

"Marvelous." — Clive Barker

SEPTIMUS HEAP

✦ BOOK ONE ✦

Magyk

ANGIE SAGE

**EXTRAS
INSIDE**

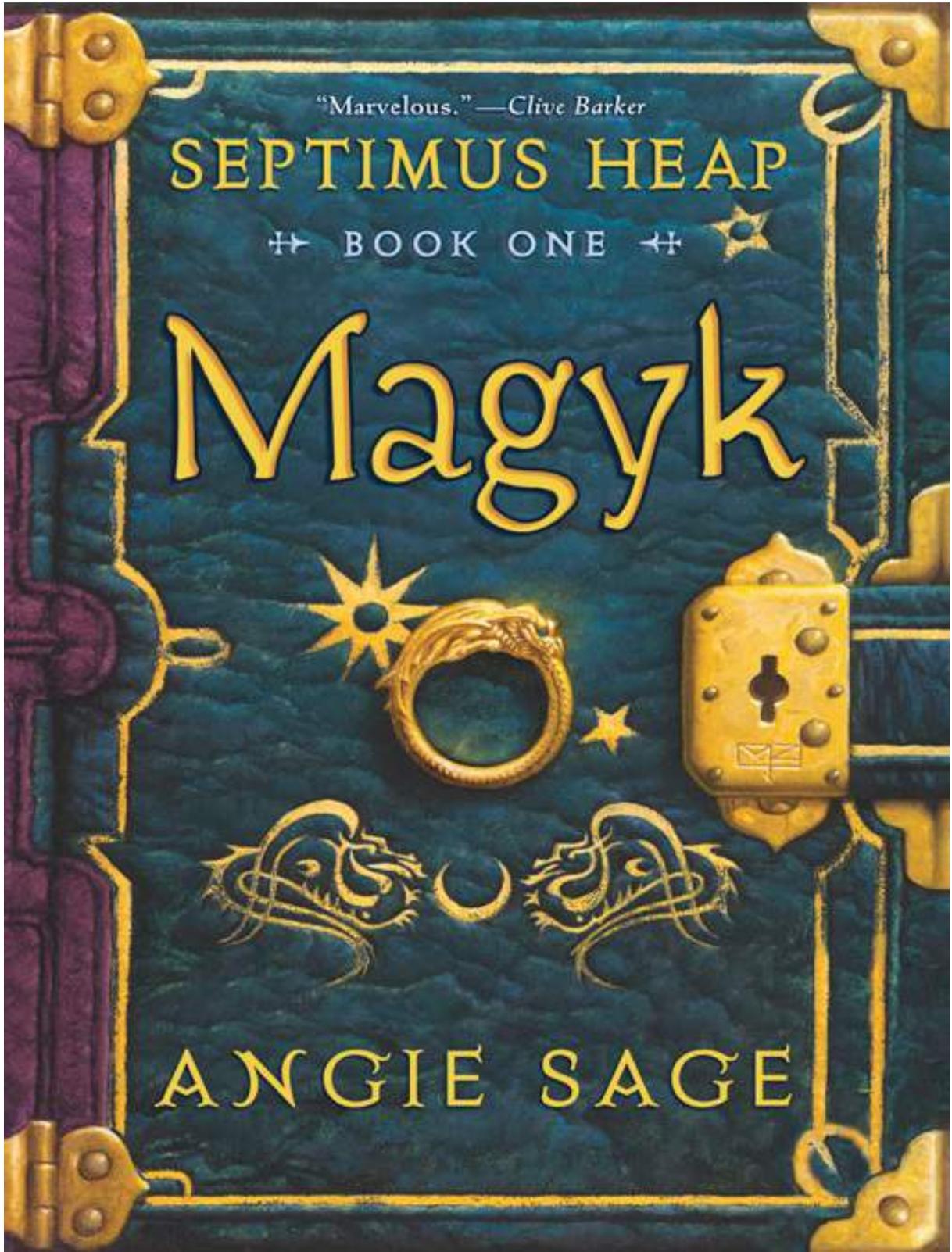
"Marvelous." —Clive Barker

SEPTIMUS HEAP

✦ BOOK ONE ✦

Magyk

ANGIE SAGE



Septimus Heap

Book One

Magyk

Angie Sage

Illustrations by Mark Zug

 HarperCollins e-books

*For Lois,
with love and thanks for
all your help and encouragement—
this book is for you.*

Contents

Map

1 Something in the Snow

2 Sarah and Silas

3 The Supreme Custodian

4 Marcia Overstrand

5 At the Heaps

6 To the Tower

7 Wizard Tower

8 The Rubbish Chute

9 Sally Mullin's Cafe

10 The Hunter

11 The Trail

12 Muriel

13 The Chase

14 Deppen Ditch

15 Midnight at the Beach

16 The Boggart

17 Alther Alone

18 Keeper's Cottage

19 Aunt Zelda

20 Boy 412

21 Rattus Rattus

22 Magyk

23 Wings

24 Shield Bugs

25 The Wendron Witch

26 MidWinter Feast Day

27 Stanley's Journey

28 The Big Freeze

29 Pythons and Rats

30 Message for Marcia

31 The Rat's Return

32 The Big Thaw

33 Watch and Wait

34 Ambush

35 Gone to Ground

36 Frozen

[37 Scrying](#)

[38 Defrosting](#)

[39 The Appointment](#)

[40 The Meeting](#)

[41 The Vengeance](#)

[42 The Storm](#)

[43 The Dragon Boat](#)

[44 To Sea](#)

[45 Ebb Tide](#)

[46 A Visitor](#)

[47 The Apprentice](#)

[48 The Apprentice Supper](#)

[49 Septimus Heap](#)

[What Aunt Zelda Saw in the Duck Pond
After...](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Other Books by Angie Sage](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

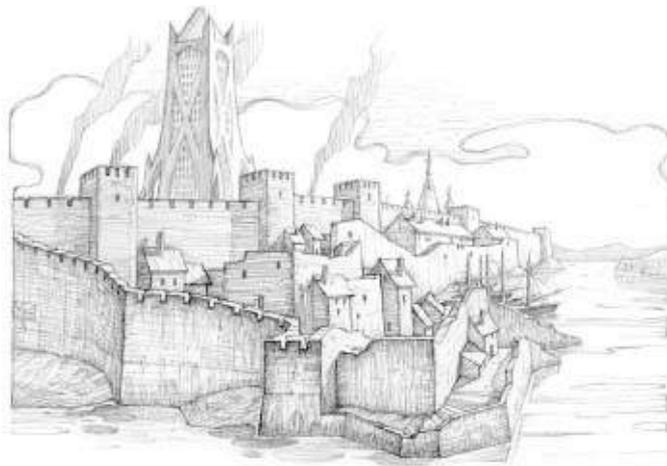
Map





1

SOMETHING IN THE SNOW



Silas Heap pulled his cloak tightly around him against the snow. It had been a long walk through the Forest, and he was chilled to the bone. But in his pockets he had the herbs that Galen, the Physik Woman, had given him for his new baby boy, Septimus, who had been born earlier that day.

Silas drew closer to the Castle, and he could see the lights flickering through the trees as candles were placed in the windows of the tall narrow houses clustered along the outside walls. It was the longest night of the year, and the candles would be kept burning until dawn, to help keep the dark at bay. Silas always loved this walk to the Castle. He had no fear of the Forest by day and enjoyed the peaceful walk along the narrow track that threaded its way through the dense trees for mile after mile. He was near the edge of the Forest now, the tall trees had begun to thin out, and as the track began to dip down to the valley floor, Silas could see the whole Castle spread before him. The old walls hugged the wide, winding river and zigzagged around the

higgledy-piggledy clumps of houses. All the houses were painted bright colors, and those that faced west looked as if they were on fire as their windows caught the last of the winter sun's rays.

The Castle had started life as a small village. Being so near to the Forest the villagers had put up some tall stone walls for protection against the wolverines, witches and warlocks who thought nothing of stealing their sheep, chickens and occasionally their children. As more houses were built, the walls were extended and a deep moat was dug so that all could feel safe.

Soon the Castle was attracting skilled craftsmen from other villages. It grew and prospered, so much so that the inhabitants began to run out of space until someone decided to build The Ramblings. The Ramblings, which was where Silas, Sarah and the boys lived, was a huge stone building that rose up along the riverside. It sprawled for three miles along the river and back again into the Castle and was a noisy, busy place filled with a warren of passages and rooms, with small factories, schools and shops mixed in with family rooms, tiny roof gardens and even a theater. There was not much space in The Ramblings, but people did not mind. There was always good company and someone for the children to play with.

As the winter sun sank below the Castle walls, Silas quickened his pace. He needed to get to the North Gate before they locked it and pulled up the drawbridge at nightfall.

It was then that Silas sensed *something* nearby. Something alive, but only just. He was aware of a small human heartbeat somewhere close to him. Silas stopped. As an Ordinary Wizard he was able to sense things, but, as he was not a particularly good Ordinary Wizard, he needed to concentrate hard. He stood still with the snow falling fast around him, already covering his footprints. And then he heard something—a snuffle, a whimper, a small breath? He wasn't sure, but it was enough.

Underneath a bush beside the path was a bundle. Silas picked up the bundle and, to his amazement, found himself gazing into the solemn eyes of a tiny baby. Silas cradled the baby in his arms and wondered how she had come to be lying in the snow on the coldest day of the year. Someone had wrapped her tightly in a heavy woolen blanket, but she was already very cold: her lips were a dusky blue and the snow dusted her eyelashes. As the baby's dark violet eyes gazed intently at him, Silas had the uncomfortable feeling that she had already seen things in her short life that no baby should see.

Thinking of his Sarah at home, warm and safe with Septimus and the

boys, Silas decided that they would just have to make room for one more little one. He carefully tucked the baby into his blue Wizard cloak and held her close to him as he ran toward the Castle gate. He reached the drawbridge just as Gringe, the Gatekeeper, was about to go and yell for the Bridge Boy to start winding it up.

“You’re cutting it a bit fine,” growled Gringe. “But you Wizards are weird. Waddy you all want to be out for on a day like this I dunno.”

“Oh?” Silas wanted to get past Gringe as soon as he could, but first he had to cross Gringe’s palm with silver. Silas quickly found a silver penny in one of his pockets and handed it over.

“Thank you, Gringe. Good night.”

Gringe looked at the penny as though it were a rather nasty beetle.

“Marcia Overstrand, she gave me an ’alf crown just now. But then she’s got class, what with ’er being the ExtraOrdinary Wizard now.”

“*What?*” Silas nearly choked.

“Yeah. Class, that’s what she’s got.”

Gringe stood back to let him pass, and Silas slipped by. As much as Silas wanted to find out why Marcia Overstrand was suddenly the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, he could feel the bundle beginning to stir in the warmth of his cloak, and something told him that it would be better if Gringe did not know about the baby.

As Silas disappeared into the shadows of the tunnel that led to The Ramblings, a tall figure in purple stepped out and barred his way.

“Marcia!” gasped Silas. “What on earth—”

“Tell *no one* you *found* her. She was *born* to you. *Understand?*”

Shocked, Silas nodded. Before he had time to say anything, Marcia was gone in a shimmer of purple mist. Silas spent the rest of the long, winding journey through The Ramblings with his mind in turmoil. Who was this baby? What did Marcia have to do with her? And why was Marcia the ExtraOrdinary Wizard now? And as Silas neared the big red door that led to the Heap family’s already overcrowded room, another, more pressing

question came into his mind: What was Sarah going to say to yet another baby to care for?

Silas did not have long to think about the last question. As he reached the door it flew open, and a large red-faced woman wearing the dark blue robes of a Matron Midwife ran out, almost knocking Silas over as she fled. She too was carrying a bundle, but the bundle was wrapped from head to toe in bandages, and she was carrying him under her arm as if he were a parcel and she was late for the post.

“Dead!” cried the Matron Midwife. She pushed Silas aside with a powerful shove and ran down the corridor. Inside the room, Sarah Heap screamed.

Silas went in with a heavy heart. He saw Sarah surrounded by six white-faced little boys, all too scared to cry.

“She’s taken him,” said Sarah hopelessly. “Septimus is dead, and she’s taken him away.”

At that moment a warm wetness spread out from the bundle that Silas still had hidden under his cloak. Silas had no words for what he wanted to say, so he just took the bundle out from under his cloak and placed her in Sarah’s arms.

Sarah Heap burst into tears.

2

SARAH AND SILAS



The bundle settled down into the Heap household and was called Jenna after Silas's mother.

The youngest of the boys, Nicko, was only two when Jenna arrived, and he soon forgot about his brother Septimus. The older boys slowly forgot too. They loved their little baby sister and brought home all kinds of treasures for her from their **Magyk** classes at school.

Sarah and Silas of course could not forget Septimus. Silas blamed himself for leaving Sarah alone while he went out to fetch the baby's herbs from the Physik Woman. Sarah just blamed herself for everything. Although she could hardly remember what had happened that terrible day, Sarah knew she had tried to breathe life back into her baby and had failed. And she remembered watching the Matron Midwife wrapping her little Septimus from head to toe in bandages and then running for the door, shouting over her shoulder, "Dead!"

Sarah remembered that all right.

But Sarah soon loved her little baby girl as much as she had loved her

Septimus. For a while she was afraid that someone would come and take Jenna away too, but as the months passed and Jenna grew into a chubby, gurgling baby, Sarah relaxed and almost stopped worrying.

Until one day when her best friend, Sally Mullin, arrived breathless on the doorstep. Sally Mullin was one of those people who knew everything that was going on in the Castle. She was a small, busy woman with wispy ginger hair that was forever escaping from her somewhat grubby cook's hat. She had a pleasant round face, a little chubby from finishing off too many cakes, and her clothes were generally covered in sprinkles of flour.

Sally ran a small cafe down on the pontoon beside the river. The sign over the door announced:

THE SALLY MULLIN TEA AND ALE HOUSE

CLEAN ACCOMMODATION AVAILABLE

NO RIFFRAFF

There were no secrets in Sally Mullin's cafe. Anything and anyone arriving at the Castle by water was noticed and commented on, and most people coming to the Castle did prefer to arrive by boat. No one apart from Silas liked the dark tracks through the Forest that surrounded the castle. The Forest still had a bad wolverine problem at night and was infested with carnivorous trees. Then there were the Wendron Witches, who were always short of cash and had been known to set traps for the unwary traveler and leave them with little more than their shirt and socks.

Sally Mullin's cafe was a busy, steaming hut perched precariously over the water. All shapes and sizes of boats would moor up at the cafe pontoon, and all sorts of people and animals would tumble out of them. Most decided to recover from their trip by having at least one of Sally's fierce beers and a slab of barley cake, and by telling the latest gossip. And anyone in the Castle with half an hour to spare and a rumbling tummy would soon find themselves on the well-trodden path down to the Port Gate, past the Riverside Amenity Rubbish Dump, and along the pontoon to Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House.

Sally made it her business to see Sarah every week and keep her up to date with everything. In Sally's opinion Sarah was much put-upon with seven

children to care for, not to mention Silas Heap, who did very little as far as she could see. Sally's stories usually involved people Sarah had never heard of and would never meet, but Sarah looked forward to Sally's visits all the same and enjoyed hearing about what was going on around her. However, this time what Sally had to tell her was different. This was more serious than everyday gossip, and this time it did involve Sarah. And, for the first time ever, Sarah knew something about it that Sally did not.

Sally swept in and closed the door conspiratorially behind her.

"I've got some terrible news," she whispered.

Sarah, who was trying to wipe breakfast from Jenna's face, and everywhere else that the baby had sprayed it, *and* clean up after the new wolfhound puppy all at the same time, was not really listening.

"Hello, Sally," she said. "There's a clean space here. Come and sit down. Cup of tea?"

"Yes, please. Sarah, can you believe this?"

"What's that, then, Sally?" asked Sarah, expecting to hear about the latest bad behavior in the cafe.

"The Queen. The Queen is dead!"

"What?" gasped Sarah. She lifted Jenna out of her chair and took her over to the corner of the room where her baby basket was. Sarah lay Jenna down for a nap. She believed that babies should be kept well away from bad news.

"*Dead*," repeated Sally unhappily.

"No!" gasped Sarah. "I don't believe it. She's just not well after her baby's birth. That's why she has not been seen since then."

"That's what the Custodian Guards have been saying, isn't it?" asked Sally.

"Well, yes," admitted Sarah, pouring out the tea. "But they *are* her bodyguards, so they must know. Though why the Queen has suddenly chosen to be guarded by such a bunch of thugs, I *don't* understand."

Sally took the cup of tea that Sarah had placed in front of her.

“Ta. Mmm, lovely. Well, *exactly*...” Sally lowered her voice and looked around as though expecting to find a Custodian Guard propped up in the corner, not that she necessarily would have noticed one amid all the mess in the Heaps’ room. “They *are* a bunch of thugs. In fact, they are the ones who *killed* her.”

“Killed? She was *killed*?” exclaimed Sarah.

“*Shhh*. Well, see here...” Sally pulled her chair closer to Sarah. “There’s a story going around—and I have it from the horse’s mouth...”

“Which horse would that be, then?” asked Sarah with a wry smile.

“Only Madam Marcia”—looking triumphant, Sally sat back and folded her arms—“that’s who.”

“*What?* How come you’ve been mixing with the ExtraOrdinary Wizard? Did she drop by for a cup of tea?”

“Almost. Terry Tarsal did. He had been up at the Wizard Tower delivering some really weird shoes that he had made for Madam Marcia. So when he had stopped moaning about her taste in shoes and how much he hated snakes, he said that he had overheard Marcia talking to one of the other Wizards. Endor, that little fat one, I think. Well, they said the Queen had been shot! By the Custodian Guards. One of their Assassins.”

Sarah could not believe what she was hearing.

“*When?*” she breathed.

“Well, this is the really *awful* thing,” whispered Sally excitedly. “They said she was shot on the day her baby was born. Six whole months ago, and we knew nothing about it. It’s terrible...terrible. And they shot Mr. Alther too. Dead. That’s how come Marcia took over...”

“Alther’s *dead*?” gasped Sarah. “I can’t believe it. I really can’t... We all thought he’d retired. Silas was his Apprentice years ago. He was lovely...”

“Was he?” asked Sally vaguely, eager to get on with the story. “Well, that’s not all, see. Because Terry reckoned that Marcia had rescued the Princess and had taken her away somewhere. Endor and Marcia were just chatting, really, wondering how she was getting along. But of course when they realized Terry was there with the shoes, they stopped. Marcia was very

rude to him, he said. He felt a bit strange afterward, and he reckoned she'd done a **Forget Spell** on him, but he'd nipped behind a pillar when he saw her muttering and it didn't take properly. He's really upset about that as he can't remember whether she paid him for the shoes or not."

Sally Mullin paused to draw breath and have a large gulp of tea.

"That poor little Princess. God help the little one. I wonder where she is now. Probably wasting away in some dungeon somewhere. Not like your little angel over there...How is she doing?"

"Oh, she's just fine," said Sarah, who usually would have talked at length about Jenna's snuffles and new tooth and how she could sit up and hold her own cup now. But just at that moment Sarah wanted to turn the attention away from Jenna—because Sarah had spent the last six months wondering who her baby really was, and now she knew.

Jenna was, thought Sarah, surely she must be...*the baby Princess*.

For once Sarah was glad to wave good-bye to Sally Mullin. She watched her bustle off down the corridor, and, as Sarah closed the door behind her, she breathed a sigh of relief. Then she rushed over to Jenna's basket.

Sarah lifted Jenna up and held her in her arms. Jenna smiled at Sarah and reached out to grab her charm necklace.

"Well, little Princess," murmured Sarah, "I always knew you were special, but I never dreamed you were our own Princess." The baby's dark violet eyes met Sarah's gaze and she looked solemnly at Sarah as if to say, *Well, now you know*.

Sarah gently laid Jenna back in her baby basket. Her head was spinning and her hands shook as she poured herself another cup of tea. She found it hard to believe all that she had heard. The Queen was dead. And Alther too. Their Jenna was the heir to the Castle. The Princess. What was happening?

Sarah spent the rest of the afternoon torn between gazing at Jenna, *Princess Jenna*, and worrying about what would happen if anyone found out where she was. Where was Silas when she needed him?

Silas was enjoying a day's fishing with the boys.

There was a small sandy beach in the bend of the river just along from The Ramblings. Silas was showing Nicko and Jo-Jo, the two youngest boys, how to tie their jam jars onto the end of a pole and dip them in the water. Jo-Jo had already caught three tiddlers, but Nicko kept dropping his and was getting upset.

Silas picked Nicko up and took him over to see Erik and Edd, the five-year-old twins. Erik was daydreaming happily and dangling his foot in the warm, clear water. Edd was poking at something under a stone with a stick. It was a huge water beetle. Nicko wailed and clung on tightly around Silas's neck.

Sam, who was nearly seven, was a serious fisherman. He had been given a proper fishing rod for his last birthday, and there were two small silver fish laid out on a rock beside him. He was about to reel in another. Nicko squealed with excitement.

"Take him away, Dad. He'll frighten the fish," Sam said crossly.

Silas tiptoed off with Nicko and went to sit beside his oldest son, Simon. Simon had a fishing rod in one hand and a book in the other. It was Simon's ambition to be the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and he was busy reading all of Silas's old magic books. This one, Silas noticed, was called *The Compleat Fish-Charmer*.

Silas expected all his boys to be some kind of Wizard; it was in the family. Silas's aunt was a renowned White Witch and both Silas's father and uncle had been Shape-Shifters, which was a very specialized branch, and one that Silas hoped his boys would avoid, for successful Shape-Shifters became increasingly unstable as they grew older, sometimes unable to hold their own shape for more than a few minutes at a time. Silas's father had eventually disappeared into the Forest as a tree, but no one knew which one. It was one of the reasons why Silas enjoyed his walks through the Forest. He would often address a remark to an untidy-looking tree in the hope that it might be his father.

Sarah Heap came from a Warlock and Wizard family. As a girl, Sarah had studied herbs and healing with Galen, the Physik Woman in the Forest, which was where she had met Silas one day. Silas had been out looking for his father. He was lost and unhappy, and Sarah took him back with her to see Galen. Galen had helped Silas to understand that his father, as a Shape-

Shifter, would have chosen his final destination as a tree many years ago and would now be truly happy. And Silas too, for the first time in his life, realized he felt truly happy sitting next to Sarah by the Physik Woman's fire.

When Sarah understood all she could about herbs and healing, she had said a fond good-bye to Galen and joined Silas in his room in The Ramblings. And there they had stayed ever since, squeezing in more and more children while Silas happily gave up his Apprenticeship and worked as a jobbing Ordinary Wizard to pay the bills. Sarah made herb tinctures at the kitchen table when she had a spare moment—which did not often happen.

That evening, as Silas and the boys made their way up the beach steps to go back to The Ramblings, a large and menacing Custodian Guard, dressed in black from head to toe, barred their way.

“Halt!” he barked. Nicko started to cry.

Silas stopped and told the boys to behave.

“Papers!” shouted the Guard. “Where are your papers?”

Silas stared at him. “What papers?” he asked quietly, not wanting to cause trouble with six tired boys around him needing to go home for supper.

“Your papers, Wizard scum. The beach area is forbidden to all without the required papers,” sneered the Guard.

Silas was shocked. If he had not been with the boys, he would have argued, but he had noticed the pistol that the guard was carrying.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I didn't know.”

The Guard looked them all up and down as if deciding what to do, but luckily for Silas he had other people to go and terrorize.

“Take your rabble out of here and don't come back,” snapped the Guard. “Stay where you belong.”

Silas hurried the shocked boys away up the steps and into the safety of The Ramblings. Sam dropped his fish and started to sob.

“There there,” said Silas, “it's all right.” But Silas felt that things were

most certainly not all right. What was going on?

“Why did he call us Wizard scum, Dad?” asked Simon. “Wizards are the best, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” said Silas distractedly, “the best.”

But the trouble was, thought Silas, there was no hiding it if you were a Wizard. All Wizards, and only Wizards, had them. Silas had them, Sarah had them and all the boys except Nicko and Jo-Jo had them. And as soon as Nicko and Jo-Jo went to the **Magyk** class in school they would have them too. Slowly but surely, until there was no mistaking it, a Wizard child’s eyes would turn green when he or she was exposed to **Magyk** learning. It had always been something to be proud of. Until now, when suddenly it felt dangerous.

That evening, when at long last all the children were asleep, Silas and Sarah talked late into the night. They talked about their Princess and their Wizard boys and the changes that had overtaken the Castle. They discussed escaping to the Marram Marshes, or going into the Forest and living with Galen. By the time dawn broke and at last they fell asleep, Silas and Sarah had decided to do what the Heaps usually did. Muddle through and hope for the best.

And so, for the next nine and a half years, Silas and Sarah kept quiet. They locked and barred their door, they spoke to only their neighbors and those they could trust and, when the **Magyk** classes were stopped at school, they taught the children **Magyk** at home in the evenings.

And that is why, nine and a half years later, all the Heaps except one had piercing green eyes.

3

THE SUPREME CUSTODIAN



It was six in the morning and still dark, ten years to the day since Silas had found the bundle.

At the end of Corridor 223, behind the big black door with the number 16 stamped on it by the Numerical Patrol, the Heap household slept peacefully. Jenna lay curled up snugly in her small box bed that Silas had made for her from driftwood washed up along the riverbank. The bed was built neatly into a big cupboard leading off a large room, which was in fact the only room that the Heaps possessed.

Jenna loved her cupboard bed. Sarah had made some bright patchwork curtains that Jenna could draw around the bed to keep out both the cold and her noisy brothers. Best of all, she had a small window in the wall above her pillow that looked out onto the river. If Jenna couldn't sleep, she would gaze out of her window for hours on end, watching the endless variety of boats that made their way to and from the Castle, and sometimes on clear dark nights she loved to count the stars until she fell fast asleep.

The large room was the place where all the Heaps lived, cooked, ate,

argued and (occasionally) did their homework, and it was a *mess*. It was stuffed full of twenty years' worth of clutter that had accumulated since Sarah and Silas had set up home together. There were fishing rods and reels, shoes and socks, rope and rat traps, bags and bedding, nets and knitting, clothes and cooking pots, and books, books, books and yet more books.

If you were foolish enough to cast your eye around the Heaps' room hoping to find a space in which to sit, the chances were a book would have found it first. Everywhere you looked there were books. On sagging shelves, in boxes, hanging in bags from the ceiling, propping up the table and stacked up in such precariously high piles that they threatened to collapse at any moment. There were storybooks, herb books, cookery books, boat books, fishing books, but mainly there were the hundreds of **Magyk** books, which Silas had illegally rescued from the school when **Magyk** had been banned a few years back.

In the middle of the room was a large hearth from which a tall chimney snaked up into the roof; it held the remains of a fire, now grown cold, around which all six Heap boys and a large dog were asleep in a chaotic pile of quilts and blankets.

Sarah and Silas were also fast asleep. They had escaped to the small attic space that Silas had acquired a few years back by the simple means of knocking a hole up through the ceiling, after Sarah had declared that she could no longer stand living with six growing boys in just one room.

But, amid all the chaos in the big room, a small island of tidiness stood out; a long and rather wobbly table was covered with a clean white cloth. On it were placed nine plates and mugs, and at the head of the table was a small chair decorated with winter berries and leaves. On the table in front of the chair a small present, carefully wrapped in colorful paper and tied with a red ribbon, had been placed ready for Jenna to open on her tenth birthday.

All was quiet and still as the Heap household slept peacefully on through the last hours of darkness before the winter sun was due to rise.

However, on the other side of the Castle, in the Palace of the Custodians, sleep, peaceful or not, had been abandoned.

The Supreme Custodian had been called from his bed and had, with the help of the Night Servant, hurriedly put on his black, fur-trimmed tunic and

heavy black and gold cloak, and he had instructed the Night Servant how to lace up his embroidered silk shoes. Then he himself had carefully placed a beautiful Crown upon his head. The Supreme Custodian was never seen without the Crown, which still had a dent in it from the day it had fallen from the Queen's head and crashed to the stone floor. The Crown sat crookedly on his slightly pointed bald head, but the Night Servant, being new and terrified, did not dare to tell him.

The Supreme Custodian strode briskly down the corridor to the Throne Room. He was a small, ratlike man with pale, almost colorless eyes and a complicated goatee beard that he was in the habit of spending many happy hours tending. He was almost swamped by his voluminous cloak, which was heavily encrusted with military badges, and his appearance was made faintly ridiculous by his crooked, and slightly feminine, Crown. But had you seen him that morning you would not have laughed. You would have shrunk back into the shadows and hoped he would not notice you, for the Supreme Custodian carried with him a powerful air of menace.

The Night Servant helped the Supreme Custodian arrange himself on the ornate throne in the Throne Room. He was then waved impatiently away and scuttled off gratefully, his shift nearly over.

The chill morning air lay heavily in the Throne Room. The Supreme Custodian sat impassively on the throne, but his breath, which misted the cold air in small quick bursts, betrayed his excitement.

He did not have long to wait before a tall young woman wearing the severe black cloak and deep red tunic of an Assassin walked briskly in and bowed low, her long slashed sleeves sweeping across the stone floor.

"The Queenling, my lord. She has been found," the Assassin said in a low voice.

The Supreme Custodian sat up and stared at the Assassin with his pale eyes.

"Are you sure? I want *no mistakes* this time," he said menacingly.

"Our spy, my lord, has suspected a child for a while. She considers her to be a stranger in her family. Yesterday our spy found out that the child is of the age."

"What age exactly?"

“Ten years old today, my lord.”

“*Really?*” The Supreme Custodian sat back in the throne and considered what the Assassin had said.

“I have a likeness of the child here, my lord. I understand she is much like her mother, the ex-Queen.” From inside her tunic the Assassin took a small piece of paper. On it was a skillful drawing of a young girl with dark violet eyes and long dark hair. The Supreme Custodian took the drawing. It was true. The girl did look remarkably like the dead Queen. He came to a swift decision and clicked his bony fingers loudly.

The Assassin inclined her head. “My lord?”

“Tonight. Midnight. You are to pay a visit to—where is it?”

“Room 16, Corridor 223, my lord.”

“Family name?”

“Heap, my lord.”

“Ah. Take the silver pistol. How many in the family?”

“Nine, my lord, including the child.”

“And nine bullets in case of trouble. Silver for the child. And bring her to me. I want *proof*.”

The young woman looked pale. It was her first, and only, test. There were no second chances for an Assassin.

“Yes, my lord.” She bowed briefly and withdrew, her hands shaking.

In a quiet corner of the Throne Room the ghost of Alther Mella eased himself up from the cold stone bench he had been sitting on. He sighed and stretched his old ghostly legs. Then he gathered his faded purple robes around him, took a deep breath and walked out through the thick stone wall of the Throne Room.

Outside he found himself hovering sixty feet above the ground in the cold dark morning air. Instead of walking off in a dignified manner as a ghost of

his age and status really should, Alther stuck his arms out like the wings of a bird and swooped gracefully through the falling snow.

Flying was about the only thing that Alther liked about being a ghost. Flying, or the Lost Art of Flyte, was something that modern ExtraOrdinary Wizards could no longer do. Even Marcia, who was determined to fly, could do no more than a quick hover before crashing to the ground. Somewhere, somehow, the secret had been lost. But all ghosts could, of course, fly. And since he had become a ghost, Alther had lost his crippling fear of heights and had spent many exciting hours perfecting his acrobatic moves. But there wasn't much else about being a ghost that he enjoyed, and sitting in the Throne Room where he had actually *become* one—and consequently where he had had to spend the first year and a day of his ghosthood—was one of his least favorite occupations. But it had to be done. Alther made it his business to know what the Custodians were planning and to try and keep Marcia up to date. With his help she had managed to stay one step ahead of the Custodians and keep Jenna safe. Until now.

Over the years, since the death of the Queen, the Supreme Custodian had become more and more desperate to track down the Princess. Every year he would make a long—and much dreaded—trip to the Badlands, where he would have to report his progress to a certain ex-ExtraOrdinary Wizard turned **Necromancer**, DomDaniel. It was DomDaniel who had sent the first Assassin to kill the Queen, and it was DomDaniel who had installed the Supreme Custodian and his henchmen to scour the Castle and search for the Princess. For while the Princess remained in the Castle, DomDaniel dared not come near. And so, every year, the Supreme Custodian would promise DomDaniel that *this* year he would be successful. *This* year he would get rid of the Queenling and at last deliver the Castle up to its rightful Master, DomDaniel.

And this was why, as Alther left the Throne Room, the Supreme Custodian wore what his mother would have called a silly grin on his face. At last, he had done the job he was sent to do. Of course, he thought, his silly grin changing to a smug smile, it was only due to his superior intelligence and talent that he had discovered the girl. But it wasn't—it was due to a bizarre stroke of luck.

When the Supreme Custodian took over the Castle, one of the first things he did was to ban women from the Courthouse. The Ladies' Washroom, which was no longer needed, had eventually become a small committee room. During the past bitterly cold month, the Committee of the Custodians had

taken to meeting in the former Ladies' Washroom, which had the great advantage of a wood-burning stove, rather than the cavernous Custodian Committee Room, where the chill wind whistled through and froze their feet to blocks of ice.

And so, unknowingly, for once the Custodians were one step ahead of Alther Mella. As a ghost, Alther could only go to the places he had been to in his lifetime—and, as a well-brought-up young Wizard, Alther had never set foot in a Ladies' Washroom in his life. The most he was able to do was hover outside waiting, just as he had done when he was alive and courting Judge Alice Nettles.

It had been late one particularly cold afternoon a few weeks ago when Alther had watched the Custodian Committee take themselves into the Ladies' Washroom. The heavy door, with LADIES still visible in faded gold letters, was slammed behind them, and Alther hovered outside with his ear to the door, trying to hear what was going on. But try as he might, he was not able to hear the Committee decide to send their very best spy, Linda Lane, with her interest in herbs and healing, to live in Room 17, Corridor 223. Right next door to the Heaps.

And so neither Alther nor the Heaps had any idea that their new neighbor was a spy. And a very good one too.

As Alther Mella flew through the snowy air pondering how to save the Princess, he absentmindedly turned two almost perfect double loops before he dived swiftly through the drifting snowflakes to reach the golden Pyramid that crowned the Wizard Tower.

Alther landed gracefully on his feet. For a moment he stood perfectly balanced on the tips of his toes. Then he raised his arms above his head and spun around, faster and faster until he started to sink slowly through the roof and down into the room below, where he misjudged his landing and fell through the canopy of Marcia Overstrand's four-poster bed.

Marcia sat up in a fright. Alther was sprawled on her pillow looking embarrassed.

"Sorry, Marcia. Very ungallant. Well, at least you haven't got your curlers in."

“My hair is naturally curly, thank you, Alther,” said Marcia crossly. “You might have waited until I had woken up.”

Alther looked serious and became slightly more transparent than usual.

“I’m afraid, Marcia,” he said heavily, “this won’t wait.”

4

MARCIA OVERSTRAND



Marcia Overstrand strode out of her lofty tower bedroom with adjoining robing room, threw open the heavy purple door that led onto the landing and checked her appearance in the adjustable mirror.

“Minus eight-point-three percent!” she instructed the mirror, which had a nervous disposition and dreaded the moment when Marcia’s door was flung open every morning. Over the years the mirror had come to read the footsteps as they crossed the wooden boards, and today they had made the mirror edgy. Very edgy. It stood to attention and, in its eagerness to please, made Marcia’s reflection 83% thinner so that she resembled something like an angry purple stick insect.

“Idiot!” snapped Marcia.

The mirror recalculated. It hated doing math first thing in the morning, and it was sure that Marcia gave it nasty percentages on purpose. Why couldn’t she be a nice round number thinner, like 5%? Or, even better, 10%. The mirror liked 10%’s; it could do *them*.

Marcia smiled at her reflection. She looked good.

Marcia had on her winter ExtraOrdinary Wizard uniform. And it suited her. Her purple double silk cloak was lined with the softest indigo-blue angora fur. It fell gracefully from her broad shoulders and gathered itself obediently around her pointy feet. Marcia's feet were pointy because she liked pointy shoes, and she had them specially made. They were made of snakeskin, shed from the purple python that the shoe shop kept in the backyard just for Marcia's shoes. Terry Tarsal, the shoemaker, hated snakes and was convinced that Marcia ordered snakeskin on purpose. He may well have been right. Marcia's purple python shoes shimmered in the light reflected from the mirror, and the gold and platinum on her ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt flashed impressively. Around her neck she wore the Akhu Amulet, symbol and source of the power of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

Marcia was satisfied. Today she needed to look impressive. Impressive and just a little scary. Well, quite a bit scary if necessary. She just hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

Marcia wasn't sure if she could do scary. She tried a few expressions in the mirror, which shivered quietly to itself, but she wasn't sure about any of them. Marcia was unaware that most people thought she did scary very well indeed, and was in fact a complete natural at scary.

Marcia clicked her fingers. "Back!" she snapped.

The mirror showed her her back view.

"Sides!"

The mirror showed her both side views.

And then she was gone. Down the stairs two at a time, down to the kitchen to terrorize the stove, which had heard her coming and was desperately trying to light itself before she came through the door.

It did not succeed, and Marcia was in a bad temper all through breakfast.

Marcia left the breakfast things to wash themselves up and strode briskly out of the heavy purple door that led to her rooms. The door closed with a soft, respectful clunk behind her as Marcia jumped onto the silver spiral staircase.

“Down,” she told the staircase. It began to turn like a giant corkscrew, taking her slowly down through the tall Tower, past seemingly endless floors and various doors that all led into rooms occupied by an amazing assortment of Wizards. From the rooms came the sounds of spells being practiced, chanted incantations, and general Wizard chitchat over breakfast. The smells of toast and bacon and porridge mixed strangely with the wafts of incense that floated up from the Hall below, and as the spiral stairs came gently to a halt, Marcia stepped off feeling slightly queasy and looking forward to getting out into the fresh air. She walked briskly through the Hall to the massive, solid silver doors that guarded the entrance to the Wizard Tower. Marcia spoke the password, the doors silently swung open for her, and in a moment she was through the silver archway and outside into the bitter cold of a snowy midwinter morning.

As Marcia descended the steep steps, treading carefully on the crisp snow in her thin pointy shoes, she surprised the sentry who had been idly throwing snowballs at a stray cat. A snowball landed with a soft thud on the purple silk of her cloak.

“Don’t do that!” snapped Marcia, brushing the snow off her cloak.

The sentry jumped and stood to attention. He looked terrified. Marcia stared at the waiflike boy. He was wearing the ceremonial sentry uniform, a rather silly design made from thin cotton, a red and white striped tunic with purple frills around the sleeves. He also wore a large floppy yellow hat, white tights and bright yellow boots, and in his left hand, which was bare and blue with cold, he held a heavy pikestaff.

Marcia had objected when the first sentries arrived at the Wizard Tower. She had told the Supreme Custodian that the Wizards did not need guarding. They could look after themselves perfectly well, thank you very much. But he had smiled his smug smile and blandly assured her that the sentries were for the Wizards’ own safety. Marcia suspected he had put them there not only to spy on the Wizards’ comings and goings but also to make the Wizards look ridiculous.

Marcia looked at the snowball-throwing sentry. His hat was too big for him; it had slipped down and come to rest on his ears, which conveniently stuck out at just the right places to stop the hat from falling over his eyes. The hat gave the boy’s thin, pinched face an unhealthy yellow tinge. His two deep gray eyes stared out from under it in terror as the boy realized that his snowball had hit the ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

He looked, thought Marcia, very small to be a soldier.

“How old are you?” she said accusingly.

The sentry blushed. No one like Marcia had ever looked at him before, let alone spoken to him.

“T-ten, Madam.”

“Then why aren’t you in school?” demanded Marcia.

The sentry looked proud. “I have no need of school, Madam. I am in the Young Army. We are the Pride of Today, the Warriors of Tomorrow.”

“Aren’t you cold?” Marcia asked unexpectedly.

“N-no Madam. We are trained not to feel the cold.” But the sentry’s lips had a bluish tinge to them, and he shivered as he spoke.

“Humph.” Marcia stomped off through the snow, leaving the boy to another four hours on guard.

Marcia walked briskly across the courtyard, which led away from the Wizard Tower, and slipped out of a side gate that took her onto a quiet, snow-covered footpath.

Marcia had been ExtraOrdinary Wizard for ten years to the day, and as she set off on her journey her thoughts turned to the past. She remembered the time she had spent as a poor Hopeful, reading anything she could about **Magyk**, hoping for that rare thing, an Apprenticeship with the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Alther Mella. They were happy years spent living in a small room in The Ramblings among so many other Hopefuls, most of whom soon settled for Apprenticeships with Ordinary Wizards. But not Marcia. She knew what she wanted, and she wanted the best. But Marcia still could hardly believe her luck when she got her chance to be Alther Mella’s Apprentice. Although being his Apprentice did not necessarily mean she would get to be the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, it was another step closer to her dream. And so Marcia had spent the next seven years and a day living at the Wizard Tower as Alther’s Apprentice.

Marcia smiled to herself as she remembered what a wonderful Wizard Alther Mella had been. His tutorials were fun, he was patient when spells

went wrong and he always had a new joke to tell her. He was also an extremely powerful Wizard. Until Marcia had become the ExtraOrdinary Wizard herself she hadn't realized just how good Alther had been. But most of all, Alther was just a lovely person. Her smile faded as she remembered how she came to take his place, and she thought about the last day of Alther Mella's life, the day the Custodians now called Day One.

Lost in her thoughts, Marcia climbed the narrow steps leading up to the broad, sheltered ledge that ran just below the Castle wall. It was a fast way of getting across to the East Side, which was what The Ramblings were now called, and which was where she was headed today. The ledge was reserved for the use of the Custodian Armed Patrol, but Marcia knew that, even now, no one stopped the ExtraOrdinary Wizard from going anywhere. So, instead of creeping through endless tiny and sometimes crowded passageways as she used to many years ago, she moved speedily along the ledge until, about half an hour later, she saw a door that she recognized.

Marcia took a deep breath. This is it, she said to herself.

Marcia followed a flight of steps down from the ledge and came face-to-face with the door. She was about to lean against it and give it a shove when the door took fright at the sight of her and flew open. Marcia shot through it and bounced off a rather slimy wall opposite. The door slammed shut, and Marcia caught her breath. The passageway was dark; it was damp and smelled of boiled cabbage, cats' pee and dry rot. This was not how Marcia remembered things. When she had lived in The Ramblings the passageways had been warm and clean, lit by reed torches burning at intervals along the wall and swept clean every day by the proud inhabitants.

Marcia hoped she could remember the way to Silas and Sarah Heap's room. In her Apprentice days she had often rushed past their door, hoping that Silas Heap would not see her and ask her in. It was the noise that she remembered most, the noise of so many little boys yelling, jumping, fighting and doing whatever little boys do, although Marcia wasn't quite sure what little boys did—as she preferred to avoid children if at all possible.

Marcia was feeling rather nervous as she walked along the dark and gloomy passageways. She was beginning to wonder just how things were going to go for her first visit to Silas in more than ten years. She dreaded what she was going to have to tell the Heaps, and she even wondered if Silas would believe her. He was a stubborn Wizard, and she knew he didn't like her much. And so, with these thoughts going around in her head, Marcia walked

purposefully along the passageways and paid no attention to anything else.

If she had bothered to pay attention, she would have been amazed at people's reactions to her. It was eight o'clock in the morning, what Silas Heap called rush hour. Hundreds of pale-faced people were making their way to work, their sleepy eyes blinking in the gloom and their thin, cheap clothes pulled around them against the deep chill of the damp stone walls. Rush hour in the East Side passageways was a time to avoid. The crush would carry you along, often way past your turning until you managed to somehow wriggle through the crowd and join the stream in the opposite direction. The rush hour air was always full of plaintive cries:

“Let me off here, *please!*”

“Stop *pushing* me!”

“My turning, my *turning!*”

But Marcia had made the rush hour disappear. No **Magyk** was necessary for this—just the sight of Marcia was enough to stop everyone in their tracks. Most people on the East Side had never seen the ExtraOrdinary Wizard before. If they had seen her at all, it would have been on a day trip to the Wizard Tower Visitor Center, where they might have hung around the courtyard all day, hoping to catch a glimpse if they were lucky. For the ExtraOrdinary Wizard to be walking among them in the dank corridors of the East Side was unbelievable.

People gasped and shrank away. They melted into the shadows of the doorways and slipped away down side alleys. They muttered their own small spells to themselves. Some froze and stood stock-still like rabbits caught in the glare of a brilliant light. They gazed at Marcia as though she were a being from another planet, which she may well have been for all the similarities between her life and theirs.

But Marcia did not really notice this. Ten years as the ExtraOrdinary Wizard had insulated her from real life, and however much of a shock it had been when it first happened, she was now used to all giving way before her, to the bowing and the respectful murmuring that surrounded her.

Marcia swept off the main thoroughfare and headed down the narrow passage that led to the Heap household. On her travels Marcia had noticed that all the passages now had numbers that replaced the rather whimsical names they had had before, such as Windy Corner and Upside-Down Lane.

The Heaps' address had previously been: Big Red Door, There and Back Again Row, The Ramblings.

Now it appeared to be: Room 16, Corridor 223, East Side. Marcia knew which one she preferred.

Marcia arrived at the Heaps' door, which had been painted regulation-black by the Paint Patrol a few days ago. She could hear the noisy hubbub of a Heap breakfast going on behind the door. Marcia took some deep breaths.

She could put off the moment no longer.

5

AT THE HEAPS



Open,” *Marcia told the black Heap door.* But, being a door belonging to Silas Heap, it did nothing of the sort; in fact, Marcia thought she saw it tighten up its hinges and stiffen its lock. So she, Madam Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard, was reduced to banging on the door as hard as she could. No one answered. She tried again, harder and with both fists, but there was still no reply. Just as she was considering giving the door a good kick (and serve it right too) the door was pulled open, and Marcia came face-to-face with Silas Heap.

“Yes?” he said abruptly as if she were no more than an irritating salesperson.

For a brief moment Marcia was lost for words. She looked past Silas to

see a room that appeared to have been recently hit by an explosion and was now, for some reason, packed full of boys. The boys were swarming around a small, dark-haired girl who was sitting at a table covered in a surprisingly clean white cloth. The girl was holding on to a small present wrapped in brightly colored paper and tied with red ribbon, laughing and pushing away some of the boys who were pretending to grab it. But one by one the girl and all the boys looked up, and a strange silence fell upon the Heap household.

“Good morning, Silas Heap,” said Marcia a little too graciously. “And good morning, Sarah Heap. And, er, all the little Heaps of course.”

The little Heaps, most of whom were no longer anything like little, said nothing. But six pairs of bright green eyes and one pair of deep violet eyes took in every detail of Marcia Overstrand. Marcia began to feel self-conscious. Did she have a smudge on her nose? Was some of her hair sticking up in a ridiculous fashion? Perhaps she had some spinach stuck in her teeth?

Marcia reminded herself that she had not had spinach for breakfast. Get on with it, Marcia, she told herself. You’re in charge here. So she turned to Silas, who was looking at her as if he hoped she would soon go away.

“I said *good morning*, Silas Heap,” said Marcia irritably.

“Indeed you did, Marcia, indeed you did,” said Silas. “And what brings you here after all these years?”

Marcia got straight to the point.

“I’ve come for the Princess,” she said.

“*Who?*” asked Silas.

“You know perfectly well *who*,” snapped Marcia, who didn’t like being questioned by anyone, least of all by Silas Heap.

“We don’t have any princesses here, Marcia,” said Silas. “I should have thought that was pretty obvious.”

Marcia looked around her. It was true, it was not somewhere you would ever expect to find a princess. In fact, Marcia had never seen such a mess before in her entire life.

In the middle of the chaos, by the newly lit fire, stood Sarah Heap. Sarah

had been cooking porridge for the birthday breakfast when Marcia had pushed her way into her home, and into her life. Now she stood transfixed, holding the porridge pan in midair and staring at Marcia. Something in her gaze told Marcia that Sarah knew what was coming. This, thought Marcia, is not going to be easy. She decided to dump the tough act and start over again.

“May I sit down, please, Silas...Sarah?” she asked.

Sarah nodded. Silas scowled. Neither spoke.

Silas glanced at Sarah. She was sitting down, white-faced and trembling, and gathering the birthday girl up onto her lap, holding her closely. Silas wished more than anything that Marcia would go away and leave them all alone, but he knew they had to hear what she had come to say. He sighed heavily and said, “Nicko, give Marcia a chair.”

“Thank you, Nicko,” said Marcia as she sat down gingerly on one of Silas’s homemade chairs. The tousle-haired Nicko gave Marcia a crooked grin and retreated into the bunch of his brothers, who were hovering protectively around Sarah.

Marcia gazed at the Heaps and was amazed how alike they all were. All of them, even Sarah and Silas, shared the same curly straw-colored hair, and of course they all had the piercing green Wizard eyes. And in the middle of the Heaps sat the Princess, with her straight black hair and deep violet eyes. Marcia groaned to herself. All babies looked the same to Marcia, and it had never occurred to her how very different the Princess would look from the Heaps when she grew older. No wonder the spy had discovered her.

Silas Heap sat himself down on an upturned crate. “Well, Marcia, what’s going on?” he said.

Marcia’s mouth felt very dry. “Have you got a glass of water?” she asked.

Jenna scrambled down from Sarah’s lap and came over to Marcia, holding a battered wooden cup with teeth marks all around the top.

“Here, have my water. I don’t mind.” She gazed at Marcia admiringly. Jenna had never seen anyone like Marcia before, no one as purple, as shiny, as clean and expensive-looking, and certainly no one with such pointy shoes.

Marcia looked at the cup dubiously, but then, remembering who had given it to her, she said, “Thank you, Princess. Er, may I call you Jenna?”

Jenna did not reply. She was too busy staring at Marcia's purple shoes.

"Answer Madam Marcia, poppet," said Sarah Heap.

"Oh, yes, you may, Madam Marcia," Jenna said, puzzled but polite.

"Thank you, Jenna. It's nice to meet you after all this time. And please, just call me Marcia," said Marcia, who could not help thinking how much Jenna looked like her mother.

Jenna slipped back to Sarah's side, and Marcia forced herself to take a sip of water from the chewed cup.

"Out with it, then, Marcia," said Silas from his upturned box. "What's going on? As usual we seem to be the last to know over here."

"Silas, do you and Sarah know who, er...Jenna...is?" asked Marcia.

"Yes. We do. Jenna is our daughter, that's who she is," said Silas stubbornly.

"But you guessed, didn't you?" said Marcia, directing her gaze at Sarah.

"Yes," said Sarah quietly.

"So you will understand when I say that she is not safe here anymore. I need to take her. Now," Marcia said urgently.

"No!" yelled Jenna. "No!" She scrambled back onto Sarah's lap. Sarah held her tightly.

Silas was angry. "Just because you're the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Marcia, you think you can just walk in here and mess up our lives like it doesn't matter. You most certainly are *not* taking Jenna away. She is ours. Our only daughter. She is perfectly safe here, and she stays with us."

"Silas," sighed Marcia, "she is *not* safe with you. Not anymore. She has been *discovered*. You have a spy living right next door to you. Linda Lane."

"Linda!" gasped Sarah. "A spy? I don't believe it."

"You mean that awful old gasbag who is always around here prattling on about pills and potions and drawing endless pictures of the kids?" asked Silas.

“Silas!” remonstrated Sarah. “Don’t be so rude.”

“I’ll be more than rude to her if she *is* a spy,” declared Silas.

“There’s no ‘if’ about it, Silas,” said Marcia. “Linda Lane most definitely *is* a spy. And I’m sure the pictures she has been drawing are proving very useful to the Supreme Custodian.”

Silas groaned. Marcia pressed home her advantage.

“Look, Silas, I only want the best for Jenna. You have to trust me.”

Silas snorted. “Why on earth should we trust you, Marcia?”

“Because I have trusted *you* with the Princess, Silas,” said Marcia. “Now you must trust me. What happened ten years ago must not happen again.”

“You forget, Marcia,” said Silas scathingly, “that we don’t *know* what happened ten years ago. No one ever bothered to tell us.”

Marcia sighed. “How *could* I tell you, Silas? It was best for the Princess’s, I mean Jenna’s, sake that you did not know.”

At the mention of Princess yet again, Jenna looked up at Sarah.

“Madam Marcia called me that before,” she whispered. “Is that *really* me?”

“Yes, poppet,” Sarah whispered back, then she looked Marcia in the eye and said, “I think we *all* need to know what happened ten years ago, Madam Marcia.”

Marcia looked at her timepiece. This had to be quick. She took a deep breath and started.

“Ten years ago,” she said, “I had just passed my final exams and I’d gone over to see Alther to thank him. Well, soon after I arrived a messenger rushed in to tell him that the Queen had given birth to a baby girl. We were so pleased—it meant that the heir to the Castle had at last arrived.

“The messenger summoned Alther to the Palace to conduct the Welcome Ceremony for the baby Princess. I went with him to help him carry all the heavy books, potions and charms that he needed. And to remind him in what order to do things as dear old Alther was becoming a little forgetful at times.

“When we arrived at the Palace we were taken to the Throne Room to see the Queen, who looked so happy—so wonderfully happy. She was sitting on the throne holding her newborn daughter, and she greeted us with the words, ‘Isn’t she beautiful?’ And those were the last words that our Queen spoke.”

“No,” muttered Sarah quietly.

“At that very moment a man in a strange black and red uniform burst into the room. Of course I know now that he was wearing the uniform of an Assassin, but at the time I knew nothing of the kind. I thought he was some kind of messenger, but I could see from the Queen’s face that she was not expecting him. Then I saw that he was carrying a long silver pistol, and I felt very afraid. I glanced at Alther, but he was fussing with his books and hadn’t noticed. Then...it was all so unreal somehow...I just watched the soldier very slowly and deliberately raise the pistol, take aim and fire it straight at the Queen. Everything was so horribly silent as the silver bullet passed straight through the Queen’s heart and embedded itself in the wall behind her. The baby Princess screamed and tumbled from her dead mother’s arms. I leaped forward and caught her.”

Jenna was pale, trying to understand what she was hearing. “Was that *me*?” she asked Sarah in a low voice. “Was *I* the baby Princess?”

Sarah nodded slowly.

Marcia’s voice trembled slightly as she carried on. “It was terrible! Alther was starting on the **SafeShield Spell** when there was another shot, and a bullet spun him around and threw him to the floor. I finished Alther’s spell for him, and for a few moments all three of us were safe. The Assassin fired his next bullet—it was one for the Princess and me this time—but it skittered off the invisible shield and shot straight back at him, catching him in the leg. He fell to the floor, but he still kept hold of his pistol. He just lay there and stared at us, waiting for the spell to end, as all spells must.

“Alther was dying. He took off the Amulet and gave it to me. I refused. I was sure that I could save him, but Alther knew better. He just very calmly told me that it was time for him to go now. He smiled and then—and then he died.”

The room was silent. No one moved. Even Silas stared deliberately at the floor. Marcia continued in a low voice.

“I—I couldn’t believe it. I tied the Amulet around my neck and gathered

up the baby Princess. She was crying now, well, we both were. Then I *ran*. I ran so fast that the Assassin had no time to fire his pistol.

“I fled to the Wizard Tower. I couldn’t think where else to go. I told the other Wizards the terrible news and asked for their protection, which they gave us. All afternoon we talked about what we should do with the Princess. We knew she could not stay in the Tower for long. We could not protect the Princess forever, and anyway, she was a newborn baby who needed a mother. It was then that I thought of you, Sarah.”

Sarah looked surprised.

“Alther often talked to me about you and Silas. I knew you had just had a baby boy. It was the talk of the Tower, the seventh son of the seventh son. I had no idea then that he had died. I was so sorry to hear that. But I knew you would love the Princess and make her happy. So we decided that you should have her.

“But I couldn’t just walk over to The Ramblings and give her to you. Someone would have seen me. So, late in the afternoon, I smuggled the Princess out of the Castle and left her in the snow, making sure that you, Silas, would find her. And that was it. There was nothing more I could do.

“Except, after Gringe had flustered me into giving him a half crown, I hid in the shadows and watched for you as you came back. When I saw the way you held your cloak and the way you walked as if you were protecting something precious, I knew that you had the Princess and, do you remember, I told you, ‘Tell *no one* you *found* her. She was *born* to you. *Understand?*’”

A charged silence hung in the air. Silas stared at the floor, Sarah sat motionless with Jenna, and the boys all looked thunderstruck. Marcia stood up quietly, and from a pocket in her tunic she took a small red velvet bag. Then she picked her way across the room, being careful not to step on anything, particularly a large, and none too clean, wolf that she had just noticed asleep in the middle of a pile of blankets.

The Heaps watched, mesmerized, as Marcia walked solemnly over to Jenna. The Heap boys parted respectfully as Marcia stopped in front of Sarah and Jenna and knelt down.

Jenna stared with wide-open eyes as Marcia opened the velvet bag and took from it a small gold circlet.

“Princess,” said Marcia, “this was your mother’s and now it is yours by right.” Marcia reached up and placed the gold circlet on Jenna’s head. It fitted perfectly.

Silas broke the spell. “Well, you’ve done it now, Marcia,” he said crossly. “The cat’s really out of the bag.”

Marcia stood up and brushed the dirt off her cloak. As she did so, to her surprise, the ghost of Alther Mella floated through the wall and settled himself down beside Sarah Heap.

“Ah, here’s Alther,” said Silas. “He won’t be pleased about this, I can tell you.”

“Hello, Silas, Sarah. Hello, all my young Wizards.” The Heap boys grinned. People called them many things, but only Alther called them Wizards.

“And hello, my little Princess,” said Alther, who had always called Jenna that. And now Jenna knew why.

“Hello, Uncle Alther,” said Jenna, feeling much happier with the old ghost floating next to her.

“I didn’t know that Alther came to see you too,” Marcia said, somewhat put out, even though she was rather relieved to see him.

“Well, I was his Apprentice first,” snapped Silas. “Before you elbowed in.”

“I did *not* elbow in. You gave up. You *begged* Alther to annul your Apprenticeship. You said you wanted to read bedtime stories to the boys instead of being stuck in a turret with your nose in a dusty old spell book. You really do take the biscuit sometimes, Silas,” glowered Marcia.

“Children, children, don’t argue now.” Alther smiled. “I love you both the same. All my Apprentices are special.”

The ghost of Alther Mella shimmered slightly in the heat of the fire. He wore his ghostly ExtraOrdinary Wizard cloak. It still had bloodstains on it, which always upset Marcia when she saw them. Alther’s long white hair was carefully tied back into a ponytail, and his beard was neatly trimmed to a point. When he had been alive, Alther’s hair and beard had always been a

mess—he could never quite keep up with how fast it all seemed to grow. But now that he was a ghost, it was easy. He’d sorted it all out ten years ago and that was the way it had stayed. Alther’s green eyes may have sparkled a little less than they had when he was alive, but they looked around him as keenly as ever. And as they gazed at the Heap household he felt sad. Things were about to change.

“Tell her, Alther,” demanded Silas. “Tell her she’s not having our Jenna. Princess or not, she’s not having her.”

“I wish I could, Silas, but I can’t,” said Alther, looking serious. “You have been discovered. An Assassin is coming. She will be here at midnight with a silver bullet. You know what that means...”

Sarah Heap put her head in her hands. “No,” she whispered.

“Yes,” said Alther. He shivered and his hand strayed to the small round bullet hole just below his heart.

“What can we do?” asked Sarah, very quiet and still.

“Marcia will take Jenna to the Wizard Tower,” said Alther. “Jenna will be safe there for the moment. Then we will have to think about what to do next.” He looked at Sarah. “You and Silas must go away with the boys. Somewhere safe where you won’t be found.”

Sarah was pale, but her voice was steady. “We’ll go into the Forest,” she said. “We will stay with Galen.”

Marcia looked at her timepiece again. It was getting late.

“I need to take the Princess now,” she said. “I must get back before they change the sentry.”

“I don’t want to go,” whispered Jenna. “I don’t have to, do I, Uncle Alther? I want to go and stay with Galen too. I want to go with everyone else. I don’t want to be on my own.” Jenna’s lower lip trembled, and her eyes filled with tears. She held on tightly to Sarah.

“You won’t be on your own. You’ll be with Marcia,” said Alther gently. Jenna did not look as though that made her feel any better.

“My little Princess,” said Alther, “Marcia is right. You need to go away

with her. Only she can give you the protection you will need.”

Jenna still looked unconvinced.

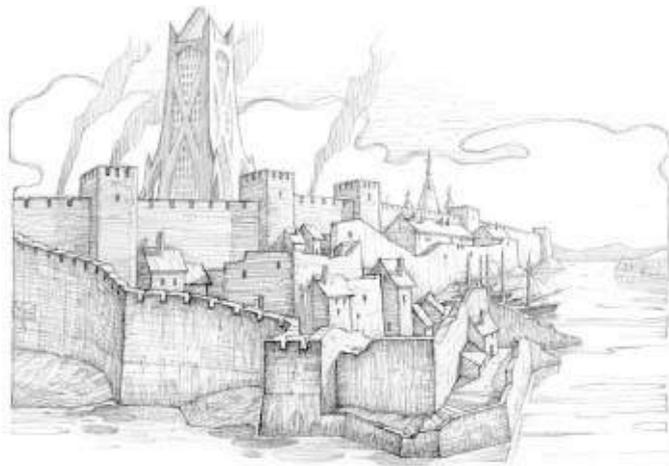
“Jenna,” said Alther seriously, “you are the Heir to the Castle, and the Castle needs you to keep safe so that you can be Queen one day. You must go with Marcia. *Please.*”

Jenna’s hands strayed to the golden circlet that Marcia had placed on her head. Somewhere inside herself she began to feel a little bit different.

“All right,” she whispered. “I’ll go.”

6

To the Tower



J*enna could not believe what was happening to her.* She hardly had time to kiss everyone good-bye before Marcia had thrown her purple cloak over her and told her to stay close and keep up. Then the big black Heap door had unwillingly creaked itself open, and Jenna was whisked away from the only home she had ever known.

It was probably a good thing that, covered as she was by Marcia's cloak, Jenna could not see the bewildered faces of the six Heap boys or the desolate expressions on the faces of Sarah and Silas Heap as they watched the four-legged purple cloak swish around the corner at the end of Corridor 223 and disappear from view.

Marcia and Jenna took the long way back to the Wizard Tower. Marcia did not want to risk being seen outside with Jenna, and the dark winding corridors of the East Side seemed safer than the quick route she had taken

earlier that morning. Marcia strode briskly along, and Jenna had to run beside her to have any hope of keeping up. Luckily all she carried with her was a small rucksack on her back with a few treasures to remind her of home; although, in the rush she had forgotten her birthday present.

It was midmorning by now and the rush hour was over. Much to Marcia's relief the damp corridors were almost deserted as she and Jenna traveled quietly along them, fluently taking each turn as Marcia's memory of her old trips to the Wizard Tower came back to her.

Hidden under Marcia's heavy cloak, Jenna could see very little, so she concentrated her gaze on the two pairs of feet below her: her own small, chunky feet in their scruffy brown boots and Marcia's long, pointy feet in their purple python skins striding over the dank gray slabs beneath them. Soon Jenna had stopped noticing her own boots and had become mesmerized by the purple pointed pythons dancing before her—left, right, left, right, left, right—as they crossed the miles of endless passageways.

In this way the strange pair moved unnoticed through the Castle. Past the heavy murmuring doors that hid the many workshops where the people from the East Side spent their long working hours making boots, beer, clothes, boats, beds, saddles, candles, sails, bread, and more recently guns, uniforms and chains. Past the cold schoolrooms where bored children chanted their thirteen times-tables and past the empty, echoing storerooms where the Custodian Army had recently taken away most of the winter stores for its own use.

At long last Marcia and Jenna emerged through the narrow archway that led into the Wizard Tower courtyard. Jenna caught her breath in the cold air and stole a look out from under the cloak.

She gasped.

Rearing up in front of her was the Wizard Tower, so high that the golden Pyramid crowning it was almost lost in a wisp of low-lying cloud. The Tower shone a brilliant silver in the winter sunlight, so bright that it hurt Jenna's eyes, and the purple glass in its hundreds of tiny windows glittered and sparkled with a mysterious darkness that reflected the light and kept the secrets hidden behind them. A thin blue haze shimmered around the Tower, blurring its boundaries, and Jenna found it hard to tell where the Tower ended and the sky began. The air too was different; it smelled strange and sweet, of magical spells and old incense. And as Jenna stood, unable to stir another step, she knew that she was surrounded by the sounds, too soft to be heard, of

ancient charms and incantations.

For the first time since Jenna had left her home she was afraid.

Marcia put a protective arm around Jenna's shoulders, for even Marcia remembered what it was like to first see the Tower. Terrifying.

"Come on, nearly there," murmured Marcia encouragingly, and together they slipped and slid across the snow-covered courtyard toward the huge marble steps that led up to the shimmering, silver entrance. Marcia was intent upon keeping her balance, and it was not until she reached the bottom of the steps that she noticed there was no longer a sentry on guard. She looked at her timepiece, puzzled. The sentry change was not due for fifteen minutes, so where was the snowball-throwing boy she had told off that morning?

Marcia looked around, tutting to herself. Something was wrong. The sentry was not here. And yet he was still here. He was, she suddenly realized, between the Here and the Not Here.

He was nearly dead.

Marcia made a sudden dive toward a small mound by the archway, and Jenna fell out of the cloak.

"Dig!" hissed Marcia, scrabbling away at the mound. "He's here. Frozen."

Underneath the mound lay the thin white body of the sentry. He was curled up into a ball, and his flimsy cotton uniform was soaked with the snow and clung coldly to him, the acid-bright colors of the bizarre uniform looking tawdry in the cold winter sunlight. Jenna shivered at the sight of the boy, not from the cold but from an unknown, wordless memory that had flitted across her mind.

Marcia carefully brushed the snow from the boy's dark blue mouth while Jenna lay her hand on his white sticklike arm. She had never felt anyone so cold before. Surely he was already dead?

Jenna watched Marcia lean over the boy's face and mutter something under her breath. Marcia stopped, listened and looked concerned. Then she muttered again, more urgently this time, "**Quicken, Youngling. Quicken.**" She paused for a moment and then breathed a long slow breath over the boy's face. The breath tumbled endlessly from Marcia's mouth, on and on, a warm pale pink cloud that enveloped the boy's mouth and nose and slowly, slowly

seemed to take away the awful blue and replace it with a living glow. The boy did not stir, but Jenna thought that now she could see a faint rise and fall of his chest. He was breathing again.

“Quick!” whispered Marcia to Jenna. “He won’t survive if we leave him here. We’ll have to get him inside.” Marcia gathered the boy into her arms and carried him up the wide marble steps. As she reached the top, the solid silver doors to the Wizard Tower swung silently open before them. Jenna took a deep breath and followed Marcia and the boy inside.

7

WIZARD TOWER



It was only when the doors of the Wizard Tower had swung closed behind her and Jenna found herself standing in the huge golden entrance Hall that she realized just how much her life had changed. Jenna had never, ever seen or even dreamed of a place like this. She knew that most other people in the Castle would never see anything like it either. She was already becoming different from those she had left behind.

Jenna gazed at the unfamiliar riches that surrounded her as she stood, entranced, in the massive circular Hall. The golden walls flickered with fleeting pictures of mythical creatures, symbols and strange lands. The air was warm and smelled of incense. It was filled with a quiet, soft hum, the sound of the everyday **Magyk** that kept the Tower operating. Beneath Jenna's feet the floor moved as if it were sand. It was made up of hundreds of different colors that danced around her boots and spelled out the words WELCOME PRINCESS, WELCOME. Then, as she gazed in surprise, the letters changed to read, HURRY UP!

Jenna glanced up to see Marcia, who was staggering a little as she carried the sentry, step onto a silver spiral staircase.

“Come on,” said Marcia impatiently. Jenna ran over, reached the bottom step and started to climb the stairs.

“No, just wait where you are,” explained Marcia. “The stairs will do the rest.”

“Go,” said Marcia loudly and, to Jenna’s amazement, the spiral staircase started turning. It was slow at first, but it soon picked up speed, whirling around faster and faster, up through the Tower until they reached the very top. Marcia stepped off and Jenna followed, jumping dizzily, just before the steps whirled back down again, called by another Wizard somewhere far below.

Marcia’s big purple front door had already sprung open for them, and the fire in the grate hastily burst into flames. A sofa arranged itself in front of the fire, and two pillows and a blanket hurled themselves through the air and landed neatly on the sofa without Marcia having to say a word.

Jenna helped Marcia lay the sentry boy down on the sofa. He looked bad. His face was pinched and white with cold, his eyes were closed and he had begun to shiver uncontrollably.

“Shivering’s a good sign,” said Marcia briskly, then clicked her fingers. **“Wet clothes off.”**

The ridiculous sentry uniform flew off the boy and fluttered to the floor in a garish damp heap.

“You’re rubbish,” Marcia told it, and the uniform dismally gathered itself together and dripped over to the rubbish chute, where it threw itself in and disappeared.

Marcia smiled. “Good riddance,” she said. “Now, **dry clothes on.**”

A pair of warm pajamas appeared on the boy, and his shivering became a little less violent.

“Good,” said Marcia. “We’ll just sit with him for a while and let him warm up. He’ll be fine.”

Jenna settled herself down on a rug by the fire, and soon two steaming

mugs of hot milk appeared. Marcia sat down beside her. Suddenly Jenna felt shy. The ExtraOrdinary Wizard was sitting next to her on the floor, just like Nicko did. What should she say? Jenna couldn't think of anything at all, except that her feet were cold, but she was too embarrassed to take her boots off.

“Best get those boots off,” said Marcia. “They’re soaking.”

Jenna unlaced her boots and pulled them off.

“Look at your socks. What a state,” Marcia tutted.

Jenna went red. Her socks had previously belonged to Nicko, and before that they had been Edd's. Or were they Erik's? They were mostly darns and far too big for her.

Jenna waggled her toes by the fire and dried her feet.

“Would you like some new socks?” asked Marcia.

Jenna nodded shyly. A pair of thick, warm purple socks appeared on her feet.

“We’ll keep the old ones though,” said Marcia. “**Clean,**” she told them. “**Fold.**” The socks did what they were told; they shook off the dirt, which landed in a sticky pile on the hearth, then they neatly folded themselves up and lay down by the fire next to Jenna. Jenna smiled. She was glad Marcia hadn't called Sarah's best darning rubbish.

The midwinter afternoon drew on, and the light began to fade. The sentry boy had at last stopped shivering and was sleeping peacefully. Jenna was curled up by the fire, looking at one of Marcia's **Magyk** picture books when there was a frantic banging on the door.

“Come *on*, Marcia. Open the door. It's me!” came an impatient voice from outside.

“It's Dad!” yelled Jenna.

“Shh...” said Marcia. “It might not be.”

“For goodness' sake, open the door, will you?” said the impatient voice.

Marcia did a quick **Translucent Spell**. Sure enough, to her irritation, outside the door stood Silas and Nicko. But that wasn't all. Sitting next to them, with its tongue lolling out and drool dribbling down its fur, was the wolf, wearing a spotted neckerchief.

Marcia had no choice but to let them in.

“Open!” Marcia abruptly told the door.

“Hello, Jen.” Nicko grinned. He stepped carefully onto Marcia's fine silk carpet, closely followed by Silas and the wolf, whose madly wagging tail swept Marcia's treasured collection of Fragile-Fairy pots crashing to the floor.

“Nicko! Dad!” yelled Jenna and hurled herself into Silas's arms. It felt like months since she had seen him. “Where's Mum. Is she all right?”

“She's fine,” said Silas. “She's gone to Galen's with the boys. Nicko and I just came by to give you this.” Silas fished around in his deep pockets. “Hang on,” he said. “It's here somewhere.”

“Are you mad?” Marcia demanded. “What do you think you are *doing*, coming here? And get that wretched wolf away from me.”

The wolf was busy dribbling over Marcia's python shoes.

“He's not a wolf,” Silas told her. “He's an Abyssinian wolfhound descended from the Maghul Maghi wolfhounds. And his name is Maximillian. Although, he might allow you to call him Maxie for short. If you're nice to him.”

“Nice!” spluttered Marcia, almost speechless.

“Thought we might stay over,” Silas carried on, tipping out the contents of a small grubby sack over Marcia's ebony and jade Ouija table and sifting through them. “It's too dark now to go into the Forest.”

“Stay? *Here?*”

“Dad! Look at my socks, Dad,” said Jenna, waggling her toes in the air.

“Mmm, very nice, poppet,” said Silas, still fishing around in his pockets. “Now where did I put it? I *know* I brought it with me...”

“Do you like my socks, Nicko?”

“Very purple,” said Nicko. “I’m frozen.”

Jenna led Nicko to the fire. She pointed at the sentry boy. “We’re waiting for him to wake up. He got frozen in the snow, and Marcia rescued him. She made him breathe again.”

Nicko whistled, impressed. “Hey,” he said, “I reckon he’s waking up now.” The sentry boy had opened his eyes and was staring at Jenna and Nicko. He looked terrified. Jenna stroked his shaven head. It was bristly and still a little cold.

“You’re safe now,” she told him. “You’re with us. I’m Jenna, and this is Nicko. What’s your name?”

“Boy 412,” mumbled the sentry.

“Boy Four One Two...?” Jenna repeated, puzzled. “But that’s a number. No one has a number for a name.”

The boy just stared at Jenna. Then he closed his eyes again and went back to sleep.

“That’s *weird*,” said Nicko. “Dad told me they only had numbers in the Young Army. There were two of them outside just now but he made them think we were Guards. And he remembered the password from years ago.”

“Good old Dad. Except,” she said thoughtfully, “I suppose he’s not my dad. And you’re not my brother...”

“Don’t be daft. ’Course we are,” said Nicko gruffly. “Nothing can change that. Silly Princess.”

“Yes, I suppose,” said Jenna.

“Yes, of *course*,” said Nicko.

Silas had overheard the conversation. “I’ll always be your dad, and Mum will always be your mum. It’s just you have a first mum as well.”

“Was she really a Queen?” asked Jenna.

“Yes. *The* Queen. Our Queen. Before we had these Custodians here.” Silas looked thoughtful and then his expression cleared as he remembered something and took off his thick woolen hat. *There* it was, in his hat pocket.

Of course.

“Found it!” Silas said triumphantly. “Your birthday present. Happy birthday, poppet.” He gave Jenna the present she had left behind.

It was small and surprisingly heavy for its size. Jenna tore off the colored paper and held a little blue drawstring bag in her hand. She carefully pulled open the strings, holding her breath with excitement.

“Oh,” she said, not able to keep the disappointment out of her voice. “It’s a pebble. But it’s a really nice pebble, Dad. Thanks.” She picked out the smooth gray stone and put it in the palm of her hand.

Silas lifted Jenna onto his lap. “It’s not a pebble. It’s a pet rock,” he explained. “Try tickling it under its chin.”

Jenna wasn’t quite sure which end its chin was, but she tickled the rock anyway. Slowly the pebble opened its little black eyes and looked at her, then it stretched out four stumpy legs, stood up and walked around her hand.

“Oh, Dad, it’s *brilliant*,” gasped Jenna.

“We thought you’d like it. I got the spell from the Roving Rocks Shop. Don’t feed it too much though, otherwise it will get very heavy and lazy. And it needs a walk every day too.”

“I’ll call it Petroc,” said Jenna. “Petroc Trelawney.”

Petroc Trelawney looked as pleased as a pebble can look, which was pretty much the same as he had looked before. He drew in his legs, closed his eyes and settled back down to sleep. Jenna put him in her pocket to keep him warm.

Meanwhile Maxie was busy chewing the wrapping paper and dribbling down Nicko’s neck.

“Hey, get *off*, you dribble-bucket! Go on, lie *down*,” said Nicko, trying to push Maxie onto the floor. But the wolfhound wouldn’t lie down. He was staring at a large picture on the wall of Marcia in her Apprenticeship Graduation gown.

Maxie began to whine softly.

Nicko patted Maxie. “Scary picture, hey?” he whispered to the dog who wagged his tail halfheartedly and then yelped as Alther Mella appeared through the picture. Maxie had never got used to Alther’s appearances.

Maxie whimpered and burrowed his head under the blanket that covered Boy 412. His cold wet nose woke the boy up with a start. Boy 412 sat bolt upright and stared around him like a frightened rabbit. He didn’t like what he saw. In fact, it was his worst nightmare.

Any minute now the Young Army Commander would come for him and then he would be in real trouble. Consorting with the enemy—that was what they called it when someone talked to Wizards. And here he was with two of them. *And* an old Wizard ghost by the look of it. Not to mention the two weirdo kids, one with some kind of crown on her head and the other with those telltale green Wizard eyes. And the filthy dog. They’d taken his uniform too and put him in civilian clothes. He could be shot as a spy. Boy 412 groaned and put his head in his hands.

Jenna reached over and put her arm around him. “It’s all right,” she whispered. “We’ll look after you.”

Alther was looking agitated. “That *Linda* woman. She’s told them where you’ve gone. They’re coming here. They’re sending the *Assassin*.”

“Oh, no,” said Marcia. “I’ll **CharmLock** the main doors.”

“Too late,” gasped Alther. “She’s already in.”

“But how?”

“Someone left the door open,” said Alther.

“Silas, you idiot!” snapped Marcia.

“Right,” said Silas making for the door. “We’ll be off, then. And I’ll take Jenna with me. She’s obviously not safe with you, Marcia.”

“What?” squeaked Marcia indignantly. “She’s not safe anywhere, you fool!”

“Don’t you call me a fool,” spluttered Silas. “I am just as intelligent as you, Marcia. Just because I am only an Ordinary—”

“*Stop it!*” shouted Alther. “This is not the time to argue. For goodness’ sake, *she’s coming up the stairs.*”

Shocked, everyone stopped and listened. All was quiet. Far too quiet. Except for the whisper of the silver stairs steadily turning as they brought a passenger slowly up through the Wizard Tower right to the very top, to Marcia’s purple door.

Jenna looked scared. Nicko put his arm around her. “I’ll keep you safe, Jen,” he said. “You’ll be all right with me.”

Suddenly Maxie put his ears back and gave a bloodcurdling howl. Everyone’s hair stood up on the backs of their necks.

Crash! The door burst open.

Silhouetted against the light stood the Assassin. Her face was pale as she surveyed the scene before her. Her eyes glanced coldly about her, searching for her prey. The Princess. In her right hand she carried a silver pistol, the one that Marcia had last seen ten years ago in the Throne Room.

The Assassin stepped forward.

“You are under arrest,” she said menacingly. “You are not required to say anything at all. You will be taken from here to a place and—”

Boy 412 stood up, trembling. It was just as he had expected—they had come for him. Slowly he walked over toward the Assassin. She stared at him coldly.

“Out of my way, boy,” snapped the Assassin. She struck out at Boy 412 and sent him crashing to the floor.

“Don’t do that!” yelled Jenna. She rushed over to Boy 412, who was sprawled on the floor. As she knelt down to see if he was hurt, the Assassin grabbed her.

Jenna twisted around. “Let go of me!” she yelled.

“Keep still, *Queenling*,” sneered the Assassin. “There’s someone who wants to see you. But he wants to see you—*dead.*”

The Assassin raised the silver pistol to Jenna’s head.

Crack!

A **Thunderflash** flew from Marcia's outstretched hand. It knocked the Assassin off her feet and threw Jenna clear of her grasp.

"Begird and Preserve!" shouted Marcia. A brilliant white sheet of light sprung up like a bright blade from the floor and encircled them, cutting them off from the unconscious Assassin.

Then Marcia threw open the hatch that covered the rubbish chute.

"It's the only way out," she said. "Silas, you go first. Try and do a **Cleaning Spell** as you go down."

"What?"

"You heard what I said. Get *in*, will you!" snapped Marcia, giving Silas a hefty shove through the open hatch. Silas tumbled into the rubbish chute and then, with a yell, he was gone.

Jenna pulled Boy 412 to his feet. "Go on," she said and pushed him headfirst into the chute. Then she jumped in, closely followed by Nicko, Marcia and an overexcited wolfhound.

8

THE RUBBISH CHUTE



When Jenna threw herself into the rubbish chute she was so terrified of the Assassin that she did not have time to be afraid of the chute. But as she tumbled uncontrollably downward into the pitch blackness she felt an overwhelming panic well up inside her.

The inside of the rubbish chute was as cold and slippery as ice. It was made from a highly polished black slate, seamlessly cut and joined by the Master Masons who had built the Wizard Tower many hundreds of years ago. The drop was steep, too steep for Jenna to have any control over how she fell, so she tumbled and twisted this way and that, rolling from side to side.

But the worst thing was the dark.

It was thick, deep, impenetrable black. It pressed in on Jenna from all sides and although she strained her eyes desperately to see anything, anything at all, there was no response. Jenna thought she had gone blind.

But she could still hear. And behind her, coming up fast, Jenna could hear the swish of damp wolfhound fur.

Maxie the wolfhound was having a good time. He liked this game. Maxie had been a little surprised when he had jumped into the chute and not found Silas ready with his ball. He was even more surprised when his paws didn't seem to work anymore, and he had briefly scrabbled around trying to find out why. Then he had bumped his nose on the back of the scary woman's neck and tried to lick a tasty morsel of something off her hair, but at that point she had given him a violent shove that had flipped him over onto his back.

And now Maxie was happy. Nose first, paws held in close, he became a streamlined streak of fur, and he overtook them all. Past Nicko, who grabbed at his tail but then let go. Past Jenna, who screamed in his ear. Past Boy 412, who was curled into a tight ball. And then past his master, Silas. Maxie felt uncomfortable going past Silas, because Silas was Top Dog and Maxie was Not Allowed in Front. But the wolfhound had no choice—he sailed by Silas in a shower of cold stew and carrot peelings and carried on down.

The rubbish chute snaked around the Wizard Tower like a giant helter-skelter buried deep inside the thick walls. It dropped steeply between each floor, taking with it not only Maxie, Silas, Boy 412, Jenna, Nicko and Marcia but also the remains of all the Wizards' lunches, which had been tipped into the chute that afternoon. The Wizard Tower was twenty-one stories high. The top two floors belonged to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and on each floor below that there were two Wizard apartments. That's a lot of lunches. It was wolfhound heaven, and Maxie ate enough scraps on his way down the Wizard Tower to keep him going for the rest of the day.

Eventually, after what felt like hours but was in fact only two minutes and fifteen seconds, Jenna felt the almost vertical drop level out, and her pace slowed to something that was bearable. She did not know it, but she now had left the Wizard Tower and was traveling below the ground, out from the foot of the Tower and toward the basements of the Courts of the Custodians. It was still pitch-black and freezing cold in the chute, and Jenna felt very alone. She strained her ears to hear any sounds that the others might be making, but everyone knew how important it was to keep quiet and no one dared to call out. Jenna thought that she could detect the swish of Marcia's cloak behind

her, but since Maxie had hurtled past her she had had no sign that there was anyone else with her at all. The thought of being alone in the dark forever began to take hold of her, and another tide of panic started to rise. But just as Jenna thought she might scream, a chink of light shone down from a distant kitchen far above, and she caught a glimpse of Boy 412 huddled into a ball not far in front of her. Jenna's spirits lifted at the sight of him, and she found herself feeling sorry for the thin, cold sentry boy in his pajamas.

Boy 412 was in no state to feel sorry for anyone, least of all himself. When the mad girl with the gold circle on her head had pushed him into the abyss he had instinctively curled himself up into a ball and had spent the entire descent down the Wizard Tower rattling from side to side of the chute like a marble in a drainpipe. Boy 412 felt bruised and battered but no more terrified than he had been since he awoke to find himself in the company of two Wizards, a Wizard boy and a Wizard ghost. As he too slowed down when the chute leveled out, Boy 412's brain began to work again. The few thoughts that he managed to put together came to the conclusion that this must be a Test. The Young Army was full of Tests. Terrifying Surprise Tests always sprung on you in the middle of the night, just as you had fallen asleep and made your cold narrow bed as warm and comfortable as was possible. But this was a Big Test. This must be one of those Do-or-Die Tests. Boy 412 gritted his teeth; he wasn't sure, but right now it felt horribly like this was the Die part of the test. Whatever it was, there wasn't much he could Do. So Boy 412 closed his eyes tightly and kept rolling along.

The chute took them ever downward. It turned left and traveled underneath the Custodian Council Chambers, bore right to take in the Army Offices and then straight on where it burrowed through the thick walls of the underground kitchens that served the Palace. This was where things became particularly messy. The Kitchen Maids were still busy clearing up after the Supreme Custodian's midday banquet, and the hatches in the kitchen, which were not far above the travelers in the rubbish chute, opened with alarming frequency and showered them with the mixed-up remains of the feast. Even Maxie, who had by now eaten as much as he possibly could, found it unpleasant, especially after a solidified rice pudding hit him square on the nose. The youngest Kitchen Maid who threw the rice pudding caught a glimpse of Maxie and had nightmares about wolves in the rubbish chute for weeks.

For Marcia it was a nightmare too. She wrapped her gravy-splattered purple silk cloak with the custard-coated fur lining tightly around her, ducked a shower of brussels sprouts and tried to rehearse the **One-Second Dry Clean**

Spell to use the moment she got out of the chute.

At last the chute took them away from the kitchens, and things became slightly cleaner. Jenna briefly allowed herself to relax, but suddenly her breath was taken away as the chute dipped sharply down under the Castle walls toward its final destination at the riverside rubbish dump.

Silas recovered first from the sharp dip and guessed they were coming to the end of their journey. He peered into the darkness to try to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but he could make nothing out at all. Although he knew that by now the sun had set, he had hoped that with the full moon rising some light would be filtering through. And then, to his surprise, he slid to a halt against something solid. Something soft and slimy that smelled disgusting. It was Maxie.

Silas was wondering why Maxie was blocking up the rubbish chute when Boy 412, Jenna, Nicko and Marcia cannoned into him in quick succession. Silas realized that it was not just Maxie who was soft, slimy and smelled disgusting—they all did.

“Dad?” Jenna’s scared voice came out of the darkness. “Is that you, Dad?”

“Yes, poppet,” whispered Silas.

“Where are we, Dad?” asked Nicko hoarsely. He hated the rubbish chute. Up until his leap into it Nicko had had no idea that he was terrified of confined spaces; what a way to find out, he thought. Nicko had managed to fight his fear by telling himself that at least they were moving and they would soon be out. But now they had stopped. And they weren’t out.

They were *stuck*.

Trapped.

Nicko tried to sit up, but his head hit the cold slate above him. He stretched out his arms, but they both met the ice-smooth sides of the chute before he could straighten them. Nicko felt his breath coming faster and faster. He thought he might go mad if they didn’t get out of there *fast*.

“Why have we stopped?” hissed Marcia.

“There’s a blockage,” whispered Silas, who had felt past Maxie and come

to the conclusion that they had fetched up against a huge pile of rubbish that was blocking the chute.

“Bother,” muttered Marcia.

“Dad. I want to get out, Dad,” gasped Nicko.

“Nicko?” whispered Silas. “You okay?”

“No...”

“It’s the rat door!” said Marcia triumphantly. “There’s a grille to keep the rats out of the chute. It was put up after Endor found a rat in her hot pot. Open it, Silas.”

“I can’t get to it. There’s all this rubbish in the way.”

“If you’d done a **Cleaning Spell** like I’d asked you, there wouldn’t be, would there?”

“Marcia,” hissed Silas, “when you think you are about to die, a spot of housekeeping is not a number-one priority.”

“Dad,” said Nicko desperately.

“I’ll do it, then,” snapped Marcia. She clicked her fingers and recited something under her breath. There was a muffled *clang* as the rat door swung open and a *swish* as the rubbish obligingly hurled itself out of the chute and tumbled down onto the dump.

They were free.

The full moon, which was rising above the river, shone its clear white light into the blackness of the chute and guided the six tired and bruised travelers out to the place they had all been longing to reach.

The Riverside Amenity Rubbish Dump.

9

SALLY MULLIN'S CAFE



It was the usual quiet winter's evening in Sally Mullin's cafe. A steady buzz of conversation filled the air as a mixture of regular customers and travelers shared the large wooden tables that were gathered around a small wood-burning stove. Sally had just been around the tables sharing jokes, offering some newly baked slabs of barley cake and refilling the oil lamps that had been burning all through the dull winter afternoon. She was now back behind the bar, carefully pouring out five measures of Springo Special Ale for some newly arrived Northern Traders.

When Sally glanced over at the Traders she noticed to her surprise that the usual look of sad resignation Northern Traders were known for had been

replaced by broad grins. Sally smiled. She prided herself on running a happy cafe, and if she could get five dour Traders laughing before they even had their first tankard of Springo Special, then she was doing something right.

Sally brought the ale over to the Traders' table by the window and set it skillfully down in front of them without spilling a drop. But the Traders paid no attention to the ale, for they were too busy rubbing the steamed-up window with their grubby sleeves and peering out into the gloom. One of them pointed at something outside, and they all broke out into raucous guffaws.

The laughter was spreading around the cafe. Other customers began coming to the windows and peering out until soon the entire clientele of the cafe was pushing for a place by the long line of windows that ran along the back.

Sally Mullin peered out to see what was causing the merriment.

Her jaw dropped.

In the bright light of the full moon, the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Madam Marcia Overstrand, was covered in rubbish and dancing like a madwoman on top of the municipal rubbish dump.

No, thought Sally, that's not possible.

She peered through the smeary window again. Sally could not believe what she saw. There indeed was Madam Marcia with three children—*three children*? Everyone knew that Madam Marcia could not abide children. There was also a wolf and someone who looked vaguely familiar to Sally. Now, who was it?

Sarah's no-good husband, Silas I'll-Do-It-Tomorrow Heap. That's who it was.

What on earth was Silas Heap doing with Marcia Overstrand? With three of the children? On the *rubbish dump*? Did Sarah know about this?

Well, she soon would.

As a good friend to Sarah Heap, Sally felt it was her duty to go and check this out. So she put the Washing-up Boy in charge of the cafe and ran out into the moonlight.

Sally clattered down the wooden gangway of the cafe pontoon and ran through the snow up the hill toward the dump. As she ran, her mind came to an inescapable conclusion.

Silas Heap was eloping with Marcia Overstrand.

It all made sense. Sarah had often complained about how Silas was obsessed with Marcia. Ever since he had given up his Apprenticeship to Alther Mella and Marcia had taken it over, Silas had watched her amazing progress with a mixture of horror and fascination, always imagining that it could have been *him*. And since she had become ExtraOrdinary Wizard ten years ago, Silas had, if anything, been worse.

Completely obsessed with what Marcia was doing, that's what Sarah had said.

But of course, mused Sally, who had now reached the foot of the huge pile of rubbish and was painfully scrabbling her way up, Sarah was not entirely innocent either. Anyone could see that their little girl was not Silas's child. She looked so different from all the others. And once when Sally had very delicately tried to bring up the subject of Jenna's father, Sarah had very quickly changed it. Oh, yes, something had been going on between the Heaps for years. But that was no excuse for what Silas was doing now. No excuse at all, thought Sally crossly as she stumbled her way up toward the top of the dump.

The bedraggled figures had started making their way down and were heading in Sally's direction. Sally waved her arms at them, but they appeared not to have noticed her. They seemed preoccupied and were staggering a little as if they were dizzy. Now that they were nearer, Sally could see that she was right about their identities.

"Silas Heap!" Sally yelled angrily.

The five figures jumped out of their skins and stared at Sally.

"Shush!" four voices whispered as loud as they dared.

"I will not *shush!*" declared Sally. "What do you think you are doing, Silas Heap? Leaving your wife for this...*floozie.*" Sally wagged her forefinger disapprovingly at Marcia.

"Floozie?" gasped Marcia.

“*And* taking these poor children with you,” she told Silas. “How *could* you?”

Silas waded through the rubbish to Sally.

“*What* are you talking about?” he demanded. “And will you please *be quiet!*”

“*Shush!*” said three voices behind him.

At last Sally quieted down.

“Don’t do it, Silas,” she whispered hoarsely. “Don’t leave your lovely wife and family. Please.”

Silas looked bemused. “I’m not,” he said. “Who told you that?”

“You’re not?”

“*No!*”

“*Shushhh!*”

It took most of the long stumble down the dump to explain to Sally what had happened. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open as Silas told her what he had to in order to get her on their side—which was pretty much everything. Silas realized that they not only needed Sally’s silence; they could do with her help too. But Marcia wasn’t so sure. Sally Mullin was not exactly the first person she would have chosen to help. Marcia decided to step in and take charge.

“Right,” she said authoritatively as they reached the solid ground at the foot of the dump. “I think we can expect the Hunter and his Pack to be sent after us any minute now.”

A flicker of fear passed over Silas’s face. He had heard about the Hunter.

Marcia was practical and calm. “I’ve filled the chute back up with rubbish and done a **Lockfast and Weld Spell** on the rat door,” she said. “So with any luck he’ll think we’re still trapped in there.”

Nicko shuddered at the thought.

“But it won’t delay him long,” continued Marcia. “And then he’ll come looking—and asking.” Marcia looked at Sally as if to say, *And it will be you he’ll be asking.*

Everyone fell quiet.

Sally returned Marcia’s gaze steadily. She knew what she was taking on. She knew it would be big trouble for her, but Sally was a loyal friend.

She would do it.

“Right, then,” said Sally briskly. “We’ll have to get you all far away with the pixies by then, won’t we?”

Sally took them down to the bunkhouse at the back of the cafe where many an exhausted traveler had found themselves a warm bed for the night, and clean clothes too if they needed them. The bunkhouse was empty at this time of day. Sally showed them where the clothes were kept and told them to take as much as they needed. It was going to be a long, cold night. She quickly filled a bucket with hot water so that they could wash off the worst of the mess from the chute and then rushed out, saying, “I’ll see you down at the quay in ten minutes. You can have my boat.”

Jenna and Nicko were only too pleased to get rid of their filthy clothes, but Boy 412 refused to do anything. He had had enough changes that day, and he was determined to hang on to what he had, even if it was a pair of wet and filthy Wizard pajamas.

Eventually Marcia was forced to use a **Clean-Up Spell** on him, followed by a **Change of Dress Spell** to get him into the thick fisherman’s sweater, trousers and sheepskin jacket plus a bright red beanie hat that Silas had found for him.

Marcia was cross at having to use a spell for Boy 412’s outfit. She wanted to save her energy for later, as she had an unpleasant feeling that she might need it all to get them to safety. She had of course used a little energy on her **One-Second Dry Clean Spell**, which, due to the disgusting state of her cloak, had turned into a **One-Minute Dry Clean Spell** and still hadn’t got rid of all the gravy stains. In Marcia’s opinion, the cloak of an ExtraOrdinary Wizard was more than just a cloak; it was a finely tuned instrument of **Magyk** and must be treated with respect.

Ten minutes later they were all down at the quay.

Sally and her sailing boat were waiting for them. Nicko looked at the little green boat approvingly. He loved boats. In fact, there was nothing Nicko loved better than being out in a boat on the open water, and this looked like a good one. She was broad and steady, sat well in the water and had a pair of new red sails. She had a nice name too: *Muriel*. Nicko liked that.

Marcia looked at the boat dubiously. “How does it work, then?” she asked Sally.

Nicko butted in. “Sails,” he said. “She sails.”

“Who sails?” asked Marcia, confused.

Nicko was patient. “The *boat* does.”

Sally was getting agitated.

“You’d better be off,” she said, glancing back at the rubbish dump. “I’ve put some paddles in, just in case you need them. And some food. Here, I’ll untie the rope and hang on to it while you all get aboard.”

Jenna scrambled in first, grabbing Boy 412 by the arm and taking him with her. He resisted for a moment but then gave in. Boy 412 was getting very tired.

Nicko jumped in next, then Silas propelled a somewhat reluctant Marcia off the quay and into the boat. She sat down uncertainly by the tiller and sniffed.

“What’s that awful smell?” she muttered.

“Fish,” said Nicko, wondering if Marcia knew how to sail.

Silas jumped in with Maxie, and *Muriel* settled a little lower down in the water.

“I’ll push you off now,” said Sally anxiously.

She threw the rope to Nicko, who skillfully caught it and stowed it neatly in the prow of the boat.

Marcia grabbed at the tiller, the sails flapping wildly, and *Muriel* took an

unpleasantly sharp turn to the left.

“Shall I take the tiller?” Nicko offered.

“Take the what? Oh, this handle thing here? Very well, Nicko. I don’t want to tire myself.” Marcia wrapped her cloak around her and, with as much dignity as she could muster, shuffled awkwardly around to the side of the boat.

Marcia was not happy. She had never been in a boat before, and she had no intention of ever getting in one again if she could possibly help it. There were no seats for a start. No carpet, no cushions even and no *roof*. Not only was there far too much water outside the boat for her liking, but there was a little too much inside too. Did this mean it was sinking? And the smell was unbelievable.

Maxie was very excited. He managed to tread on Marcia’s precious shoes and wag his tail in her face at the same time.

“Shove over, you daft dog,” said Silas, pushing Maxie up to the prow where he could put his long wolfhound nose into the wind and sniff all the water smells. Then Silas squashed himself in beside Marcia, much to her discomfort, while Jenna and Boy 412 curled up on the other side of the boat.

Nicko stood happily in the stern, holding on to the tiller, and confidently set sail for the open reaches of the river.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

Marcia was still too preoccupied with her sudden proximity to such a large amount of water to answer.

“Aunt Zelda,” said Silas, who had discussed things with Sarah after Jenna had left that morning, “we’ll go and stay with Aunt Zelda.”

The wind caught *Muriel*’s sails and she picked up speed, heading toward the fast current in the middle of the river. Marcia closed her eyes and felt dizzy. She wondered if the boat was meant to lean over *quite* so much.

“The Keeper in Marram Marshes?” Marcia asked rather feebly.

“Yes,” said Silas. “We’ll be safe there. She’s got her cottage permanently **Enchanted** now, after she was raided by the Quake Ooze Brownies last

winter. No one will ever find it.”

“Very well,” said Marcia. “We’ll go to Aunt Zelda.”

Silas looked surprised. Marcia had actually agreed with him without an argument. But then, he smiled to himself, they were all in the same boat now.

And so the little green boat disappeared into the night, leaving Sally a distant figure on the shore, waving bravely. As she lost sight of *Muriel*, Sally stood on the quay and listened to the sound of the water lapping against the cold stones. Suddenly she felt quite alone. She turned and started to make her way back along the snowy riverbank, her path lit by the yellow light shining from her cafe windows a short distance away. A few customers’ faces gazed out into the night as Sally hurried back to the warmth and chatter of the cafe, but they appeared not to notice her small figure as she tramped through the snow and made her way up the gangway to the pontoon.

As Sally pushed open the cafe door and slipped into the warm hubbub, her more regular customers noticed that she was not her usual self. And they were right; unusually for Sally, she had only one thought on her mind.

How long would it be before the Hunter arrived?

10

THE HUNTER



It took *precisely eight minutes and twenty seconds* for the Hunter and his Pack to arrive at the Riverside Amenity Rubbish Dump after Sally had waved *Muriel* off at the quay. Sally had lived through each one of those five hundred seconds with a mounting dread in the pit of her stomach.

What had she *done*?

Sally had said nothing when she returned to the cafe, but something about her demeanor had caused most of her customers to quickly drink up their Springo, gulp down the last crumbs of barley cake and melt speedily into the night. The only customers Sally had left were the five Northern Traders, who were on their second measures of Springo Special and were talking softly among themselves in their mournful singsong accents. Even the Washing-up Boy had disappeared.

Sally's mouth was dry, her hands were shaking and she fought against her overwhelming desire to run away. Calm down, girl, she told herself. Tough it out. Deny everything. The Hunter has no reason to suspect you. If you run now, he'll *know* you're involved. And the Hunter will find you. He always does. Just sit tight and keep cool.

The second hand of the big cafe clock ticked on.

Click...Click...Click...

Four hundred and ninety-eight seconds...Four hundred and ninety-nine seconds...Five hundred.

A powerful searchlight beam swept across the top of the rubbish dump.

Sally ran to a nearby window and stared out, her heart pounding. She could see a swarm of black figures milling around, silhouetted in the beam of the searchlight. The Hunter had brought his Pack, just as Marcia had warned.

Sally stared intently, trying to make out what they were doing. The Pack was gathered around the rat door, which Marcia had jammed shut with the **Lockfast and Weld Spell**. To Sally's relief the Pack seemed to be in no hurry; in fact, it looked as though they were laughing among themselves. Some faint shouts drifted down to the cafe. Sally strained her ears. What she heard made her shiver.

"...Wizard scum..."

"...Rats trapped by a rat door..."

"...Don't go away, ha ha. We're coming to get you..."

As Sally watched she could see the figures around the rat door becoming increasingly frantic as the door held fast against all their efforts to pull it free. Standing apart from the Pack was a lone figure watching impatiently whom Sally rightly took to be the Hunter.

Suddenly the Hunter lost patience with the efforts to free the rat door. He strode over, grabbed an axe from one of the Pack and angrily attacked the door. Loud metallic clangs echoed down to the cafe until eventually the mangled rat door was tossed to the side, and one of the Pack was sent into the chute to dig out the rubbish. A searchlight was now trained directly into the chute, and the Pack gathered around the exit. Sally could see the glinting of

their pistols in the glare of the lights. With her heart in her mouth, Sally waited for them to discover that their prey had fled.

It didn't take long.

A disheveled figure emerged from the chute and was roughly grabbed by the Hunter who, Sally could tell, was furious. He shook the man violently and threw him aside, sending him sprawling down the slope of the dump. The Hunter crouched down and peered disbelievingly into the empty rubbish chute. Abruptly, he motioned for the smallest of the Pack to go into the chute. The man chosen hung back reluctantly, but he was forced in, and two Pack Guards with pistols were left at the entrance.

The Hunter walked slowly to the edge of the rubbish dump to regain his composure after finding that his prey had eluded him. He was followed at a safe distance by the small figure of a boy.

The boy was dressed in the everyday green robes of a Wizard Apprentice, but unlike any other Apprentice, he wore around his waist a red sash with three black stars emblazoned on it. The stars of DomDaniel.

But at that moment the Hunter was unaware of DomDaniel's Apprentice. He stood quietly, a short, solidly built man with the usual cropped Guard haircut. His face was brown and lined from all his years outdoors spent hunting and tracking down prey of the human kind. He wore the usual Hunter attire: dark green tunic and short cloak with thick brown leather boots. Around his waist was a broad leather belt from which hung a sheathed knife and a pouch.

The Hunter smiled a grim smile, his mouth a thin, determined line turned down at the edges, his pale blue eyes narrowed to a watchful slit. So it was to be a Hunt, was it? Very well, there was nothing he liked better than a Hunt. For years he had been slowly making his way up through the ranks of the Hunting Pack, and at last he had reached his goal. He was a Hunter, the very best of the Pack, and this was the moment he had been waiting for. Here he was, hunting not only the ExtraOrdinary Wizard but also the Princess, the *Queenling* no less. The Hunter felt excited as he anticipated a night to remember: the Sighting, the Trail, the Chase, the Close and the Kill. No problem, thought the Hunter, his smile broadening to show his small pointed teeth in the cold moonlight.

The Hunter turned his thoughts to the Hunt. Something told him that the birds had flown from the rubbish chute, but as an efficient Hunter he had to make sure that all possibilities were covered, and the Pack Guard he had sent inside had been given instructions to follow the chute and check all exits back up to the Wizard Tower. The fact that that was probably impossible did not trouble the Hunter; a Pack Guard was the lowest of the low, an Expendable, and would do his duty or die in the attempt. The Hunter had been an Expendable once but not for long—he'd made sure of that. And now, he thought with a tremor of excitement, now he must find the Trail.

The rubbish dump, however, yielded few clues even to the skilled tracker that the Hunter was. The heat from the decay of the rubbish had melted the snow, and the constant disturbance of the rubbish by rats and gulls had already removed any trace of a Trail. Very well, thought the Hunter. In the absence of a Trail he must search out a Sighting.

The Hunter stood on his vantage point on top of the dump and surveyed the moonlit scene through his narrowed eyes. Behind him rose the steep, dark walls of the Castle, the battlements outlined crisply against the cold, bright starry sky. In front of him lay the undulating landscape of the rich farmland that bordered the far side of the river, and in the distance on the horizon his eyes took in the jagged spine of the Border Mountains. The Hunter gave the snow-covered landscape a long, considered stare but saw nothing of interest to him. He then turned his attention to the more immediate scene below him. He looked down at the broad sweep of the river, his gaze following the flow of the water as it rounded the bend and flowed swiftly on to his right, past the cafe perched on the pontoon, which was floating gently on the high tide, past the little quay with its boats moored up for the night, and on down the broad sweep of the river until it disappeared from view behind Raven's Rock, a jagged outcrop that towered over the river.

The Hunter listened intently for sounds rising up from the water, but all he heard was the silence that the blanketing of snow brings. He scanned the water for clues—perhaps a shadow under the banks, a startled bird, a telltale ripple—but he could see nothing. *Nothing*. It was strangely quiet and still, the dark river silently winding through the bright snowy landscape lit by the shimmer of the full moon. It was, thought the Hunter, a perfect night for a Hunt.

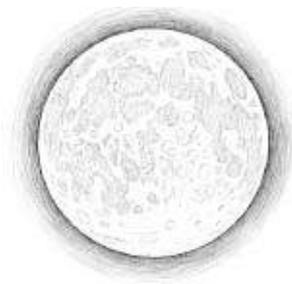
The Hunter stood immobile, tense, waiting for the Sighting to show itself to him.

Watching and waiting...

Something caught his eye. A white face at the window of the cafe. A frightened face, a face that *knew* something. The Hunter smiled. He had a Sighting. He was back on the Trail.

11

THE TRAIL



Sally saw them coming.

She jumped back from the window, straightened her skirts and collected her thoughts. Go for it, girl, she told herself. You can do it. Just put on your Welcoming Landlady face and they won't suspect a thing. Sally took refuge behind the bar and, for the first time ever during cafe hours, she poured herself a tankard of Springo Special and took a large gulp.

Eurgh. She had never liked the stuff. Too many dead rats in the bottom of the barrel for her taste.

As Sally took another mouthful of dead rat, a powerful searchlight beam cut into the cafe and swept over the occupants. Briefly, it shone straight into Sally's eyes and then, moving on, lit up the pale faces of the Northern Traders. The Traders stopped talking and exchanged worried glances.

A moment later Sally heard the heavy thud of hurried footsteps coming up the gangway. The pontoon rocked as the Pack ran along it, and the cafe shook, its plates and glasses nervously clinking with the movement. Sally put her tankard away, stood up straight and with great difficulty put a welcoming

smile on her face.

The door crashed open.

The Hunter strode in. Behind him, in the beam of the searchlight, Sally could see the Pack lined up along the pontoon, pistols at the ready.

“Good evening, sir. What can I get you?” Sally trilled nervously.

The Hunter heard the tremor in her voice with satisfaction. He liked it when they were frightened.

He walked slowly up to the bar, leaned over and stared at Sally intently.

“You can get me some *information*. I know you have it.”

“Oh?” Sally tried to sound politely interested. But that wasn’t what the Hunter heard. He heard scared and playing for time.

Good, he thought. This one knows something.

“I am in pursuit of a small and dangerous group of terrorists,” said the Hunter, carefully watching Sally’s face. Sally struggled to keep her Welcoming Landlady face, but for a fraction of a second it slipped, and the briefest of expressions flitted across her features: surprise.

“Surprised to hear your friends described as terrorists, are you?”

“No,” said Sally quickly. And then, realizing what she had said, stuttered, “I—I don’t mean that. I...”

Sally gave up. The damage was done. How had it happened so easily? It was his eyes, thought Sally, those thin, bright slits of eyes like two searchlights shining into your brain. What a fool she was to think she could outwit a Hunter. Sally’s heart was pounding so loudly she was sure the Hunter could hear it.

Which of course he could. That was one of his favorite sounds, the beating heart of cornered prey. He listened for a delightful moment longer and then he said, “You will tell us where they are.”

“No,” muttered Sally.

The Hunter seemed untroubled by this small act of rebellion. “You will,”

he told her matter-of-factly.

The Hunter leaned against the bar.

“Nice place you’ve got here, Sally Mullin. Very pretty. Built of wood, isn’t it? Been here a while if I remember right. Good dry seasoned timber by now. Burns exceedingly well, I’m told.”

“No...” whispered Sally.

“Well, I’ll tell you what, then. You just tell me where your friends have gone, and I’ll mislay my tinder box...”

Sally said nothing. Her mind was racing, but her thoughts made no sense to her. All she could think of was that she had never got the fire buckets refilled after the Washing-up Boy set the tea towels alight.

“Right, then,” said the Hunter. “I’ll go and tell the boys to get the fire started. I’ll lock the doors behind me when I go. We don’t want anyone running out and getting hurt, do we?”

“You *can’t*...” gasped Sally, understanding that the Hunter was not only about to burn down her beloved cafe but intended to burn it down with her inside it. Not to mention the five Northern Traders. Sally glanced at them. They were muttering anxiously among themselves.

The Hunter had said all he’d come to say. It was going pretty much as he had expected, and now was the time to show that he meant business. He turned abruptly and walked toward the door.

Sally stared after him, suddenly angry. How dare he come into *my* cafe and terrorize *my* customers! And then swagger off to burn us all to cinders? That man, thought Sally, is nothing but a bully. She didn’t like bullies.

Sally, impetuous as ever, ran out from behind the bar.

“Wait!” she yelled.

The Hunter smiled. It was working. It always did. Walk away and leave them to think about it for a moment. They always come around. The Hunter stopped but did not turn.

A hard kick on his leg from Sally’s sturdy right boot caught the Hunter by

surprise.

“Bully,” shouted Sally.

“Fool,” gasped the Hunter, clutching his leg. “You will regret this, Sally Mullin.”

A Senior Pack Guard appeared. “Trouble, sir?” he inquired.

The Hunter was not pleased to be seen hopping about in such an undignified manner. “No,” he snapped. “All part of the plan.”

“The men have collected the brushwood, sir, and set it under the cafe as you ordered. The tinder is dry and the flints are sparking well, sir.”

“Good,” said the Hunter grimly.

“Excuse me, sir?” said a heavily accented voice behind him. One of the Northern Traders had left their table and made his way over to the Hunter.

“Yes?” replied the Hunter through gritted teeth, spinning around on one leg to face the man. The Trader stood awkwardly. He was dressed in the dark red tunic of the Hanseatic League, travel-stained and ragged. His straggly blond hair was held in place by a greasy leather band around his forehead, and his face was a pasty white in the glare of the searchlight.

“I believe we have the information you require?” the Trader continued. His voice was slowly searching for the right words in an unfamiliar language, rising as though asking a question.

“Have you now?” replied the Hunter, the pain in his leg leaving him as, at last, the Hunt began to pick up the Trail.

Sally stared at the Northern Trader in horror. How did *he* know anything? Then she realized. He must have seen them from the window.

The Trader avoided Sally’s accusing stare. He looked uncomfortable, but he had obviously understood enough of the Hunter’s words to also be afraid.

“We believe those you seek have left? In the boat?” the Trader said slowly.

“The boat. Which boat?” snapped the Hunter, back in charge now.

“We do not know your boats here. A small boat, red sails? A family with a wolf.”

“A wolf. Ah, the mutt.” The Hunter moved uncomfortably close to the Trader and growled in a low voice, “Which direction? Upstream or downstream? To the mountains or to the Port? Think carefully, my friend, if you and your companions wish to keep cool tonight.”

“Downstream. To the Port,” muttered the Trader, finding the hot breath of the Hunter unpleasant.

“Right,” said the Hunter, satisfied. “I suggest you and your friends leave now while you can.”

The other four Traders silently got up and walked over to the fifth Trader, guiltily avoiding Sally’s horrified gaze. Swiftly they slipped out into the night, leaving Sally to her fate.

The Hunter gave her a little mocking bow.

“And good night to you too, Madam,” he said. “Thank you for your hospitality.” The Hunter swept out and slammed the cafe door behind him.

“Nail the door shut!” he shouted angrily. “And the windows. Don’t let her escape!”

The Hunter strode off down the gangway. “Get me a fast-pursuit bullet boat,” he ordered the Runner waiting at the end of the gangway. “At the quay. *Now!*”

The Hunter reached the riverbank and turned to survey Sally Mullin’s beleaguered cafe. As much as he wanted to see the first lick of the flames before he left, he did not stop. He needed to catch the Trail before it went cold. As he strode down to the quay to await the arrival of the bullet boat, the Hunter smiled a satisfied smile.

No one tried to make a fool of *him* and got away with it.

Behind the smiling Hunter trotted the Apprentice. He was somewhat sulky at having been left outside the cafe in the cold, but he was also very excited. He wrapped his thick cloak around him and hugged himself with anticipation. His dark eyes shone, and his pale cheeks were flushed with the chill night air. This was turning into the Big Adventure his Master had told

him it would be. It was the start of his Master's Return. And he was part of it because without him it could not happen. He was Advisor to the Hunter. He was the one who would Oversee the Hunt. The one whose **Magykal** powers would Save the Day. A brief tremor of doubt crossed the Apprentice's mind at this thought, but he pushed it away. He felt so important it made him want to shout. Or jump about. Or hit someone. But he couldn't. He had to do as his Master told him and follow the Hunter carefully and quietly. But he might just hit the Queenling when he got her—that would show her.

“Stop daydreaming and get in the boat, will you?” the Hunter snapped at him. “Get in the back, out of the way.”

The Apprentice did as he was told. He didn't want to admit it, but the Hunter scared him. He stepped carefully into the stern of the boat and squeezed himself into the tiny space in front of the feet of the oarsmen.

The Hunter looked approvingly at the bullet boat. Long, narrow, sleek and as black as the night, it was coated with a polished lacquer that allowed it to slip through the water with the ease of a skater's blade on ice. Powered by ten highly trained oarsmen, it could outrun anything on the water.

On the prow it carried a powerful searchlight and a sturdy tripod on which a pistol could be mounted. The Hunter stepped carefully into the prow and sat on the narrow plank behind the tripod, where he set about quickly and expertly mounting the Assassin's silver pistol onto it. He then took a silver bullet from his pouch, looked at it closely to make sure it was the one he wanted and laid it down in a small tray beside the pistol in readiness. Finally the Hunter took five standard bullets from the boat's bullet box and lined them up beside the silver bullet. He was ready.

“Go!” he said.

The bullet boat pulled smoothly and silently out from the quay, found the fast current in the middle of the river and disappeared into the night.

But not before the Hunter had glanced behind him and seen the sight he had been waiting for.

A sheet of flame was snaking up into the night.

Sally Mullin's cafe was ablaze.

12

MURIEL



A few miles downriver the sailboat *Muriel* was running with the wind, and Nicko was in his element. He stood at the helm of the small crowded boat and guided her skillfully along the channel that wound down the middle of the river, where the water flowed swift and deep. The spring tide was ebbing fast and taking them with it, while the wind had risen enough to make the water choppy and send *Muriel* bouncing through the waves.

The full moon rode high in the sky and cast a bright silver light over the river, lighting their way. The river widened as it traveled ever onward toward the sea, and as the occupants of the boat gazed out they noticed that the low-lying riverbanks with their overhanging trees and occasional lonely cottage appeared increasingly distant. A silence descended as the passengers began to feel uncomfortably small in such a large expanse of water. And Marcia began to feel horribly sick.

Jenna was sitting on the wooden deck, resting against the hull and holding on to a rope for Nicko. The rope was attached to the small triangular sail at the prow that tugged and pulled with the wind, and Jenna was kept busy

trying to keep hold of it. Her fingers felt stiff and numb, but she did not dare let go. Nicko got very bossy when he was in charge of a boat, Jenna thought.

The wind felt cold, and even with the thick sweater, big sheepskin jacket and itchy woolen hat that Silas had found for her in Sally's clothes cupboard, Jenna shivered in the chill from the water.

Curled up beside Jenna lay Boy 412. Once Jenna had pulled him into the boat, Boy 412 had decided that there was nothing he could do anymore and had given up his struggle against the Wizards and the weird kids. And when *Muriel* had rounded Raven's Rock and he could no longer see the Castle, Boy 412 had simply curled up into a ball beside Jenna and fallen fast asleep. Now that *Muriel* had reached rougher waters, his head was thumping against the mast with the movement of the boat, and Jenna gently shifted Boy 412 and placed his head on her lap. She looked down at his thin, pinched face almost hidden beneath his red felt hat and thought that Boy 412 looked a lot happier in his sleep than he did when he was awake. Then her thoughts turned to Sally.

Jenna loved Sally. She loved the way Sally never stopped talking and the way she made things happen. When Sally breezed in to see the Heaps, she brought with her all the excitement of life in the Castle, and Jenna loved it.

"I hope Sally is all right," said Jenna quietly as she listened to the steady creaking and gentle purposeful swish of the little boat speeding through the shining black water.

"So do I, poppet," said Silas, deep in thought.

Since the Castle had disappeared from view, Silas too now had time to think. And, after he had thought about Sarah and the boys and hoped they had reached Galen's tree house in the Forest safely, his thoughts had also turned to Sally, and they made for uncomfortable thinking.

"She'll be fine," said Marcia weakly. She felt sick, and she didn't like it.

"That's just so typical of you, Marcia," snapped Silas. "Now that you're ExtraOrdinary Wizard you just take what you want from someone and don't give them another thought. You just don't live in the real world anymore, do you? Unlike us Ordinary Wizards. We *know* what it's like to be in danger."

"*Muriel's* going well," said Nicko brightly, trying to change the subject. He didn't like it when Silas got upset about Ordinary Wizards. Nicko thought

being an Ordinary Wizard was pretty good. He wouldn't fancy it himself—too many books to read and not enough time to go sailing—but he reckoned it was a respectable job. And who would want to be *Extra*Ordinary Wizard anyway? Stuck in that weird Tower for most of the time and never able to go anywhere without people gawking at you. There was no way he would ever want to do *that*.

Marcia sighed. “I imagine the platinum **KeepSafe** I gave her from my belt will be of some help,” she said slowly, gazing studiedly at the distant riverbank.

“You gave Sally one of your belt **Charms**?” asked Silas, amazed. “Your **KeepSafe**? Wasn't that a bit risky? You might need it.”

“The **KeepSafe** is there to be used when the Need is Great. Sally is going to join Sarah and Galen. It may be of some use to them too. Now be quiet. I think I'm going to be sick.”

An uneasy silence fell.

“*Muriel*'s doing nicely, Nicko. You're a good sailor,” said Silas some time later.

“Thanks, Dad,” said Nicko, smiling broadly, as he always did when a boat was sailing well. Nicko was guiding *Muriel* expertly through the water, balancing the pull of the tiller against the force of the wind in the sails and sending the little boat singing through the waves.

“Is that the Marram Marshes, Dad?” asked Nicko after a while, pointing to the distant riverbank on his left. He had noticed that the landscape around them was changing. *Muriel* was now sailing down the middle of what was a wide expanse of water, and in the distance Nicko could see a vast stretch of flat low-lying land, dusted with snow and shimmering in the moonlight.

Silas stared out across the water.

“Perhaps you should sail that way a bit, Nicko,” suggested Silas, waving his arm in the general direction where Nicko was pointing. “Then we can keep an eye open for the Deppen Ditch. That's the one we need.”

Silas hoped he could remember the entrance to the Deppen Ditch, which was the channel that led to Keeper's Cottage, where Aunt Zelda lived. It had

been a long time since he had been to see Aunt Zelda, and the marshland all looked much the same to Silas.

Nicko had just changed course and was heading in the direction of Silas's waving arm when a brilliant beam of light cut through the darkness behind them.

It was the bullet boat's searchlight.

13

THE CHASE



Everyone—except Boy 412, who was still asleep—stared into the darkness. As they did so the searchlight swept across the distant horizon again, lighting up the broad expanse of the river and the low-lying banks on either side. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind what it was.

“It’s the Hunter, isn’t it, Dad?” whispered Jenna.

Silas knew Jenna was right, but he said, “Well, it could be anything, poppet. Just a boat out fishing...or something,” he added lamely.

“Of course it’s the Hunter. In a fast-pursuit bullet boat, if I’m not mistaken,” snapped Marcia, who had suddenly stopped feeling sick.

Marcia didn’t realize it, but she no longer felt sick because *Muriel* had stopped bouncing through the water. In fact, *Muriel* had stopped doing anything at all, except slowly drifting nowhere in particular.

Marcia looked accusingly at Nicko. “Get a move on, Nicko. What have you slowed down for?”

“There’s nothing I can do. The wind’s dropped,” muttered Nicko, worried. He had just turned *Muriel* toward the Marram Marshes only to find that the wind had died. *Muriel* had lost all speed, and her sails were hanging limply.

“Well, we can’t just *sit* here,” said Marcia, anxiously watching the searchlight coming rapidly closer. “That bullet boat’s going to be here in a few minutes.”

“Can’t you rustle up some wind for us?” Silas asked Marcia, agitated. “I thought you did **Element Control** on the Advanced Course. Or make us invisible. Come on, Marcia. *Do* something.”

“I can’t just ‘rustle up some wind,’ as you put it. There’s nowhere near enough time. And you *know* **Invisibility** is a personal spell. I can’t do it for anyone else.”

The searchlight swept across the water again. Bigger, brighter, nearer. And coming toward them *fast*.

“We’ll have to use the paddles,” said Nicko, who, as skipper, had decided to take charge. “We can paddle over to the marsh and hide there. Come on. *Quick*.”

Marcia, Silas and Jenna grabbed a paddle each. Boy 412 woke up with a start as Jenna thumped his head down on the deck in her rush to pick up a paddle. He looked around him unhappily. Why was he still in the boat with all the Wizards? What did they want him for?

Jenna thrust the remaining paddle into his hand.

“Paddle!” she told him. “As fast as you can!” Jenna’s tone of voice reminded Boy 412 of his drill teacher. He put his paddle into the water and paddled as fast as he could.

Slowly, far too slowly, *Muriel* crept toward the safety of the Marram Marshes while the bullet boat’s searchlight swung backward and forward across the water, mercilessly seeking out its prey.

Jenna stole a look behind her and, to her horror, saw the black shape of the bullet boat. It was like a long repulsive beetle, its five pairs of thin black

legs silently slicing through the water to and fro, to and fro, as the highly trained oarsmen pushed themselves and the boat to the limits, gaining fast on *Muriel's* frantically paddling occupants.

Sitting in the prow was the unmistakable shape of the Hunter, tense and ready to pounce. Jenna caught the Hunter's cold, calculating stare and suddenly she felt brave enough to talk to Marcia.

"Marcia," said Jenna, "we're not going to reach the marshes in time. You *must* do something. *Now.*"

Although Marcia looked surprised at being spoken to so directly, she approved. Spoken like a true Princess, she thought.

"Very well," agreed Marcia. "I could try a **Fog**. I can do that in fifty-three seconds. If it's cold and damp enough."

Muriel's crew was sure that there were no problems with the cold and damp bit. They just hoped they had fifty-three seconds left.

"Everyone stop paddling," instructed Marcia. "Keep still. And quiet. Very quiet." *Muriel's* crew did as they were told, and in the silence that fell, they heard a new sound in the distance. The rhythmic splash of the bullet boat's oars.

Marcia gingerly stood up, wishing that the floor wouldn't move around so much. Then she leaned against the mast to steady herself, took a deep breath and threw her arms wide, her cloak flying out like a pair of purple wings.

"**Murken Wake!**" the ExtraOrdinary Wizard whispered as loud as she dared. "**Murken Wake and Refuge Make!**"

It was a beautiful spell. Jenna watched as thick white clouds gathered themselves together in the bright moonlit sky, quickly obscuring the moon and bringing down a deep chill into the night air. In the darkness all became deathly still as the first delicate tendrils of mist started rising from the black water as far as the eye could see. Faster and faster the tendrils grew, gathering together and growing into thick swathes of **Fog**, as the mist from the marshes rolled over the water to join them. In the very center, in the eye of the **Fog**, sat *Muriel*, becalmed and patiently waiting as the mist tumbled, swirled and thickened around her.

Soon *Muriel* was blanketed by a deep white thickness that struck a damp

chill into Jenna's bones. Next to her she felt Boy 412 start shivering badly. He was still chilled from his time under the snow.

"Fifty-three seconds precisely," Marcia's voice muttered from out of the **Fog**. "Not bad."

"*Shhhh*," shushed Silas.

Thick white silence fell in the little boat. Slowly Jenna lifted her hand and placed it in front of her wide-open eyes. She could see nothing but whiteness. But she could hear everything.

She could hear the synchronized splash of ten knife-sharp oars being dipped into the water and out again, in and out, in and out. She could hear the swishing whisper of the bullet boat's prow slicing through the river, and now—now the bullet boat was so close that she could even hear the labored breathing of the oarsmen.

"*Stop!*" the Hunter's voice boomed through the **Fog**. The splash of the oars ceased and the bullet boat drifted to a halt. Inside the **Fog Muriel's** occupants held their breath, convinced that the bullet boat was very close indeed. Maybe close enough for them to reach out and touch. Or close enough even for the Hunter to leap onto *Muriel's* crowded deck....

Jenna felt her heart beating fast and loud, but she made herself breathe slowly, silently, and stay completely still. She knew that although they could not be seen, they could still be heard. Nicko and Marcia were doing the same. Silas was too, with the added interest of having one hand clasped around Maxie's long, damp muzzle to stop him from howling and the other hand slowly and calmly stroking the agitated wolfhound, who had become quite spooked by the **Fog**.

Jenna could feel Boy 412's constant shivering. She slowly reached out her arm and pulled him close to her to try and warm him up. Boy 412 seemed tense. Jenna could tell he was listening hard to the Hunter's voice.

"We have them!" the Hunter was saying. "This is a **Hexed Fog** if ever I saw one. And what do you always find in the middle of a **Hexed Fog**? One hexing Wizard. And her accomplices." His low, self-satisfied chuckle drifted through the **Fog** and made Jenna shiver.

"Give...yourselves...up." The Hunter's disembodied voice enveloped *Muriel*. "The Qu—the Princess has nothing to fear from us. Neither do the

rest of you. We are only concerned for your own safety and wish to escort you back to the Castle before you have an unfortunate accident.”

Jenna hated the Hunter’s oily voice. She hated the way they could not escape it, the way they had to just sit there and listen to his silky smooth lies. She wanted to shout at him. To tell him that *she* was in charge here. That *she* would not listen to his threats. That soon *he* would be sorry. And then she felt Boy 412 take a deep breath, and she knew exactly what he was going to do.

Yell.

Jenna clapped her hand tightly around Boy 412’s mouth. He struggled with her and tried to push her away, but she grabbed his arms with her other hand and held them tightly against his sides. Jenna was strong for her size and very quick. Boy 412 was no match for her, thin and weak as he was.

Boy 412 was furious. His last chance to redeem himself had been thwarted. He could have returned to the Young Army as a hero, having bravely foiled the Wizards’ attempt to escape. Instead he had the Princess’s grubby little hand shoved over his mouth, which was making him feel sick. *And* she was stronger than him. That wasn’t right. He was a boy and she was just a stupid girl. In his anger Boy 412 kicked out and hit the deck with a loud thump. At once Nicko was on him, pinning his legs down and holding him so tightly that he was completely unable to move or make another sound.

But the damage was done. The Hunter was loading his pistol with a silver bullet. Boy 412’s angry kick had been all the Hunter needed to pinpoint exactly where they were. He smiled to himself as he turned the pistol on its tripod to face into the **Fog**. He was indeed pointing it straight at Jenna.

Marcia heard the metallic clicks of the silver bullet being loaded, a sound she had heard once before and never forgotten. She thought fast. She could do a **Begird and Preserve**, but she understood the Hunter well enough to know that he would merely watch and wait until the spell faded. The only solution, thought Marcia, was a **Projection**. She just hoped she had enough energy to maintain it.

Marcia closed her eyes and **Projected**. She **Projected** an image of *Muriel* and all its occupants sailing out of the **Fog** at full speed. Like all **Projections** it was a mirror image, but she hoped that in the darkness, and with already sailing away fast, the Hunter would not notice.

“Sir!” came the shout of an oarsman. “They’re trying to outrun us, sir!”

The sounds of the pistol being primed ceased. The Hunter swore.

“Follow them, you idiots!” he screamed at the oarsmen.

Slowly the bullet boat pulled away from the **Fog**.

“Faster!” yelled the Hunter angrily, unable to bear the sight of his prey escaping him for the *third* time that night.

Inside the **Fog**, Jenna and Nicko grinned. Score: one up for them.

14

DEPPEN DITCH



Marcia was snappy. Very snappy.

Keeping two spells on the go was a tough one. Especially since one of them, being a **Projection**, was a **Reverse** form of **Magyk** and, unlike most spells that Marcia used, still had links to the **Darke** side—the **Other** side, as Marcia preferred to call it. It took a brave and skillful Wizard to use **Reverse Magyk** without inviting the **Other** in. Alther had taught Marcia well, for many of the spells he had learned from DomDaniel did indeed bring in **Darke Magyk**, and Alther had become adept at blocking it out. Marcia was only too well aware that all the time she was using the **Projection**, the **Other** hovered about them, awaiting its chance to break into the spell.

Which explained why Marcia felt as though her brain had no room left for anything else, certainly not for making the effort to be polite.

“For goodness’ sake, get this wretched boat moving, Nicko,” snapped Marcia. Nicko looked hurt. There was no need to talk to him like that.

“Someone’s got to paddle it, then,” muttered Nicko. “And it would help if I could see where we’re going.”

With some effort, and a consequent increase in snappiness, Marcia cleared a tunnel through the **Fog**. Silas kept quiet. He knew that Marcia was having to use a huge amount of **Magyk** energy and skill, and he felt a grudging respect for her. There was no way Silas would ever dare attempt a **Projection**, let alone keep a massive **Fog** going at the same time. He had to hand it to her—she was pretty good.

Silas left Marcia to her **Magyk** and paddled *Muriel* through the thick white cocoon of the **Fog** tunnel while Nicko carefully steered the boat toward the bright starry sky at the end of the tunnel. Soon Nicko felt the bottom of the boat scraping along rough sand, and *Muriel* bumped up against a thick tuft of sedge grass.

They had reached the safety of the Marram Marshes.

Marcia breathed a sigh of relief and let the **Fog** disperse. Everyone relaxed, except for Jenna. Jenna, who had not been the only girl in a family of six boys without learning a thing or two, had Boy 412 facedown on the deck in an armlock.

“Let him go, Jen,” said Nicko.

“Why?” demanded Jenna.

“He’s only a silly boy.”

“But he nearly got us all killed. We saved his life when he was buried in the snow and he betrayed us,” Jenna said angrily.

Boy 412 was silent. Buried in the snow? Saved his life? All he remembered was falling asleep outside the Wizard Tower and then waking up a prisoner in Marcia’s rooms.

“Let him go, Jenna,” said Silas. “He doesn’t understand what’s going on.”

“All right,” said Jenna, a little reluctantly releasing Boy 412 from the armlock. “But I think he’s a *pig*.”

Boy 412 sat up slowly, rubbing his arm. He didn't like the way everyone was glaring him. And he didn't like the way the Princess girl called him a pig, especially after she had been so nice to him before. Boy 412 huddled by himself as far away from Jenna as he could get and tried to work things out in his head. It wasn't easy. Nothing made sense. He tried to remember what they told him in the Young Army.

Facts. There are only facts. Good facts. Bad facts. So:

Fact One. Kidnapped: BAD.

Fact Two. Uniform stolen: BAD.

Fact Three. Pushed down rubbish chute: BAD. Really BAD.

Fact Four. Shoved into cold smelly boat: BAD.

Fact Five. Not killed by Wizards (yet): GOOD.

Fact Six. Probably going to be killed by Wizards soon: BAD.

Boy 412 counted up the GOODs and the BADs. As usual, the BADs outnumbered the GOODs, which didn't surprise him.

Nicko and Jenna clambered out of *Muriel* and scrambled up the grassy bank beside the small sandy beach on which *Muriel* now lay with her sails hanging loose. Nicko wanted a rest from being in charge of the boat. He took his responsibilities as skipper very seriously, and while he was actually in *Muriel* he felt that if anything went wrong, it was somehow his fault. Jenna was pleased to be on dry land again, or rather slightly damp land—the grass she sat down on had a soggy, squashy feel to it, as though it was growing on a big piece of wet sponge, and it was covered in a light dusting of snow.

With Jenna at a safe distance, Boy 412 dared to look up, and he saw something that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Magyk. Powerful **Magyk.**

Boy 412 stared at Marcia. Although no one else seemed to have noticed, he could see the haze of **Magyk** energy that surrounded her. It glowed a shimmering purple, flickering across the surface of her ExtraOrdinary Wizard cloak and giving her dark curly hair a deep purple shine. Marcia's brilliant

green eyes glittered as she gazed into infinity, observing a silent film that only she could see. Despite his Young Army anti-Wizard training, Boy 412 found himself awestruck in the presence of **Magyk**.

The film Marcia was watching was, of course, *IsisM* and her six mirror-image crew. They were sailing fast toward the wide mouth of the river and had nearly reached the open sea at the Port. They were, to the Hunter's amazement, reaching incredible speeds for a small sailing boat, and although the bullet boat managed to keep *IsisM* in sight, it was having trouble closing the distance enough for the Hunter to fire his silver bullet. The ten oarsmen were also tiring, and the Hunter was quite hoarse from screaming at them to go "faster, fools!"

The Apprentice had sat obediently in the back of the boat for the entire Chase. The angrier the Hunter had become, the less he had dared to say anything at all and the more he had slunk down into his tiny space at the sweaty feet of Oarsman Number Ten. But as time went on Oarsman Number Ten began to mutter extremely rude and interesting comments about the Hunter under his breath, and the Apprentice got a little braver. He gazed out over the water and stared at the speeding. The more he looked at, the more he knew that something was wrong.

Finally the Apprentice dared to shout out to the Hunter, "Did you know that that boat's name is back to front?"

"Don't try to be clever with *me*, boy."

The Hunter's eyesight was good, but maybe not as good as a ten-and-a-half-year-old boy's, whose hobby was collecting and labeling ants. Not for nothing had the Apprentice spent hours at his Master's Camera Obscura, hidden far away in the Badlands, watching the river. He knew the names and histories of all the boats that sailed there. He knew that the boat they had been chasing *before* the **Fog** was *Muriel*, built by Rupert Gringe and hired out to catch herring. He also knew that *after* the **Fog** the boat was called *IsisM*, and "*IsisM*" was a mirror image of "Muriel." And he had been an Apprentice to DomDaniel for long enough to know exactly what that meant.

IsisM was a **Projection**, an **Apparition**, a **Phantasm** and an **Illusion**.

Luckily for the Apprentice, who was just about to inform the Hunter of this interesting fact, at that very moment back in the real *Muriel*, Maxie licked Marcia's hand in a friendly, slobbery wolfhound way. Marcia shuddered at the warm wolfhound spit, her concentration lapsed for a second, and *IsisM* briefly

disappeared in front of the Hunter's own eyes. The boat quickly reappeared again, but too late. *IsimM* had given herself away.

The Hunter screamed in fury and slammed his fist down on the bullet box. Then he screamed again, this time in pain. He had broken his fifth metacarpal. His little finger. And it *hurt*. Nursing his hand, the Hunter yelled at the oarsmen: "*Turn around, you fools!*"

The bullet boat stopped, the oarsmen reversed their seats and wearily started rowing in the opposite direction. The Hunter found himself in the back of the boat. The Apprentice, to his delight, was now in the front.

But the bullet boat was not the efficient machine it had been. The oarsmen were rapidly tiring and were not taking kindly to having insults screamed at them by an increasingly hysterical would-be murderer. The rhythm of their rowing faltered, and the smooth movement of the bullet boat became uneven and uncomfortable.

The Hunter sat glowering in the back of the boat. He knew that for the *fourth* time that night the Trail had gone cold. The Hunt was turning bad.

The Apprentice, however, was enjoying the turnaround. He sat low at what was now the prow and, rather like Maxie, put his nose in the air and enjoyed the sensation of the night air rushing past him. He also felt relieved that he had been able to do his job. His Master would be proud. He imagined himself back at his Master's side and how he would describe the way *he* had detected a fiendish **Projection** and saved the day. Perhaps it would stop his Master from being so disappointed in his lack of **Magykal** talent. He did try, thought the Apprentice, he really did, but somehow he just never quite got it. Whatever *it* was.

It was Jenna who saw the dreaded searchlight coming around a distant bend.

"They're coming back!" she yelled.

Marcia jumped, lost the **Projection** completely and, far away at the Port, *IsimM* and her crew disappeared forever, much to the shock of a lone fisherman on the harbor wall.

"We've got to hide the boat," said Nicko, jumping up and running along the grassy bank, followed by Jenna.

Silas shoved Maxie out of the boat and told him to go and lie down. Then he helped Marcia out, and Boy 412 scrambled after her.

Marcia sat on the grassy bank of Deppen Ditch, determined to keep her purple python shoes dry for as long as she possibly could. Everyone else, including, to Jenna's surprise, Boy 412, waded into the shallow water and pushed *Muriel* clear of the sand so that she was floating again. Then Nicko grabbed a rope and pulled *Muriel* along the Deppen Ditch until she rounded a corner and could no longer be seen from the river. The tide was falling now, and *Muriel* floated low in the Ditch, her short mast hidden by the steeply rising banks.

The sound of the Hunter screaming at the oarsmen drifted across the water, and Marcia stuck her head up over the top of the Ditch to see what was going on. She had never seen anything quite like it. The Hunter was standing very precariously in the back of the bullet boat wildly waving one arm in the air. He kept up a nonstop barrage of insults directed at the oarsmen, who had by now lost all sense of rhythm and were letting the bullet boat zigzag across the water.

"I shouldn't do this," said Marcia. "I really shouldn't. It's petty and vindictive and it demeans the power of **Magyk**, but I *don't care*."

Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 rushed to the top of the Ditch to see what Marcia was about to do. As they watched, Marcia pointed her finger at the Hunter and muttered, "**Dive!**"

For a split second the Hunter felt odd, as though he was about to do something very stupid—which he was. For some reason he could not understand, he raised his arms elegantly above his head and carefully pointed his hands toward the water. Then he slowly bent his knees and dived neatly out of the bullet boat, performing a skillful somersault before he landed perfectly in the freezing cold water.

Reluctantly, and rather unnecessarily slowly, the oarsmen rowed back and helped the gasping Hunter into the boat.

"You really shouldn't have done that, sir," said Oarsman Number Ten. "Not in this weather."

The Hunter could not reply. His teeth chattered so loudly that he could hardly think, let alone speak. His wet clothes clung to him as he shivered violently in the cold night air. Gloomily, he surveyed the marshland where he

was sure his quarry had fled but could see no sign of them. Seasoned Hunter that he was, he knew better than to take to the Marram Marshes on foot in the middle of the night. There was nothing else for it—the Trail was dead and he must return to the Castle.

The bullet boat began its long, cold journey to the Castle while the Hunter huddled in the stern, nursing his broken finger and contemplating the ruins of his Hunt. And his reputation.

“Serves him right,” said Marcia. “Horrible little man.”

“Not entirely professional,” a familiar voice boomed from the bottom of the Ditch, “but completely understandable, my dear. In my younger days I would have been tempted myself.”

“Alther!” gasped Marcia, turning a little pink.

15

MIDNIGHT AT THE BEACH



Uncle Alther!” yelled Jenna happily. She scrambled down the bank and joined Alther, who was standing on the beach staring, puzzled, at a fishing rod he was holding.

“Princess!” Alther beamed and gave her his ghostly hug, which always made Jenna feel as though a warm summer breeze had wafted through her.

“Well, well,” said Alther, “I used to come here fishing as a boy, and I seem to have brought the fishing rod too. I hoped I might find you all here.”

Jenna laughed. She could not believe that Uncle Alther had ever been a boy.

“Are you coming with us, Uncle Alther?” she asked.

“Sorry, Princess. I can’t. You know the rules of Ghosthood:

A Ghost may only tread once more

Where, living, he has trod before.

And, unfortunately, as a boy I never got farther than this beach here. Too many good fish to be had, you see. Now,” said Alther changing the subject, “is that a picnic basket I see in the bottom of the boat?”

Lying under a soggy coil of rope was the picnic basket that Sally Mullin had made up for them. Silas heaved it out.

“Oh, my back,” he groaned. “What *has* she put in it?” Silas lifted the lid. “Ah, that explains it.” He sighed. “Stuffed full of barley cake. Still, it made good ballast, hey?”

“*Dad*,” remonstrated Jenna. “Don’t be mean. Anyway, we like barley cake, don’t we, Nicko?”

Nicko pulled a face, but Boy 412 looked hopeful. *Food*. He was so hungry—he couldn’t even remember the last thing he had to eat. Oh, yes, that was it, a bowl of cold, lumpy porridge just before the 6 A.M. roll call that morning. It seemed a lifetime away.

Silas lifted out the other rather squashed items that lay under the barley cake. A tinder box and dry kindling, a can of water, some chocolate, sugar and milk. He set about making a small fire and hung the can of water over it to boil while everyone clustered around the flickering flames, warming up their cold hands in between chewing on the thick slabs of cake.

Even Marcia ignored the barley cake’s well-known tendency to glue the teeth together and ate almost a whole slab. Boy 412 gulped down his share and finished off all the bits that anyone else had left too. Then he lay back on the damp sand and wondered if he would ever be able to move again. He felt as though someone had poured concrete into him.

Jenna put her hand in her pocket and took out Petroc Trelawney. He sat very still and quiet in her hand, Jenna stroked him gently, and Petroc put out his four stumpy legs and waved them helplessly in the air. He was lying on his back like a stranded beetle.

“Oops, wrong way up.” Jenna chuckled. She set him the right way up, and Petroc Trelawney opened his eyes and blinked slowly.

Jenna stuck a crumb of barley cake on her thumb and offered it to the pet rock.

Petroc Trelawney blinked again, gave the barley cake some thought, then

nibbled delicately at the cake crumb. Jenna was thrilled.

“He’s eaten it!” she exclaimed.

“He would,” said Nicko. “Rock cake for a pet rock. Perfect.”

But even Petroc Trelawney could not manage more than a large crumb of barley cake. He gazed around him for a few more minutes and then closed his eyes and went back to sleep in the warmth of Jenna’s hand.

Soon the water in the can over the fire was boiling. Silas melted the dark chocolate squares into it and added the milk. He mixed it up just the way he liked it, and when it was about to bubble over, he poured in the sugar and stirred.

“The best hot chocolate ever,” Nicko pronounced. No one disagreed as the can was passed around and finished all too soon.

While everyone was eating, Alther had been practicing his casting technique with his fishing rod in a preoccupied manner, and when he saw that they had finished, he wafted over to the fire. He looked serious.

“Something happened after you left,” he said quietly.

Silas felt a weight lurch to the bottom of his stomach, and it wasn’t just the barley cake. It was dread.

“What is it, Alther?” asked Silas, horribly sure that he was going to hear that Sarah and the boys had been captured.

Alther knew what Silas was thinking.

“It’s not that, Silas,” he said. “Sarah and the boys are fine. But it is very bad. DomDaniel has come back to the Castle.”

“What?” gasped Marcia. “He *can’t* come back. *I’m* the ExtraOrdinary Wizard—I’ve got the Amulet. And I’ve left the Tower stuffed full of Wizards—there’s enough **Magyk** in that tower to keep the old has-been buried in the Badlands where he belongs. Are you sure he’s back, Alther, and it’s not some joke the Supreme Custodian—that revolting little rat—is playing while I’m away?”

“It’s no joke, Marcia,” Alther said. “I saw him myself. As soon as Muriel had rounded Raven’s Rock, he **Materialized** in the Wizard Tower Courtyard. The whole place crackled with **Darke Magyk**. Smelled terrible. Sent the Wizards into a blind panic, scurrying here, there and everywhere, like a crowd of ants when you tread on their nest.”

“That’s disgraceful. What were they thinking of? I don’t know, the quality of the average Ordinary Wizard is appalling nowadays,” said Marcia, casting a glance in Silas’s direction. “And where was Endor? She’s meant to be my deputy—don’t tell me Endor panicked as well?”

“No. No, she didn’t. She came out and confronted him. She put a **Bar** across the doors to the Tower.”

“Oh, thank goodness. The Tower is safe.” Marcia sighed with relief.

“No, Marcia, it’s not. DomDaniel struck Endor down with a **Thunderflash**. She’s dead.” Alther tied a particularly complicated knot in his fishing line. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Dead,” Marcia mumbled.

“Then he **Removed** the Wizards.”

“All of them? Where to?”

“They all shot off toward the Badlands—there was nothing they could do. I expect he’s got them in one of his Burrows down there.”

“Oh, *Alther*.”

“Then the Supreme Custodian—that horrible little man—arrives with his retinue, bowing and scraping and practically *drooling* all over his Master. The next thing I know he’s escorted DomDaniel into the Wizard Tower and up to...er, well, up to your rooms, Marcia.”

“My rooms? DomDaniel in *my rooms*?”

“Well, you’ll be pleased to know he was in no fit state to appreciate them by the time he got up there, as they had to walk all the way up. There wasn’t enough **Magyk** left to keep the stairs working. Or anything else in the Tower for that matter.”

Marcia shook her head in disbelief. “I never thought DomDaniel could do this. *Never.*”

“No, neither did I,” said Alther.

“I thought,” said Marcia, “that as long as we Wizards could hang on until the Princess was old enough to wear the Crown, we would be all right. Then we could get rid of those Custodians, the Young Army and all the creeping **Darknesse** that infests the Castle and makes peoples’ lives so miserable.”

“So did I,” said Alther, “but I followed DomDaniel up the stairs. He was blathering on to the Supreme Custodian about how he couldn’t believe his luck—not only had *you* left the Castle, but you had taken the one obstacle to his return with you.”

“Obstacle?”

“Jenna.”

Jenna gazed at Alther in dismay. “*Me?* An obstacle? Why?”

Alther stared at the fire, deep in thought. “It seems, Princess, that you have somehow been stopping that awful old **Necromancer** from coming back to the Castle. Just by being there. And very likely your mother did too. I always wondered why he sent the Assassin for the Queen and not for me.”

Jenna shivered. She suddenly felt very afraid. Silas put his arm around her. “That’s enough now, Alther. There’s no need to frighten us all out of our wits. Frankly, I think you just dropped off to sleep and had a nightmare. You know you get them every now and then. The Custodians are simply a load of thugs that any *decent* ExtraOrdinary Wizard would have seen off years ago.”

“I am not going to just sit here and be insulted like this,” Marcia spluttered. “You have no idea the things we have tried to get rid of them. No idea at all. It’s been all we can do to keep the Wizard Tower going sometimes. And with no help from you, Silas Heap.”

“Well, I don’t know what the fuss is all about, Marcia. DomDaniel’s *dead*,” Silas replied.

“No, he’s not,” said Marcia quietly.

“Don’t be silly, Marcia,” snapped Silas. “Alther threw him off the top of

the Tower forty years ago.”

Jenna and Nicko gasped. “Did you really, Uncle Alther?” asked Jenna.

“No!” exclaimed Alther crossly. “I *didn't*. He threw *himself* off.”

“Well, whatever,” said Silas stubbornly. “He’s still dead.”

“Not necessarily...” said Alther in a low voice, staring into the fire. The light from the glowing embers cast flickering shadows over everyone except Alther, who floated unhappily through them, absentmindedly trying to undo the knot he had just tied in his fishing line. The fire blazed for a moment and lit up the circle of people around it. Suddenly Jenna spoke.

“What *did* happen on top of the Wizard Tower with DomDaniel, Uncle Alther?” she whispered.

“It’s a bit of a scary story, Princess. I don’t want to frighten you.”

“Oh, go on, tell us,” said Nicko. “Jen likes scary stories.”

Jenna nodded a little uncertainly.

“Well,” said Alther, “it’s hard for me to tell it in my own words, but I’ll tell you the story as I once heard it spoken around a campfire deep in the Forest. It was a night like this, midnight with a full moon high in the sky, and it was told by an old and wise Wendron Witch Mother to her witches.”

And so, beside the fire, Alther Mella changed his form into a large and comfortable-looking woman dressed in green. Speaking in the witch’s quiet Forest burr, he began.

“This is where the story begins: on top of a golden Pyramid crowning a tall silver Tower. The Wizard Tower shimmers in the early morning sun and is so high that the crowd of people gathered at its foot appear like ants to the young man who is clambering up the stepped sides of the Pyramid. The young man has looked down at the ants once already and felt sick with the giddy sensation of height. He now keeps his gaze firmly fixed on the figure in front of him—an older but remarkably agile man who, to his great advantage, has no fear of heights. The older man’s purple cloak flies out from him in the brisk wind that always plays around the top of the Tower, and to the crowd below he looks like nothing more than a fluttering purple bat creeping up to the point of the Pyramid.

“What, the watchers below ask themselves, is their ExtraOrdinary Wizard doing? And isn’t that his Apprentice following him, chasing him even?”

“The Apprentice, Alther Mella, now has his Master, DomDaniel, within his grasp. DomDaniel has reached the pinnacle of the Pyramid, a small square platform of hammered gold inlaid with the silver hieroglyphs that **Enchant** the Tower. DomDaniel stands tall, his thick purple cloak streaming out behind him, his gold and platinum ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt flashing in the sun. He is daring his Apprentice to come closer.

“Alther Mella knows he has no choice. In a brave and terrified leap he lunges at his Master and takes him by surprise. DomDaniel is knocked off his feet, and his Apprentice dives onto him, grabbing at the gold and lapis lazuli Akhu Amulet that his Master wears around his neck on a thick silver chain.

“Far below, in the courtyard of the Wizard Tower, the people gasp in disbelief as they gaze with squinting eyes into the brightness of the golden Pyramid and watch the Apprentice grapple with his Master. Together they balance on the tiny platform, rolling this way and that as the ExtraOrdinary Wizard tries to break free of Alther Mella’s grasp on the Amulet.

“DomDaniel fixes Alther Mella with a baleful glare, his dark green eyes glittering with fury. Alther’s bright green eyes meet the stare unflinchingly, and he feels the Amulet loosen. He pulls hard, the chain snaps into a hundred pieces, and the Amulet comes away in his grasp.

“‘Take it,’ hisses DomDaniel. ‘But I will be back for it. I will be back with the seventh of the seventh.’”

“One piercing scream rises from below as the crowd sees its ExtraOrdinary Wizard launch himself from the top of the Pyramid and tumble from the Tower. His cloak spreads like a magnificent pair of wings, but it does not slow his long, tumbling fall to earth.

“And then he is gone.

“At the top of the Pyramid his Apprentice clutches the Akhu Amulet and gazes in shock at what he has seen—his Master enter the Abyss.

“The crowd clusters around the scorched earth which marks the spot where DomDaniel hit the ground. Each has seen something different. One says he changed into a bat and flew away. Another saw a dark horse appear and gallop off into the Forest, and still another saw DomDaniel change into a

snake and slither under a rock. But none saw the truth that Alther saw.

“Alther Mella makes his way back down the Pyramid with his eyes closed so that he does not have to see the dizzying drop beneath him. He only opens his eyes when he has crawled through the small hatch into the safety of the Library, which is housed inside the golden Pyramid. And then, with a sense of dread, he sees what has happened. His plain green woolen Apprentice Wizard robes have changed to a heavy purple silk. The simple leather belt that he wears around his tunic has become remarkably weighty; it is now made of gold with the intricate platinum inlay of runes and charms that protect and empower the ExtraOrdinary Wizard that Alther has, to his amazement, become.

“Alther gazes at the Amulet that he holds in his trembling hand. It is a small round stone of ultramarine lapis lazuli shot through with streaks of gold and carved with an enchanted dragon. The stone lies heavily in his palm, bound with a band of gold pinched together at the top to form a loop. From this loop hangs a broken silver link, snapped when Alther ripped the Amulet from its silver chain.

“After a moment’s thought Alther bends down and takes out the leather lace from one of his boots. He threads the Amulet onto it and, as all ExtraOrdinary Wizards have done before him, hangs it around his neck. And then, with his long wispy brown hair still awry from his fight, his face pale and anxious, his green eyes wide with awe, Alther makes the long journey down through the Tower to face the waiting, murmuring crowd outside.

“When Alther stumbles out through the huge, solid silver doors that guard the entrance to the Wizard Tower, he is greeted by a gasp. But nothing more is said, for there is no arguing with the presence of a new ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Amid a few quiet mutterings the crowd disperses, although one voice calls out.

“‘As you have gained it, so will you lose it.’

“Alther sighs. He knows this is true.

“As he makes his lonely way back into the Tower to begin the work of undoing DomDaniel’s **Darknesse**, in a small room not so very far away a baby boy is born to a poor Wizard family.

“He is their seventh son, and his name is Silas Heap.”

There was a long silence around the fire while Alther slowly regained his own form. Silas shivered. He had never heard the story told like that before.

“That’s amazing, Alther,” he said in a hoarse whisper. “I had no idea. How did the Witch Mother know so much?”

“She was watching in the crowd,” said Alther. “She came to see me later that day to congratulate me on becoming ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and I told her my side of the story. If you want the truth to be known then all you need to do is tell the Witch Mother. She will tell everyone else. Of course, whether they believe it or not is another matter.”

Jenna was thinking hard. “But why, Uncle Alther, were you chasing DomDaniel?”

“Ah, good question. I didn’t tell the Witch Mother that. There are some **Darke** matters that should not be spoken of lightly. But you should know, so I will tell you. You see, that morning, like every morning, I had been tidying up the Pyramid Library. One of the tasks of an Apprentice is to keep the Library organized, and I took my duties seriously, even if they *were* for such an unpleasant Master. Anyway, that particular morning I had found a strange **Incantation** in DomDaniel’s handwriting tucked into one of the books. I had seen one lying around before and hadn’t been able to read the writing, but as I studied this one, an idea occurred to me. I held the **Incantation** up to the looking glass and discovered I was right: it was written in mirror writing. I began to get a bad feeling about it then, because I knew that it must be a **Reverse Incantation**, using **Magyk** from the **Darke** side—or the **Other** side, as I prefer to call it, as it is not always **Darke Magyk** that the **Other** side puts to use. Anyway, I had to know the truth about DomDaniel and what he was doing, so I decided to risk reading the **Incantation**. I had just started when something terrible happened.”

“What?” whispered Jenna.

“A **Spectre Appeared** behind me. Well, at least I could see it in the looking glass, but when I turned around it wasn’t there. But I could feel it. I could feel it put its hand on my shoulder, and then—I heard it. I heard its empty voice speaking to me. It told me that my time had come. That it had come to collect me *as arranged*.”

Alther shivered at the memory and raised his hand to his left shoulder as

the **Spectre** had done. It still ached with cold, as it had ever since that morning.

Everyone else shivered too and drew closer around the fire.

“I told the **Spectre** that I was not ready. Not yet. You see I knew enough about the **Other** side to know you must never refuse them. But they are willing to wait. Time is nothing to them. They have nothing else to do *but* wait. The **Spectre** told me it would return for me the next day and that I had better be ready then, and it faded away. After it went, I made myself read the **Reverse** words, and I saw that DomDaniel had offered me up as part of a bargain with the **Other** side, to be collected at the time I read the **Incantation**. And then I knew for sure he was using **Reverse Magyk**—the mirror image of **Magyk**, the kind that uses people up—and I had fallen into his trap.”

The fire on the beach began to die down, and everyone clustered around it, huddling together in the fading glow as Alther continued his story.

“Suddenly DomDaniel came in and saw me reading the **Incantation**. And that I was still there—I had not been **Taken**. He knew that his plan was discovered and he ran. He scuttled up the Library stepladder like a spider, ran along the top of the shelves and squeezed through the trapdoor that led outside of the Pyramid. He laughed at me and taunted me to follow him if I dared. You see, he knew I was terrified of heights. But I had no choice but to follow him. So I did.”

Everyone was silent. No one, not even Marcia, had heard the full story of the **Spectre** before then.

Jenna broke the silence. “That’s horrible.” She shuddered. “So did the **Spectre** come back for you, Uncle Alther?”

“No, Princess. With some help I devised an **Anti-Hex Formula**. It was powerless after that.” Alther sat in thought for a while, and then he said, “I just want you all to know that I am not proud of what I did at the top of the Wizard Tower—even though I did *not* push DomDaniel off. You know, it is a terrible thing for an Apprentice to supplant his Master.”

“But you had to do it, Uncle Alther. Didn’t you?” said Jenna.

“Yes, I did,” said Alther quietly. “And we will have to do it again.”

“We shall do it tonight,” declared Marcia. “I shall go right back and throw that evil man out of the Tower. He’ll soon learn that he doesn’t mess with the ExtraOrdinaryWizard.” She got up purposefully and wrapped her purple cloak around her, ready to go.

Alther leapt into the air and put a ghostly hand on Marcia’s arm. “No. No, Marcia.”

“But, Alther—” Marcia protested.

“Marcia, there are no Wizards left to protect you at the Tower, and I hear you gave your **KeepSafe** to Sally Mullin. I beg you not to go back. It is too dangerous. You must get the Princess to safety. And keep her safe. I shall go back to the Castle and do what I can.”

Marcia sank back down onto the wet sand. She knew Alther was right. The last flames of the fire spluttered out as large wet flakes of snow began to fall and darkness closed in on them. Alther put his ghostly fishing rod down on the sand and floated above the Deppen Ditch. He gazed across the marshlands that stretched far into the distance. They were a peaceful sight in the moonlight, broad wetlands dusted with snow and dotted with little islands here and there as far as he could see.

“Canoes,” said Alther, floating back down. “When I was a boy that’s how the marsh folk got around. And that’s what you’re going to need too.”

“You can do that, Silas,” said Marcia dismally. “I’m far too tired to go messing about with boats.”

Silas got to his feet. “Come on then, Nicko,” he said. “We’ll go and **Transmute Muriel** into some canoes.”

Muriel was still floating patiently in Deppen Ditch, just around the bend, out of sight of the river. Nicko felt sad to see their faithful boat go but he knew the **Rules of Magyk**, and so he knew only too well that in a spell, matter can neither be created nor destroyed. *Muriel* would not really be gone but, Nicko hoped, rearranged into a set of smart canoes.

“Can I have a fast one, Dad?” asked Nicko as Silas stared at *Muriel* and tried to think of a suitable spell.

“I don’t know about ‘fast,’ Nicko. I shall just be happy if it floats. Now, let me think. I suppose one canoe each would be good. Here goes. **Convert to**

Five! Oh, bother.”

Five very small *Muriels* bobbed up and down in front of them.

“Dad,” complained Nicko, “you’re not doing it right.”

“Wait a minute, Nicko. I’m thinking. That’s it—**Canoe Renew!**”

“*Dad!*”

One enormous canoe sat wedged into the banks of the Ditch.

“Now, let’s be logical about this,” Silas muttered to himself.

“Why don’t you just ask for five canoes, Dad?” suggested Nicko.

“Good idea, Nicko. We’ll make a Wizard of you yet. **I Choose Canoes for Five to Use!**”

The spell fizzled out before it really got going, and Silas ended up with just two canoes and a forlorn pile of *Muriel*-colored timbers and rope.

“Only two, Dad?” said Nicko, disappointed not to be getting his own canoe.

“They’ll have to do,” said Silas. “You can’t change matter more than three times without it getting fragile.”

In fact, Silas was just pleased that he had ended up with any canoes at all.

Soon Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 were sitting in what Nicko had named the *Muriel One* canoe, and Silas and Marcia were squashed together in the *Muriel Two*. Silas insisted on sitting in the front because, “I know the way, Marcia. It makes sense.”

Marcia snorted dubiously, but she was far too tired to fuss.

“Go on, Maxie,” Silas told the wolfhound. “Go and sit with Nicko.”

But Maxie had other ideas. Maxie’s purpose in life was to stay by his master, and stay by his master he would. He bounded onto Silas’s lap, and the canoe tilted dangerously.

“Can’t you control that animal?” demanded Marcia, who was dismayed to find herself horribly close to the water again.

“Of course I can. He does exactly what I tell him, don’t you, Maxie?”

Nicko made a spluttering sound.

“Go sit at the back, Maxie,” Silas told the wolfhound sternly. Looking crestfallen, Maxie bounded over Marcia to the back of the canoe and settled himself down behind her.

“He’s not sitting behind *me*,” said Marcia.

“Well he can’t sit by me. I have to concentrate on where we’re going,” Silas told her.

“And it’s high time you were going too,” said Alther, hovering anxiously. “Before the snow really sets in. I just wish I could come with you.”

Alther floated up and watched them set off, paddling along the Deppen Ditch, which was now slowly filling as the tide came back in and would take them deep into the Marram Marshes. Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412’s canoe led the way, with Silas, Marcia and Maxie following them.

Maxie sat bolt upright behind Marcia and breathed excited dog breath onto the back of her neck. He sniffed the new, damp marshland smells and listened to the scrabbling sounds made by assorted small animals as they scuttled out of the way of the canoes. Every now and then his excitement overwhelmed him, and he dribbled happily into Marcia’s hair.

Soon Jenna reached a narrow channel running off the Ditch. She stopped.

“Do we go down here, Dad?” she called back to Silas.

Silas looked confused. He didn’t remember this bit at all. Just as he was wondering whether to say yes or no, his thoughts were interrupted by a piercing shriek from Jenna.

A slimy mud-brown hand with webbed fingers and broad black claws had reached out of the water and grabbed the end of her canoe.

16

THE BOGGART



The slimy brown hand fumbled along the side of the canoe, making its way toward Jenna. Then it grabbed hold of her paddle. Jenna wrested the paddle away and was about to hit the slimy brown thing with it—*hard*—when a voice said, “Oi. No need fer that.”

A seallike creature covered in slippery brown fur pulled itself up so that its head was just out of the water. Two bright black-button eyes stared at Jenna, who had her paddle still poised in midair.

“Wish you’d put that down. Could hurt someone. So where you *bin*, then?” the creature asked grumpily in a deep, gurgling voice with a broad marshland drawl. “I bin waitin’ for hours. Freezin’ in here. How’d *you* like it? Stuck in a ditch. Just *waitin’*.”

All Jenna could manage in reply was a small squeak; her voice seemed to have stopped working.

“What is it, Jen?” asked Nicko, who was sitting behind Boy 412, just to make sure he didn’t do anything stupid, and couldn’t see the creature.

“Th—this…” Jenna pointed at the creature, who looked offended.

“What you mean *this*?” he asked. “You mean me? You mean *Boggart*?”

“Boggart? No. I didn’t say that,” muttered Jenna.

“Well I did. Boggart. That’s me. I’m Boggart. Boggart, the Boggart. Good name, innit?”

“Lovely,” said Jenna politely.

“What’s going on?” asked Silas, catching up with them. “Stoppit, Maxie. *Stoppit* I say!”

Maxie had caught sight of the Boggart and was barking frantically. The Boggart took one look at Maxie and disappeared back under the water. Since the notorious Boggart Hunts many years ago in which Maxie’s ancestors had taken part so effectively, the Marram Marsh Boggart had become a rare creature. With a long memory.

The Boggart reappeared at a safe distance. “You’re not bringin’ *that*?” he said, looking balefully at Maxie. “She didnt say nothin’ ’bout one a *them*.”

“Do I hear a Boggart?” asked Silas.

“Yeah,” said the Boggart.

“Zelda’s Boggart?”

“Yeah,” said the Boggart.

“Has she sent you to find us?”

“Yeah,” said the Boggart.

“Good,” said Silas, very relieved. “We’ll follow you, then.”

“Yeah,” said the Boggart, and he swam off along Deppen Ditch and took the next turning but one.

The next turning but one was much narrower than the Deppen Ditch and

wound its snakelike way deep into the moonlit, snow-covered marshes. The snow fell steadily and all was quiet and still, apart from the gurgles and splashes of the Boggart as he swam in front of the canoes, every now and then sticking his head out of the dark water and calling out, “You *followin’*?”

“I don’t know what else he thinks we *can* do,” Jenna said to Nicko as they paddled the canoe along the increasingly narrow ditch. “It’s not as if there’s anywhere else to go.”

But the Boggart took his duties seriously and kept going with the same question until they reached a small marsh pool with several overgrown channels leading off it.

“Best wait for the others,” said the Boggart. “Don’t want ’em gettin’ lost.”

Jenna glanced back to see where Marcia and Silas had got to. They were far behind now, as Silas was the only one paddling. Marcia had given up and had both hands clamped firmly to the top of her head. Behind her the long and pointy snout of an Abyssinian wolfhound loftily surveyed the scene before him and let drop the occasional long strand of glistening dribble. Straight onto Marcia’s head.

As Silas propelled the canoe into the pool and wearily laid his paddle down, Marcia declared, “I am *not* sitting in front of that animal one moment longer. There’s dog dribble all over my hair. It’s disgusting. I’m getting out. I’d rather walk.”

“You don’t wanter be doin’ that, Yer Majesty,” came the Boggart’s voice from out of the water beside Marcia. He gazed up at Marcia, his bright black eyes blinking through his brown fur, amazed by her ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt that glinted in the moonlight. Although he was a creature of the marsh mud, the Boggart loved bright and shiny things. And he had never seen such a bright and shiny thing as Marcia’s gold and platinum belt.

“You don’t wanter be walkin’ round ’ere, Yer Majesty,” the Boggart told her respectfully. “You’ll start followin’ the Marshfire, and it’ll lead you into the Quake Ooze before you know it. There’s many as has followed the Marshfire and there’s none as has returned.”

A rumbling growl was coming from deep down in Maxie’s throat. The fur on the back of his neck stood up, and suddenly, obeying an old and compelling wolfhound instinct, Maxie leaped into the water after the Boggart.

“Maxie! *Maxie!* Oh, you *stupid* dog,” yelled Silas.

The water in the pool was freezing. Maxie yelped and frantically dog-paddled back to Silas’s and Marcia’s canoe.

Marcia shoved him away.

“That dog is *not* getting back in here,” she announced.

“Marcia, he’ll freeze,” protested Silas.

“I don’t *care.*”

“Here, Maxie. C’mon boy,” said Nicko. He grabbed Maxie’s neckerchief and, with Jenna’s help, hauled the dog into their canoe. The canoe tipped dangerously, but Boy 412, who had no desire to end up in the water like Maxie, steadied it by grabbing hold of a tree root.

Maxie stood shivering for a moment, then he did what any wet dog has to do: he shook himself.

“*Maxie!*” gasped Nicko and Jenna.

Boy 412 said nothing. He didn’t like dogs at all. The only dogs he had ever known were the vicious Custodian Guard Dogs, and although he could see that Maxie looked nothing like them, he still expected him to bite at any moment. And so when Maxie settled down, laid his head on Boy 412’s lap and went to sleep, it was just another very bad moment in Boy 412’s worst day ever. But Maxie was happy. Boy 412’s sheepskin jacket was warm and comfortable, and the wolfhound spent the rest of the journey dreaming that he was back at home curled up in front of the fire with all the other Heaps.

But the Boggart had gone.

“Boggart? Where are you, Mr. Boggart?” Jenna called out politely.

There was no reply. Just the deep silence that comes to the marshes when a blanket of snow covers the bogs and quags, silences their gurgles and gloops and sends all the slimy creatures back into the stillness of the mud.

“Now we’ve lost that nice Boggart because of your stupid animal,” Marcia told Silas crossly. “I don’t know *why* you had to bring him.”

Silas sighed. Sharing a canoe with Marcia Overstrand was not something

he had ever imagined he would have to do. But if he had, in a mad moment, ever imagined it, this was exactly how it would have been.

Silas scanned the horizon in the hope that he might be able to see Keeper's Cottage, where Aunt Zelda lived. The cottage stood on Dragen Island, one of the many islands in the marsh, which became true islands only when the marshland flooded. But all Silas could see was white flatness stretching out before him in all directions. To make matters worse, he could see the marsh mist beginning to rise up and drift across the water, and he knew that if the mist came in they would never see Keeper's Cottage, however close they might be to it.

Then he remembered that the cottage was **Enchanted**. Which meant that no one could see it anyway.

If they ever needed the Boggart, it was now.

"I can see a light!" said Jenna, suddenly. "It must be Aunt Zelda coming to look for us. Look, over there!"

All eyes followed Jenna's pointing finger.

A flickering light was jumping over the marshes, as if bounding from tussock to tussock.

"She's coming toward us," said Jenna, excited.

"No, she's not," Nicko said. "Look, she's going away."

"Perhaps we ought to go and meet her," said Silas.

Marcia was not convinced. "How can you be sure it's Zelda?" she said. "It could be anyone. *Anything*."

Everyone fell silent at the thought of a *thing* with a light coming toward them, until Silas said, "It *is* Zelda. Look, I can see her."

"No, you can't," said Marcia. "It's *Marshfire*, like that very intelligent Boggart said."

"Marcia, I know Zelda when I see her, and I can see her now. She's carrying a light. She's come all this way to find us and we are just *sitting* here. I'm going to meet her."

“They say that fools see what they want to see in Marshfire,” said Marcia tartly, “and you’ve just proved that saying true, Silas.”

Silas made to get out of the canoe, and Marcia grabbed his cloak.

“*Sit!*” she said as though she was talking to Maxie.

But Silas pulled away, half in a dream, drawn to the flickering light and the shadow of Aunt Zelda that appeared and disappeared through the rising mist. Sometimes she was tantalizingly near, about to find them all and lead them to a warm fire and a soft bed, sometimes fading away sorrowfully and inviting them to follow and be with her. But Silas could no longer bear to be away from the light. He climbed out of the canoe and stumbled off toward the flickering glow.

“Dad!” yelled Jenna. “Can we come too?”

“No, you may not,” said Marcia firmly. “And I’m going to have to bring the silly old fool back.”

Marcia was just drawing breath for the **Boomerang Spell** when Silas tripped and fell headlong onto the boggy ground. As he lay winded, Silas felt the marsh beneath him begin to shift as though living things were stirring in the depths of the mud. And when he tried to get up, Silas found that he could not. It was as if he were glued to the ground. In his Marshfire daze, Silas was confused about why he seemed unable to move. He tried to lift his head to see what was happening but was unable to. It was then that he realized the awful truth: *something was pulling at his hair.*

Silas raised his hands to his head, and to his horror, he could feel little bony fingers in his hair, winding and knotting his long straggling curls around them and pulling, tugging him down into the bog. Desperately Silas struggled to get free, but the more he struggled, the more the fingers tangled themselves up in his hair. Slowly and steadily they pulled Silas down until the mud covered his eyes and soon, very soon, would cover his nose.

Marcia could see what was happening, but she knew better than to run to Silas’s aid.

“Dad!” yelled Jenna, getting out of the canoe. “I’ll help you, Dad.”

“No!” Marcia told her. “No. That’s how the Marshfire works. The bog will drag you down too.”

“But—but we can’t just watch Dad *drown*,” cried Jenna.

Suddenly a squat brown shape heaved itself out of the water, scrambled up the bank and, leaping expertly from tussock to tussock, ran toward Silas.

“What you doin’ in the Quake Ooze, sir?” said the Boggart crossly.

“Whaaa?” mumbled Silas whose ears were full of mud and could hear only the shrieking and wailing of the creatures in the bog beneath him. The bony fingers continued their pulling and twisting, and Silas was beginning to feel the painful cuts of razor-sharp teeth nipping at his head. He struggled frantically, but each struggle pulled him farther down into the Ooze and set off another wave of screeching.

Jenna and Nicko watched Silas slowly sinking into the Ooze with horror. Why didn’t the Boggart *do* something? *Now*, before Silas disappeared forever. Suddenly Jenna could stand it no longer and sprang up again from the canoe, and Nicko went to follow her. Boy 412, who had heard all about Marshfire from the only survivor of a platoon of Young Army boys who had gotten lost in the Quake Ooze a few years earlier, grabbed hold of Jenna and tried to pull her back into the canoe. Angrily, she pushed him away.

The sudden movement caught the Boggart’s attention. “*Stay there, miss*,” he said urgently. Boy 412 gave another hefty tug on Jenna’s sheepskin jacket, and she sat down in the canoe with a bump. Maxie whined.

The Boggart’s bright black eyes were worried. He knew exactly who the knotting, twisting fingers belonged to, and he knew they were trouble.

“Blinkin’ Brownies!” said the Boggart. “Nasty little articles. Try a taste of Boggart Breath, you spiteful creatures.” The Boggart leaned over Silas, took a very deep breath and breathed out over the tugging fingers. From deep inside the bog Silas heard a teeth-shattering screech as though someone was scraping fingernails down a blackboard, then the snarling fingers slipped from his hair, and the bog moved as he felt the creatures below shift away.

Silas was free.

The Boggart helped him sit up and rubbed the mud from his eyes.

“I told you Marshfire will lead you to the Quake Ooze. An’ it did, didnt it?” remonstrated the Boggart.

Silas said nothing. He was quite overcome by the pungent smell of Boggart Breath still in his hair.

“Yer all right now, sir,” the Boggart told him. “But it were close. I don’t mind telling you that. Haven’t had to *breathe* on a Brownie since they ransacked the cottage. Ah, Boggart Breath is a wonderful thing. Some may not like it much, but I always says to ’em, ‘You’d think different if you was got by the Quake Ooze Brownies.’”

“Oh. Ah. Quite. Thank you, Boggart. Thank you very much,” mumbled Silas, still dazed.

The Boggart carefully led him back to the canoe.

“You’d best go in the front, Yer Majesty,” the Boggart said to Marcia. “He’s in no fit state ter drive one a these things.”

Marcia helped the Boggart get Silas into the canoe, and then the Boggart slipped into the water.

“I’ll take you to Miss Zelda’s, but mind you keep that animal out me way,” he said, glaring at Maxie. “Brought me out in a nasty rash that growlin’ did. I is covered in lumps now. Here feel this.” The Boggart offered his large round tummy for Marcia to feel.

“It’s very kind of you, but no thank you, not just now,” said Marcia faintly.

“Another time, then.”

“Indeed.”

“Right, then.” The Boggart swam toward a small channel that no one had even noticed before.

“Now, you *followin’*?” he asked, not for the last time.

17

ALThER ALONE



While the *Boggart* and the canoes were winding their long and complicated way through the marshes, Alther was following the route his old boat, *Molly*, used to take back to the Castle.

Alther was flying the way he loved to fly, low and very fast, and it was not long before he overtook the bullet boat. It was a sorry sight. Ten oarsmen were wearily pulling on the oars as the boat crept slowly back up the river. Sitting in the stern of the boat was the Hunter, hunched, shivering and silently pondering his fate, while in the prow the Apprentice, to the Hunter's extreme irritation, fidgeted about, occasionally kicking the side of the boat out of boredom and in an effort to get some feeling back into his toes.

Alther flew unseen over the boat, for he **Appeared** only to those he chose,

and continued his journey. Above him the clear sky was clouding over with heavy snow clouds, and the moon had disappeared, plunging the bright snow-covered riverbanks into darkness. As Alther drew nearer to the Castle, fat snowflakes began to drift lazily down from the sky, and as he approached the final bend in the river that would take him around Raven's Rock, the air became suddenly thick with snow.

Alther slowed right down, for even a ghost can find it hard to see where he's going in a blizzard, and carefully flew on toward the Castle. Soon, through the white wall of snow, Alther could see the glowing red embers that were all that remained of Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House. The snow sizzled and spat as it landed on the charred pontoon, and as Alther lingered for a moment over the remains of Sally's pride and joy, he hoped that somewhere on the cold river the Hunter was enjoying the blizzard.

Alther flew up the rubbish dump, past the discarded rat door and made a steep ascent over the Castle wall. He was surprised how peaceful and quiet the Castle was. He had somehow expected the upheavals of the evening to show, but it was past midnight by now and a fresh blanket of snow covered the deserted courtyards and old stone buildings. Alther skirted around the Palace and headed along the broad avenue known as Wizard Way that led to the Wizard Tower. He began to feel nervous. What would he find?

Drifting up the outside of the Tower, he soon spotted the small arched window at the top that he had been looking for. He melted himself through the window and found himself standing outside Marcia's front door, or so it had been a few hours earlier. Alther did the ghost equivalent of taking a deep breath and composed himself. Then he carefully **Discomposed** himself just enough to pass through the solid purple planks and thick silver hinges of the door and expertly **Rearranged** himself on the other side. Perfect. He was back in Marcia's rooms.

And so was the **Darke** Wizard, the **Necromancer**, DomDaniel.

DomDaniel was asleep on Marcia's sofa. He lay on his back with his black robes wrapped around him and his short, black, cylindrical hat pulled down over his eyes while his head rested on Boy 412's pillows. DomDaniel's mouth was wide open and he was snoring loudly. It was not a pretty sight.

Alther stared at DomDaniel, finding it strange to see his old Master again in the very same place where they had spent so many years together. Alther did not remember those years with any fondness even though he had learned all, and much more than he had wanted to know, about **Magyk**. DomDaniel

had been an arrogant and unpleasant ExtraOrdinary Wizard, completely uninterested in the Castle and the people there who needed his help, pursuing only his desire for extreme power and eternal youth. Or rather, since DomDaniel had taken a while to work it out, eternal middle age.

The DomDaniel who lay snoring in front of Alther looked, at first glance, much the same as he had remembered him from all those years ago, but as Alther scrutinized him more closely he saw that all was not unchanged. There was a gray tinge to the **Necromancer**'s skin that spoke of years spent underground in the company of **Shades** and **Shadows**. An aura of the **Other** side still clung to him and filled the room with the smell of overripe mold and damp earth. As Alther watched, a thin line of dribble slowly made its way out of the corner of DomDaniel's mouth and wandered down his chin, where it dripped onto his black cloak.

To the accompaniment of DomDaniel's snores, Alther surveyed the room. It looked remarkably unchanged, as though Marcia was likely to walk in at any moment, sit down and tell him about her day, as she always did. But then Alther noticed the large scorch mark where the **Thunderflash** had struck down the Assassin. A charred black Assassin-shaped hole was burned into Marcia's treasured silk carpet.

So it really *had* happened, thought Alther.

The ghost wafted over to the hatch on the rubbish chute, which was still gaping open, and peered into the chill blackness. He shivered and reflected on the terrifying journey they all must have had. And then, because Alther wanted to do *something*, however small it might be, he stepped over the boundary between the ghostly and the living world. He **Caused** something to happen.

He slammed the hatch closed.

Bang!

DomDaniel woke up with a start. He sat bolt upright and stared around him, momentarily wondering where he was. Soon, with a little sigh of satisfaction, he remembered. He was back where he belonged. Back in the rooms of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Back at the top of the Tower. Back with a vengeance. DomDaniel looked about him, expecting to see his Apprentice, who should have returned hours ago with the news at last of the end of the Princess and that awful woman, Marcia Overstrand, not to mention a couple of the Heaps thrown into the bargain. The fewer of *them* remaining the better,

thought DomDaniel. He shivered in the chill air of the night and clicked his fingers impatiently to rekindle the fire in the grate. It flared up and, *pouf!* Alther blew it out. Then he wafted the smoke out from the chimney and set DomDaniel coughing.

The old **Necromancer** may be here, thought Alther grimly, and there may be nothing I can do about *that*, but he's not going to enjoy it. Not if I can help it.

It was well into the early hours of the morning, after DomDaniel had gone upstairs to bed and had had considerable trouble sleeping due to the fact that the sheets seemed to be intent on strangling him, when the Apprentice returned. The boy was white with tiredness and cold, his green robes were caked in snow and he trembled as the Guardsman who had escorted him to the door made a quick exit and left him alone to face his Master.

DomDaniel was in a foul temper as the door let the Apprentice in.

"I hope," DomDaniel told the trembling boy, "that you have some *interesting* news for me."

Alther hovered around the boy, who was almost unable to speak from exhaustion. He felt sorry for the boy—it was not his fault that he was Apprenticed to DomDaniel. Alther blew on the fire and got it going again. The boy saw the flames jump in the grate and made to move over to the warmth.

"Where are you going?" thundered DomDaniel.

"I—I'm cold, sir."

"You're not going near that fire until you tell me what happened. Are they *dispatched*?"

The boy looked puzzled. "I—I told him it was a **Projection**," he mumbled.

"What *are* you on about, boy? *What* was a **Projection**?"

"Their boat."

"Well, you managed *that* I suppose. Simple enough. But are they

dispatched? *Dead? Yes or no?*” DomDaniel’s voice rose in exasperation. He had already guessed the answer, but he had to hear it.

“No,” whispered the boy, looking terrified, his sodden robes dripping on the floor as the snow began to melt in the faint heat that Alther’s fire was giving off.

DomDaniel cast a withering look toward the boy.

“You are nothing but a disappointment. I go to endless trouble to rescue you from a *disgrace* of a family. I give you an education most boys can only *dream* of. And what do you do? Act like a *complete* fool! I just do not understand it. A boy like you should have found that rabble in *no time*. And all you do is come back with some story about **Projections** and—and *drip all over the floor!*”

DomDaniel decided that if *he* was awake, he didn’t see why the Supreme Custodian should not be awake too. And as for the Hunter, he’d be *very* interested in what he had to say for himself. DomDaniel strode out, slamming the door behind him, and set off down the static silver stairs, clattering past endless dark floors left empty and echoing by the exodus of all the Ordinary Wizards earlier that evening.

The Wizard Tower was chill and gloomy with the absence of **Magyk**. A cold wind moaned as it was drawn up as if through a huge chimney, and doors banged mournfully in the empty rooms. As DomDaniel descended, becoming quite dizzy from the never-ending spirals of the stairs, he noted all the changes with approval. This was how the Tower was going to be from now on. A place for serious **Darke Magyk**. None of those irritating Ordinary Wizards prancing around with their pathetic little spells. No more namby-pamby incense and plinky-plonky happy sounds floating in the air, and certainly no more frivolous colors and lights. *His Magyk* would be used for greater things. Except he might fix the stairs.

DomDaniel eventually emerged into the dark and silent hall. The silver doors to the Tower hung forlornly open. Snow had blown in and covered the motionless floor which was now a dull gray stone. He swept through the doors and strode across the courtyard.

As DomDaniel stamped angrily through the snow and made his way along Wizard Way to the Palace, he began to wish he had thought to change out of his sleeping robes and slippers before he had stormed out. He arrived at the Palace Gate a somewhat soggy and unprepossessing figure, and the lone

Palace Guard refused to let him in.

DomDaniel struck the Guard down with a **Thunderflash** and strode in. Very soon the Supreme Custodian was roused from his bed for the second night running.

Back at the Tower, the Apprentice had stumbled to the sofa and fallen into a cold and unhappy sleep. Alther took pity on him and kept the fire going. While the boy slept, the ghost also took the opportunity of **Causing** a few more changes. He loosened the heavy canopy above the bed so that it was hanging only by a thread. He took the wicks out of all the candles. He added a murky green color to the water tanks and installed a large, aggressive family of cockroaches in the kitchen. He put an irritable rat under the floorboards and loosened all the joints of the most comfortable chairs. And then, as an afterthought, he exchanged DomDaniel's stiff black cylindrical hat, which lay abandoned on the bed, for one just a little bigger.

As dawn broke, Alther left the Apprentice sleeping and made his way out to the Forest, where he followed the path he had once taken with Silas on a visit to Sarah and Galen many years ago.

KEEPER'S COTTAGE



It was the silence that woke Jenna in Keeper's Cottage the next morning. After ten years of waking every day to the busy sounds of The Ramblings, not to mention the riot and hubbub of the six Heap boys, the silence was deafening. Jenna opened her eyes, and for a moment thought that she was still dreaming. Where was she? Why wasn't she at home in her cupboard? Why were just Jo-Jo and Nicko here? Where were all her other brothers?

And then she remembered.

Jenna sat up quietly so as not to wake the boys who were lying beside her by the glowing embers of the fire downstairs in Aunt Zelda's cottage. She wrapped her quilt around her as, despite the fire, the air in the cottage had a damp chill to it. And then, hesitantly, she raised a hand to her head.

So it *was* true. The gold circlet was still there. She was still a Princess. It hadn't been just for her birthday.

All through the previous day, Jenna had had that feeling of unreality that she always got on her birthday. A feeling that the day was somehow part of another world, another time, and that anything that happened on her birthday was not real. And it was that feeling that had carried Jenna through the amazing events of her tenth birthday, a feeling that, whatever happened, it would all be back to normal the next day, so it didn't really matter.

But it wasn't. And it did.

Jenna hugged herself to keep warm and considered the matter. She was a *Princess*.

Jenna and her best friend, Bo, had often discussed together the fact that they were in fact long-lost Princess sisters, separated at birth, whom fate had thrown together in the form of a shared desk in Class 6 of East Side Third School. Jenna had almost believed this; it had seemed so right somehow. Although, when she went around to Bo's rooms to play, Jenna didn't see how Bo could really belong to another family. Bo looked so much like her mother, thought Jenna, with her bright red hair and masses of freckles, that she *had* to be her daughter. But Bo had been scathing about this when Jenna had pointed it out, so she didn't mention it again.

Even so, it hadn't stopped Jenna wondering why she looked so unlike her own mother. And father. And brothers. Why was she the only one with dark hair? Why didn't she have green eyes? Jenna had desperately wanted her eyes to turn green. In fact, up until the previous day, she had still hoped that they might.

She had longed for the excitement of Sarah saying to her, as she watched her do with all the boys, "You know, I *do* think your eyes are beginning to turn. I can definitely see a bit of green in them today." And then: "You *are* growing up fast. Your eyes are nearly as green as your father's."

But when Jenna demanded to be told about *her* eyes, and why they weren't green yet like her brothers', Sarah would only say, "But you're our little *girl*, Jenna. You're special. You have beautiful eyes."

But that didn't fool Jenna. She knew that girls could have green Wizard eyes too. Just look at Miranda Bott down the corridor, whose grandfather ran the Wizard secondhand cloak shop. Miranda had green eyes, and it was only

her *grandfather* who was a Wizard. So why didn't *she*?

Jenna felt upset thinking about Sarah. She wondered when she would see her again. She even wondered if Sarah would still want to be her mother, now that everything had changed.

Jenna shook herself and told herself not to be silly. She stood up, keeping her quilt around her, and picked her way over the two sleeping boys. She paused to glance at Boy 412 and wondered why she had thought he was Jo-Jo. It must have been a trick of the light, she decided.

The inside of the cottage was still dark apart from the dull glow cast by the fire, but Jenna had become accustomed to the gloom, and she began to wander around, trailing her quilt along the floor and slowly taking in her new surroundings.

The cottage was not big. There was one room downstairs; at one end was a huge open fireplace with a pile of gently smoldering logs still glowing on the hot stone hearth. Nicko and Boy 412 were fast asleep on the rug in front of the fire, each wrapped warmly in one of Aunt Zelda's patchwork quilts. In the middle of the room was a flight of narrow stairs with a cupboard underneath, with the words UNSTABLE POTIONS AND PARTIKULAR POISONS written in flowing golden letters on the firmly closed door. She peered up the narrow stairs that led up to a large darkened room where Aunt Zelda, Marcia and Silas were still sleeping. And of course Maxie, whose snores and snuffles drifted down to Jenna. Or were they Silas's snores and Maxie's snuffles? When they were asleep, master and wolfhound sounded remarkably similar.

Downstairs the ceilings were low and showed the roughhewn beams that the cottage was built from. All manner of things were hung from these beams: boat paddles, hats, bags of shells, spades, hoes, sacks of potatoes, shoes, ribbons, brooms, bundles of reeds, willow knots and of course hundreds of bunches of the herbs that Aunt Zelda either grew herself or bought at the **Magyk** Market, which was held every year and a day down at the Port. As a White Witch, Aunt Zelda used herbs for charms and potions as well as medicine, and you'd be lucky to be able to tell Aunt Zelda anything about a herb that she did not know already.

Jenna gazed around her, loving the feeling of being the only one awake, free to wander undisturbed for a while. As she walked about, she thought how strange it was to be in a cottage with four walls all of its very own that were not joined to anyone else's walls. It was so different from the hurly-burly of

The Ramblings, but she already felt at home. Jenna carried on with her exploration, noticing the old but comfortable chairs, the well-scrubbed table that did not look as though it was about to roll over and die at any minute and, most strikingly, the newly swept stone floor that was *empty*. There was *nothing* on it apart from some worn rugs and, by the door, a pair of Aunt Zelda's boots.

She peeked into the little built-on kitchen, with its large sink, some neat and tidy pots and pans and a small table, but it was far too cold to linger in. Then she wandered over to the end of the room where shelves of potion bottles and jars lined the walls, reminding her of home. There were some that she recognized and remembered Sarah using. **Frog Fusions**, **Marvel Mixture** and **Basic Brew** were all familiar names to Jenna. And then, just like home, surrounding a small desk covered with neat piles of pens, papers and notebooks, there were teetering piles of **Magyk** books reaching up to the ceiling. There were so many that they covered almost an entire wall, but unlike home, they did not cover the floor as well.

The dawn light was beginning to creep through the frost-covered windows, and Jenna decided to take a look outside. She tiptoed over to the big wooden door and very slowly drew back the huge, well-oiled bolt. Then she carefully pulled the door open, hoping that it wouldn't creak. It didn't, because Aunt Zelda, like all witches, was very particular about doors. A creaking door in the house of a White Witch was a bad sign, a sign of misplaced **Magyk** and ill-founded spells.

Jenna slipped quietly outside and sat on the doorstep with her quilt wrapped around her and her warm breath turning to white clouds in the chill dawn air. The marsh mist was heavy and low. It hugged the ground and swirled over the surface of the water and around a small wooden bridge that crossed a broad channel to the marsh on the other side. The water was brimming up over the banks of the channel, which was known as the Mott, and ran all the way around Aunt Zelda's island like a moat. The water was dark and so flat that it looked as though a thin skin was stretched over its surface, and yet, as Jenna gazed at it she could see that the water was slowly creeping over the edges of the banks and wandering onto the island.

For years Jenna had watched the tides come and go, and she knew the tide that morning was a high spring tide after the full moon the night before, and she also knew that soon it would start to creep out again, just as it did in the river outside her little window at home, until it was as low as it had been high, leaving the mud and sand for the waterbirds to dip into with their long, curved

beaks.

The pale white disk of the winter sun rose slowly through the thick blanket of mist, and around Jenna the silence began to change into the dawn sounds of stirring animals. A fussy clucking noise made Jenna jump in surprise and glance over to where the sound was coming from. To her amazement, Jenna could see the shape of a fishing boat looming through the mist.

For Jenna, who had seen more new and strange things in the last twenty-four hours than she had ever dreamed possible, a fishing boat crewed by chickens was not as much a surprise as it might have been. She just sat on the doorstep and waited for the boat to pass by. After a few minutes the boat appeared not to have moved, and she wondered if it had run aground on the island. A few minutes after that, when the mist had cleared a little more, she realized what it was: the fishing boat was a chicken house. Stepping delicately down the gangplank were a dozen hens, busily beginning the work of the day. Pecking and scratching, scratching and pecking.

Things, thought Jenna, are not always what they seem.

A thin, reedy birdcall drifted through the mist, and some muffled splashes were coming from the water, which sounded as though they belonged to small and, Jenna hoped, furry animals. It crossed her mind that they might be made by water snakes or eels, but she decided not to think about that. Jenna leaned back against the door post and breathed in the fresh, slightly salty marsh air. It was perfect. Peace and quiet.

“Boo!” said Nicko. “Got you, Jen!”

“Nicko,” protested Jenna. “You’re so noisy. Shhh.”

Nicko settled himself down on the doorstep next to Jenna and grabbed some of her quilt to wrap himself in.

“Please,” Jenna told him.

“What?”

“Please, Jenna, may I share your quilt? Yes, you may, Nicko. Oh, thank you very much, Jenna, that’s very kind of you. Don’t mention it, Nicko.”

“All right, then, I won’t.” Nicko grinned. “And I suppose I have to curtsy

to you now you're Miss High and Mighty."

"Boys don't curtsy." Jenna laughed. "You have to bow."

Nicko leaped to his feet and, doffing an imaginary hat with a sweep of his arm, bowed an exaggerated bow. Jenna clapped.

"Very good. You can do that every morning." She laughed again.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Nicko gravely, stuffing his imaginary hat back on his head.

"I wonder where the Boggart is?" said Jenna a little sleepily.

Nicko yawned. "Probably at the bottom of some mud pool somewhere. I don't suppose he's tucked up in bed."

"He'd hate it, wouldn't he? Too dry and clean."

"Well," said Nicko, "*I'm* going back to bed. I need more than two hours sleep, even if you don't." He extricated himself from Jenna's quilt and wandered back inside to his own, which lay in a crumpled heap by the fire. Jenna realized that she still felt tired too. Her eyelids were beginning to get that prickly feeling that told her she had not slept long enough, and she was getting cold. She stood up, gathered her quilt around her, slipped back into the half-light of the cottage and very quietly closed the door behind her.

19

AUNT ZELDA



Good morning, everyone!” Aunt Zelda’s cheery voice called out to the pile of quilts and their inhabitants by the fire. Boy 412 woke up in a panic, expecting to have to tumble out of his Young Army bed and line up outside in thirty seconds flat for roll call. He stared uncomprehendingly at Aunt Zelda, who looked nothing like his usual morning tormenter, the shaven-headed Chief Cadet, who took great pleasure in chucking buckets of icy water over anyone who didn’t jump out of bed immediately. The last time that had happened to Boy 412, he had had to sleep in a cold, wet bed for days before it dried out. Boy 412 leaped to his feet with a terrified look on his face but relaxed a little when he noticed that Aunt Zelda did not actually have a bucket of icy water in her hand. Rather, she was carrying a tray laden with mugs of hot milk and a huge pile of hot buttered toast.

“Now, young man,” said Aunt Zelda, “there’s no rush. Just snuggle yourself back down and drink this while it’s still hot.” She offered a mug of milk and the biggest slice of toast to Boy 412, who looked, she thought, like

he could do with fattening up.

Boy 412 sat back down, wrapped his quilt around him and somewhat warily drank the hot milk and ate his buttered toast. In between sips of milk and mouthfuls of toast he glanced around him, his dark gray eyes wide with apprehension.

Aunt Zelda settled herself down on an old chair beside the fire and threw a few logs onto the embers. Soon the fire was blazing, and Aunt Zelda sat contentedly warming her hands by the flames. Boy 412 glanced at Aunt Zelda whenever he thought she wouldn't notice. Of course she did notice, but she was used to looking after frightened and injured creatures, and she saw Boy 412 as no different from the assortment of marsh animals that she regularly nursed back to health. In fact, he particularly reminded her of a small and very frightened rabbit she had rescued from the clutches of a Marsh Lynx not long ago. The Lynx had been taunting the rabbit for hours, nipping its ears and throwing it about, enjoying the rabbit's frozen terror before it would eventually decide to break its neck. When, in an overenthusiastic throw, the Lynx had hurled the terrified animal into her path, Aunt Zelda had snatched the rabbit up, stuffed it into the large bag she always took out with her and gone straight home, leaving the Lynx wandering around for hours searching for its lost prey.

That rabbit had spent days sitting by the fire looking at her in just the same way that Boy 412 was now. Aunt Zelda reflected as she busied herself with the fire, careful not to frighten Boy 412 by looking at him for very long, the rabbit had recovered, and she was sure Boy 412 would too.

Boy 412's sidelong glances took in Aunt Zelda's frizzy gray hair, rosy cheeks, comfortable smile and friendly witch's brilliant blue eyes. He needed quite a few glances to take in her large patchwork dress, which made it hard to tell exactly what shape she might be, especially when she was sitting down. It gave Boy 412 the impression that Aunt Zelda had walked into a large patchwork tent and had just, that very minute, poked her head out of the top to see what was going on. Briefly, a smile flickered at the corner of his mouth at the thought.

Aunt Zelda noticed the hint of a smile and was pleased. She had never in her life seen such a pinched and frightened-looking child, and it upset her to think about what could have made Boy 412 become that way. She had heard talk about the Young Army in her occasional visits to the Port, but she had never really believed all the terrible stories she had heard. Surely no one

could treat children in such a way? But now she began to wonder whether there was more truth in them than she had realized.

Aunt Zelda smiled at Boy 412; then with a comfortable groan she heaved herself out of the chair and pattered off to fetch some more hot milk.

While she was gone Nicko and Jenna woke up. Boy 412 stared at them and moved away a little, remembering only too well Jenna's armlock of the night before. But Jenna just smiled sleepily at him and said, "Did you sleep well?"

Boy 412 nodded and stared at his almost empty mug of milk.

Nicko sat up, grunted a hello in Jenna and Boy 412's direction, grabbed a slice of toast and was surprised to find how hungry he was. Aunt Zelda arrived back at the fireside carrying a jug of hot milk.

"Nicko!" Aunt Zelda smiled. "Well, you've changed a bit since I last saw you, that's for sure. You were just a little baby then. Those were the days when I used to visit your ma and pa in The Ramblings. Happy days."

Aunt Zelda sighed and passed Nicko his hot milk.

"And our Jenna!"—Aunt Zelda smiled a broad smile at her—"I always wanted to come and see you, but things became very difficult after the...well, after a while. But Silas has been making up for lost time and telling me *all* about you."

Jenna smiled a little shyly, glad that Aunt Zelda had said "our." She took the mug of hot milk that Aunt Zelda offered her and sat sleepily looking at the fire.

A contented silence fell for a while, broken only by the sound of Silas and Maxie still snoring upstairs and toast being munched downstairs. Jenna, who was leaning against the wall by the fire, thought she could hear a faint sound of meowing from inside the wall, but as that was obviously impossible, she decided it must be coming from outside and ignored it. But the meowing continued. It became steadily louder and, thought Jenna, crosser. She put her ear to the wall and heard the distinctive sounds of an angry cat.

"There's a cat in the wall..." said Jenna.

"Go on," said Nicko. "I don't know that one."

“It’s not a joke. There *is* a cat in the wall. I can hear it.”

Aunt Zelda jumped up.

“Oh, *my*. I completely forgot about Bert! Jenna love, could you just open Bert’s door for her, please?” Jenna looked confused.

Aunt Zelda pointed to a small wooden door set into the bottom of the wall beside Jenna. Jenna tugged at the little door. It flew open, and out waddled an angry duck.

“I’m so sorry, Bert darling,” apologized Aunt Zelda. “Have you been waiting for ages?”

Bert waddled unsteadily over the heap of quilts and sat herself down by the fire. The duck was cross. It very deliberately turned her back on Aunt Zelda and ruffled its feathers. Aunt Zelda leaned over and stroked her.

“Let me introduce you to my cat, Bert,” she said.

Three pairs of bewildered eyes stared at Aunt Zelda. Nicko inhaled his milk and started choking. Boy 412 looked disappointed. He was just starting to like Aunt Zelda and now it turned out she was as mad as the rest of them.

“But Bert’s a duck,” said Jenna. She was thinking that someone had to say it, and they had better say it straight away before they all got into the let’s-pretend-the-duck’s-a-cat-just-to-humor-Aunt-Zelda thing.

“Ah, yes. Well, of course she *is* a duck at the moment. In fact, she has been a duck for a while now, haven’t you, Bert?”

Bert gave a small meow.

“You see, ducks can fly and swim and that is a great advantage in the marshes. And I have yet to meet a cat who enjoys getting her feet wet, and Bert was no exception. So she decided to become a duck and enjoy the water. And you do, don’t you, Bert?”

There was no answer. Like the cat she really was, Bert had fallen asleep by the fire.

Jenna tentatively stroked the duck’s feathers, wondering if they felt like cat fur, but they were soft and smooth and felt entirely like duck feathers.

“Hello, Bert,” whispered Jenna.

Nicko and Boy 412 said nothing. Neither of them was about to start talking to a *duck*.

“Poor old Bert,” said Aunt Zelda. “She often gets stuck outside. But ever since the Quake Ooze Brownies got in through the cat tunnel I’ve tried to keep the cat door **CharmLocked**. You have no idea what a shock it was to come downstairs that morning and find the place heaving with those nasty little creatures, like a sea of mud they were, swarming up the walls and poking their long bony fingers into everything and staring at me with those little red eyes. They ate everything they could and messed up anything else they couldn’t. And then, of course, as soon as they saw me they started all that high-pitched screaming.” Aunt Zelda shuddered. “It set my teeth on edge for weeks. If it hadn’t been for Boggart, I don’t know what I would have done. I spent weeks cleaning the mud off the books, not to mention making up all my potions again. Talking of mud, would anyone like a dip in the hot spring?”

A little later, Jenna and Nicko felt a lot cleaner after Aunt Zelda had shown them where the hot spring bubbled up into the little bath hut in the backyard. Boy 412 had refused to have anything to do with it and had stayed huddled by the fire, his red hat crammed down over his ears and his sailor’s sheepskin jacket still wrapped around him. Boy 412 felt as if the cold of the previous day was still deep in his bones, and he thought he would never again feel warm. Aunt Zelda let him sit by the fire for a while, but when Jenna and Nicko decided to go out and explore the island she shooed Boy 412 out with them.

“Here, take this,” Aunt Zelda said, handing Nicko a lantern. Nicko gave Aunt Zelda a quizzical look. What were they going to need a lantern for at midday?

“Haar,” said Aunt Zelda.

“Ha?” asked Nicko.

“Haar. Because of the haar, the salt marsh mist that rolls in from the sea,” explained Aunt Zelda. “Look, we’re surrounded by it today.” She waved her hand around in a grand sweep. “On a clear day you can see the Port from where we’re standing. The haar’s lying low today, and we’re high enough to

be above it, but if it rises it'll come over us too. *Then* you'll need the lantern."

So Nicko took the lantern and, surrounded by the haar, which lay like an undulating white blanket over the marshes below, they set off to explore the island while Aunt Zelda, Silas and Marcia sat inside talking earnestly by the fireside.

Jenna led the way, closely followed by Nicko, while Boy 412 lagged behind, shivering every now and then and wishing he was back by the fire. The snow had melted in the warmer, damper marsh climate, and the ground was damp and soggy. Jenna took a path that led them down to the banks of the Mott. The tide had dropped and the water had all but disappeared, leaving marsh mud behind it, which was covered with hundreds of bird footprints and a few zigzag water snake trails.

Draggen Island itself was about a quarter of a mile long and looked as if someone had cut a huge green egg in half length-ways and plopped it down on top of the marsh. A footpath ran all the way around it along the bank of the Mott, and Jenna set off along the path, breathing in the cold salt air rolling in from the haar. Jenna liked the haar surrounding them. It made her feel safe at last—no one could find them now.

Apart from the boat-dwelling chickens, which Jenna and Nicko had seen earlier that morning, they found a nanny goat tethered in the middle of some long grass. They also found a colony of rabbits living in a burrow bank that Aunt Zelda had fenced off to keep the rabbits out of the winter cabbage patch.

The well-worn path took them past the burrows, through a lot of cabbages and wound down to a low-lying patch of mud and suspiciously bright green grass.

"Do you reckon there might be some of those Brownies in there?" Jenna whispered to Nicko, hanging back a little.

Some bubbles floated to the surface of the mud, and there was a loud sucking noise as if someone was trying to pull a stuck boot from out of the mire. Jenna jumped back in alarm as the mud bubbled and heaved.

"Not if I've got anything ter do with it, there won't be." The broad brown face of the Boggart pushed its way to the surface. He blinked the Ooze away from his round black eyes and regarded them with a bleary gaze.

"Mornin'," he said slowly.

“Good morning, Mr. Boggart,” said Jenna.

“Just Boggart’ll do, ta.”

“Is this where you live? I hope we’re not disturbing you?” Jenna said politely.

“Well you *is* disturbing me, as a matter of fact. I sleeps in the day, see.” The Boggart blinked again and began to sink back into the mud. “But you’s not ter know that. Just don’t mention them Brownies as it wakes me up, see. Just hearin’ the name gets me all wide awake.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jenna. “We’ll go away and leave you in peace.”

“Yeah,” agreed the Boggart, and he disappeared back into the mud.

Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 tiptoed back up the path.

“He was cross, wasn’t he?” said Jenna.

“No,” said Nicko. “I reckon he’s always like that. He’s okay.”

“I hope so,” said Jenna.

They carried on walking around the island until they reached the blunt end of the green “egg.” This consisted of a large grassy mound covered with a scattering of small, prickly round bushes. They wandered across the mound and stopped for a while, watching the haar swirling below them.

Jenna and Nicko had been silent in case they should wake the Boggart up again, but as they stood on top of the mound Jenna said, “Don’t you think there’s a funny feeling under your feet?”

“My boots *are* a bit uncomfortable,” said Nicko, “now you mention it. I think they’re still wet.”

“No. I mean the ground under your feet. It feels kind of...er...”

“Hollow,” supplied Nicko.

“Yes, that’s it. Hollow.” Jenna stamped her foot down hard. The ground was firm enough, but there was something about it that felt different.

“Must be all those rabbit burrows,” said Nicko.

They wandered off down the mound and headed toward a large duck pond with a wooden duck house beside it. A few ducks noticed them and began to waddle over the grass in the hope that they might have brought some bread with them.

“Hey, where’s he gone?” Jenna suddenly said, looking around for Boy 412.

“He’s probably gone back to the cottage,” said Nicko. “I don’t think he likes being with us much.”

“No, I don’t think he does—but aren’t we meant to be looking after him? I mean, he might have fallen into the Boggart patch, or the ditch or a *Brownie* might have got him.”

“*Shhh*. You’ll wake the Boggart up again.”

“Well, a *Brownie* *might* have got him. We ought to try and find him.”

“I suppose,” said Nicko doubtfully, “that Aunt Zelda will be upset if we lose him.”

“Well, I will too,” said Jenna.

“You don’t *like* him, do you?” asked Nicko. “Not after the little twerp nearly got us killed?”

“He didn’t mean to,” said Jenna. “I can see that now. He was as scared as we were. And just think, he’s probably been in the Young Army all his life and never had a mum or dad. Not like us. I mean you,” Jenna corrected herself.

“You *have* had a mum and dad. Still have. Silly,” said Nicko. “All right, we’ll go and look for the kid if you really want to.”

Jenna looked around, wondering where to start, and realized she could no longer see the cottage. In fact she could no longer see much at all except for Nicko, and that was only because his lantern gave off a low red light.

The haar had risen.

20

Boy 412



Boy 412 had fallen down a hole. He hadn't meant to, and he had no idea how it had happened, but there he was, at the bottom of a hole.

Just before he had fallen down the hole, Boy 412 had become decidedly fed up with trailing around after the Princess-girl and the Wizard-boy. They didn't seem to want him with them, and he felt cold and bored. So he had decided to slip off back to the cottage and hoped that he might get Aunt Zelda to himself for a while.

And then the haar had come in.

If nothing else, the Young Army training had prepared him for something like this. Many times, in the middle of a foggy night, his platoon of boys had been taken out into the Forest and left to find their own way back. Not all of them did, of course. There was always one unlucky boy who fell foul of a hungry wolverine or was left lingering in a trap set by one of the Wendron Witches, but Boy 412 had been lucky, and he knew how to keep quiet and move fast through the night fog. And so, quiet as the haar itself, Boy 412 had started to make his way back to the cottage. At some point he had actually passed so close to Nicko and Jenna that they could have put their hands out and touched him, but he had slipped by them noiselessly, enjoying his

freedom and the feeling of independence.

After a while Boy 412 reached the large grassy mound at the end of the island. This confused him because he was sure he had already walked across it, and by now he should have been nearly back at the cottage. Maybe this was a different grassy mound? Maybe there was one at the other end of the island too? He began to wonder if he might be lost. It occurred to him that it would be possible to walk endlessly around and around the island and *never* get to the cottage. Preoccupied with his thoughts, Boy 412 lost his footing and fell headlong into a small, and unpleasantly prickly, bush. And that was when it had happened. One moment the bush was there, and the next moment Boy 412 had crashed through it and was falling into darkness.

His yell of surprise was lost on the thick damp air of the haar, and he landed with a heavy thud on his back. Winded, Boy 412 lay still for a moment, wondering if he had broken any bones. No, he thought as he sat up slowly, nothing seemed to hurt too much. He was lucky. He had landed on what felt like sand, and it had cushioned his fall. Boy 412 stood up and promptly hit his head on a low rock above him. That *did* hurt.

Holding the top of his head with one hand, Boy 412 stretched up his other hand and tried to feel for the hole he had fallen through, but the rock sloped smoothly upward and gave him no clues, no handholds or footholds. Nothing but silk-smooth, ice-cold rock.

It was also pitch-black. No chink of light shone from above, and however much Boy 412 stared into the darkness hoping his eyes would get used to it, they didn't. It was as though he was blind.

Boy 412 dropped to his hands and knees and began to feel about him on the sandy floor. He had a wild thought that maybe he could dig his way out, but as his fingers scrabbled the sand away he soon hit a smooth stone floor, so smooth and cold that Boy 412 wondered if it might be marble. He had seen marble a few times when he had stood guard at the Palace, but he couldn't imagine what it might be doing out here in the Marram Marshes in the middle of nowhere.

Boy 412 sat down on the sandy floor and nervously ran his hands through the sand, trying to think what to do next. He was wondering if maybe his luck had finally run out when his fingers brushed against something metallic. At first Boy 412's spirits rose—maybe this was what he had been looking for, a hidden lock or a secret handle—but as his fingers closed around the metal object his heart sank. All he had found was a ring. Boy 412 lifted the ring,

cradled it in his palm and stared at it, although in the pitch blackness he could see nothing.

“I wish I had a light,” Boy 412 muttered to himself, trying to see the ring and holding his eyes as wide as they would go, as if it might make a difference. The ring sat in his palm, and after hundreds of years lying alone in a chill dark place under the ground, it slowly warmed up in the small human hand that held it for the first time since it had been lost so long ago.

As Boy 412 sat with the ring, he began to relax. He realized that he was not afraid of the dark, that he felt quite safe, safer in fact than he had felt for years. He was miles away from his tormentors in the Young Army, and he knew that they would never be able to find him here. Boy 412 smiled and leaned back against the wall. He would find a way out, that was for sure.

Boy 412 decided to see if the ring would fit. It was far too big for any of his skinny fingers, so he slipped it onto his right index finger, the biggest finger that he had. Boy 412 turned it around and around, enjoying the feeling of warmth, even heat, which was coming from it. Very soon Boy 412 became aware of a strange sensation. The ring, which felt as if it had come alive, was tightening around his index finger; it now fitted perfectly. Not only that, but it was giving off a faint golden glow.

Boy 412 gazed at the ring in delight, seeing his find for the first time. It was like no ring he had ever seen before. Curled around his finger was a gold dragon, its tail clasped in its mouth. Its emerald-green eyes glinted at him, and Boy 412 had the strangest feeling of being looked at by the dragon itself. Excited, he stood up, holding his right hand out in front of him with his very own ring, his dragon ring, now glowing as brightly as if it were a lantern.

Boy 412 looked around him in the golden light of the ring. He realized that he was at the end of a tunnel. In front of him, sloping down even deeper into the ground, was a narrow, high-sided passageway cut neatly from the rock. Holding his hand high above his head, Boy 412 stared upward into the blackness through which he had fallen, but could see no way of climbing back up. He reluctantly decided that the only thing he could do was follow the tunnel and hope it would lead him to another way out.

And so, holding out the ring, Boy 412 set off. The tunnel's sandy floor followed a steady downward slope. It twisted and turned this way and that, leading him into dead ends and at times taking him around in circles, until Boy 412 lost all sense of direction and became almost dizzy with confusion. It was as if the person who had built the tunnel was deliberately trying to

confuse him. And succeeding.

And that, reckoned Boy 412, was why he fell down the steps.

At the foot of the steps Boy 412 caught his breath. He was all right, he told himself. He hadn't fallen far. But something was missing—*his ring was gone*. For the first time since he had been in the tunnel, Boy 412 felt scared. The ring had not only given him light; it had kept him company. It had also, Boy 412 realized as he shivered in the chill, made him feel warm. He looked about him, eyes wide open in the pitch blackness, desperately looking for that faint golden glow.

He could see nothing but black. *Nothing*. Boy 412 felt desolate. As desolate as he had felt when his best friend, Boy 409, had fallen overboard in a night raid and they had not been allowed to stop to pick him up. Boy 412 put his head in his hands. He felt like giving up.

And then he heard the singing.

A soft, thin, beautiful sound drifted over to him, calling him toward it. On his hands and knees, because he did not want to fall down any more steps just then, Boy 412 inched his way toward the sound, feeling along the cold marble floor as he did so. Steadily, he crawled toward it and the singing became softer and less urgent, until it became strangely muffled, and Boy 412 realized he had his hand over the ring.

He had found it. Or rather, the ring had found him. Grinning happily, Boy 412 slipped the dragon ring back onto his finger, and the darkness around him faded away.

It was easy after that. The ring guided Boy 412 along the tunnel, which had opened out to become wide and straight and now had white marble walls richly decorated with hundreds of simple pictures in bright blues, yellow and reds. But Boy 412 paid little attention to the pictures. By now all he really wanted to do was find his way out. And so he kept going until he found what he was hoping to find, a flight of steps that at last led upward. With a feeling of relief, Boy 412 climbed the steps and found himself walking up a steep sandy slope that soon came to a dead end.

At last, in the light of the ring, Boy 412 saw his exit. An old ladder was propped up against a wall and above it was a wooden trapdoor. Boy 412 climbed the ladder, reached over and gave the trapdoor a push. To his relief it moved. He pushed a little harder, the trapdoor opened and Boy 412 peered

out. It was still dark but a change in the air told Boy 412 that he was now aboveground, and as he waited, trying to get his bearings, he noticed a narrow strip of light along the floor. Boy 412 breathed a sigh of relief. He knew where he was. He was in Aunt Zelda's Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard. Silently Boy 412 pulled himself up through the trapdoor, closed it and replaced the rug that covered it. Then he gingerly opened the cupboard door and peered out to see if anyone was around.

In the kitchen Aunt Zelda was making up a new potion. As Boy 412 crept past the door she glanced up, but, seemingly preoccupied by her work, she said nothing. Boy 412 slipped by and headed for the fireside. Suddenly Boy 412 felt very tired. He took off the dragon ring and tucked it safely into the pocket he had discovered inside his red hat, then he lay himself down next to Bert on the rug in front of the fire and fell fast asleep.

He was so deeply asleep that he didn't hear Marcia come downstairs and **Command** Aunt Zelda's tallest and most wobbly pile of **Magyk** books to lift themselves up. He certainly didn't hear the soft swish of a large and very ancient book, *The Undoing of the Darkenese*, pulling itself out from the bottom of the swaying pile and flying over to the most comfortable chair by the fire. Nor did he hear the rustle of its pages as the book obediently opened and found the exact page that Marcia wanted to see.

Boy 412 didn't even hear Marcia squeal as, on her way to the chair, she nearly trod on him, stepped back and trod on Bert instead. But, deep in his sleep, Boy 412 had a strange dream about a flock of angry ducks and cats who chased him out of a tunnel and then carried him into the sky and taught him how to fly.

Far away in his dream, Boy 412 smiled. He was free.

21

RATTUS RATTUS



How did you get back so fast?” Jenna asked Boy 412.

It had taken Nicko and Jenna all afternoon to find their way back through the haar to the cottage. While Nicko had spent the time they were lost deciding which were his top-ten best boats and then, as he became hungrier, imagining what his all-time favorite supper would be, Jenna had spent most of the time worrying about what had happened to Boy 412 and deciding she was going to be much nicer to him from now on. That was if he hadn't already fallen into the Mott and drowned.

So when Jenna at last got back to the cottage cold and wet, with the haar still clinging to her clothes, and found Boy 412 sitting perkily on the sofa next to Aunt Zelda, looking almost pleased with himself, she did not feel quite as irritated as Nicko did. Nicko just grunted and went off to soak himself in the hot spring. Jenna let Aunt Zelda rub her hair dry for her, and then she sat down next to Boy 412 and asked him her question, “How did you get back so fast?”

Boy 412 looked at her sheepishly but said nothing. Jenna tried again.

“I was scared you had fallen in the Mott.”

Boy 412 looked a little surprised at this. He didn't expect the Princess-girl to care whether he had fallen into the Mott, or even down a hole for that matter.

“I'm glad you got back safely,” Jenna persisted. “It took me and Nicko ages. We kept getting lost.”

Boy 412 smiled. He almost wanted to tell Jenna about what had happened to him and show her his ring, but years of having to keep things to himself had taught him to be careful. The only person he had ever shared secrets with had been Boy 409, and although there was something nice about Jenna that did remind him of Boy 409, she was a Princess, and even worse, a *girl*. So he said nothing.

Jenna noticed the smile and felt pleased. She was about to try another question when, in a voice that made the potion bottles rattle, Aunt Zelda yelled, “Message Rat!”

Marcia, who had taken over Aunt Zelda's desk at the far end of the room, got up quickly and, to Jenna's surprise, grabbed her by the hand and hauled her off the sofa.

“Hey!” protested Jenna. Marcia took no notice. She headed up the stairs, pulling Jenna along behind her. Halfway up they collided with Silas and Maxie, who were rushing down to see the Message Rat.

“That dog should not be allowed upstairs,” snapped Marcia as she tried to squeeze past Maxie without getting any dogdribble trails on her cloak.

Maxie slobbered excitedly on Marcia's hand and rushed down after Silas, one of his large paws treading heavily on Marcia's foot. Maxie paid very little attention to Marcia. He didn't bother to get out of her way or take any notice of what she said because, in his wolfhound way of looking at the world, Silas was Top Dog and Marcia was right at the bottom of the pile.

Happily for Marcia, these finer points of Maxie's inner life had passed her by, and she pushed past the wolfhound and strode upstairs, trailing Jenna in her wake, out of the way of the Message Rat.

“Wha-what did you do that for?” asked Jenna, getting her breath back as they reached the attic room.

“The Message Rat,” said Marcia, a little puffed. “We don’t know what kind of rat it is. It might not be a Chartered Confidential Rat.”

“A *what* rat?” asked Jenna, puzzled.

“Well,” whispered Marcia, sitting down on Aunt Zelda’s narrow bed, which was covered with an assortment of patchwork blankets that were the result of many long, solitary evenings by the fireside. She patted the space beside her, and Jenna sat down too.

“Do you know about Message Rats?” asked Marcia in a low voice.

“I think so,” said Jenna uncertainly, “but we never got one at home. Ever. I thought you had to be really important to get a Message Rat.”

“No,” said Marcia, “anyone can get one. Or send one.”

“Maybe Mum sent it,” said Jenna in a hopeful voice.

“Maybe,” said Marcia, “and maybe not. We need to know if it is a Confidential Rat before we can trust it. A Confidential Rat will always tell the truth and keep all secrets at all times. It is also extremely expensive.”

Jenna thought gloomily that in that case Sarah could never have sent the rat.

“So we’ll just have to wait and see,” said Marcia. “And meanwhile you and I will wait up here just in case it’s a spy rat come to see where the ExtraOrdinary Wizard is hiding with the Princess.”

Jenna nodded slowly. It was that word again. Princess. It still took her by surprise. She couldn’t quite believe that that was who she really was. But she sat quietly next to Marcia, gazing around the attic room.

The room felt surprisingly large and airy. It had a sloping ceiling in which was set a small window that looked out far across the snow-covered marshes. Huge sturdy beams supported the roof. Below the beams hung an assortment of what looked like large patchwork tents, until Jenna realized that they must be Aunt Zelda’s dresses. There were three beds in the room. Jenna guessed from the patchwork covers that they were sitting on Aunt Zelda’s bed, and the one tucked away low in an alcove by the stairs and covered in dog hair was likely to belong to Silas. In the far corner was a large bed built into the wall. It reminded Jenna of her own box bed at home and gave her a sharp pang of

homesickness when she looked at it. She guessed that it was Marcia's, for beside the bed was her book, *The Undoing of the Darkenese*, a fine onyx pen and a pile of the best quality vellum covered in **Magykal** signs and symbols.

Marcia followed her gaze.

"Come on, you can try out my pen. You'll like that. It writes in any color you ask it to—if it's in a good mood."

While Jenna was upstairs trying out Marcia's pen, which was being somewhat contrary by insisting on writing every other letter in lurid green, Silas was downstairs trying to restrain an excitable Maxie, who had caught sight of the Message Rat.

"Nicko," said Silas distractedly, having spotted his damp-looking son just coming in from the hot spring. "Hang on to Maxie and keep him away from the rat, would you?" Nicko and Maxie bounded onto the sofa, and with equal speed, Boy 412 shot off.

"Now, where's that rat?" asked Silas.

A large brown rat was sitting outside the window, tapping on the glass. Aunt Zelda opened the window, and the rat hopped in and looked around the room with his quick, bright eyes.

"Squeeke, Rat!" said Silas in **Magyk**.

The rat looked at him impatiently.

"Speeke, Rat!"

The rat crossed his arms and waited. He gave Silas a withering look.

"Um...sorry. It's been ages since I've had a Message Rat," Silas excused himself. "Oh, *that's* it...**Speeke, Rattus Rattus.**"

"Right-ho," sighed the rat. "Got there in the end." He drew himself up and said, "First I have to ask. Is there anyone here answering to the name of Silas Heap?" The rat stared straight at Silas.

"Yes, me," said Silas.

"Thought so," said the rat. "Fits the description." He gave a small, important-sounding cough, stood up straight and clasped his front paws

behind his back.

“I am come here to deliver a message to Silas Heap. The message is sent today at eight o’clock this morning from one Sarah Heap residing in the house of Galen.

“Message begins:

Hello, Silas love. And Jenna piglet and Nicko angel.

I have sent the rat to Zelda’s in the hope that he finds you safe and well. Sally told us that the Hunter was after you, and I couldn’t sleep all night for thinking about it. That man has such a terrible reputation. I was at my wits’ end by the morning and was convinced you had all been caught (although Galen told me she knew you were safe), but dear Alther came to see us as soon as it was light and told us the wonderful news that you had escaped. He said he last saw you setting off into the Marram Marshes. He wished he could have come with you.

Silas, something has happened. Simon disappeared on our way here. We were on the riverside path that leads into Galen’s part of the Forest when I realized that he had gone. I just don’t know what can have happened to him. We didn’t see any Guards, and no one saw or heard him go. Silas, I am so afraid he has fallen into one of those traps that those awful witches set. We are going out to search for him today.

*The Guards set fire to Sally’s cafe and she only just managed to escape. She is not sure how she did it, but she arrived here safely this morning and asked me to tell Marcia that she is very grateful for the **KeepSafe** she gave her. In fact, we all are. It was very generous of Marcia.*

Silas, please send the rat back and let me know how you are.

*All our love and thoughts go to you all.
Your loving Sarah*

“Message ends.”

Exhausted, the rat slumped down on the windowsill.

“I could murder a cup of tea,” he said.

Silas was very agitated.

“I shall have to go back,” he said, “and look for Simon. Who knows what might have happened?”

Aunt Zelda tried to calm him down. She brought out two mugs of hot sweet tea and gave one to the rat and one to Silas. The rat downed his mug in one go while Silas sat gloomily nursing his.

“Simon’s really tough, Dad,” said Nicko. “He’ll be all right. I expect he just got lost. He’ll be back with Mum by now.”

Silas was not convinced.

Aunt Zelda decided the only sensible thing to do was to have supper. Aunt Zelda’s suppers usually took people’s minds off their problems. She was a hospitable cook who liked to have as many people around her table as she could, and although her guests always enjoyed the conversation, the food could be more of a challenge. The most frequent description was “interesting,” as in, “That bread and cabbage bake was very...interesting, Zelda. I never would have thought of that myself,” or, “Well, I must say that strawberry jam is such an...interesting sauce for sliced eel.”

Silas was put to work laying the table to take his mind off things, and the Message Rat was invited to supper.

Aunt Zelda served frog and rabbit casserole with twice-boiled turnip heads followed by cherry and parsnip delight. Boy 412 tucked into it with great enthusiasm, as it was a wonderful improvement on the Young Army food, and he even had second and third helpings, much to Aunt Zelda’s delight. No one had ever asked her for second helpings before, let alone *third*.

Nicko was pleased that Boy 412 was eating so much, as it meant that Aunt Zelda did not notice the frog lumps that he had lined up and hidden under his knife. Or if she did, it didn’t bother her too much. Nicko also managed to feed the complete rabbit ear that he had found on his plate to Maxie, much to his relief and Maxie’s delight.

Marcia had called down, excusing herself and Jenna from supper on account of the presence of the Message Rat. Silas thought it was a feeble excuse and suspected her of secretly doing a few gourmet food spells on the

side.

Despite—or maybe because of—Marcia’s absence, supper was an enjoyable affair. The Message Rat was good company. Silas had not bothered to undo the **Speeke, Rattus Rattus** command, and so the talkative rat held forth on any topic that caught his imagination, which ranged from the problem with young rats today to the rat sausage scandal in the Guards’ canteen that had upset the entire rat community, not to mention the Guards.

As the meal drew to a close, Aunt Zelda asked Silas if he was going to send the Message Rat back to Sarah that night.

The rat looked apprehensive. Although he was a big rat and could, as he was fond of telling everyone, “take care of myself,” Marram Marshes at night was not his favorite place. The suckers on a large Water Nixie could spell the end for a rat, and neither Brownies nor Boggarts were the rat’s first choice of companions. The Brownies would drag a rat down into the Ooze just for fun, and a hungry Boggart would happily boil up a rat stew for its baby Boggarts, who were, in the Message Rat’s opinion, voracious little pests.

(The Boggart of course had not joined them for supper. He never did. He preferred to eat the boiled cabbage sandwiches that Aunt Zelda made for him in the comfort of his own mud patch. He himself had not eaten rat for a long time. He didn’t like the taste much, and the little bones got stuck between his teeth.)

“I was thinking,” said Silas slowly, “that it might be better to send the rat back in the morning. He’s come a long way, and he ought to get some sleep.”

The rat look pleased.

“Quite right, sir. Very wise,” he said. “Many a message is lost for want of a good rest. And a good supper. And may I say that was an exceptionally... interesting supper, Madam.” He bowed his head in Aunt Zelda’s direction.

“My pleasure.” Aunt Zelda smiled.

“*Is that rat a Confidential Rat?*” asked the pepper pot in Marcia’s voice. Everyone jumped.

“You might give us a bit of warning if you’re going to start throwing your voice around,” complained Silas. “I nearly inhaled my parsnip delight.”

“*Well, is it?*” the pepper pot persisted.

“Are you?” Silas asked the rat, who was staring at the pepper pot and for once seemed lost for words. “Are you a Confidential Rat or not?”

“Yes,” said the rat, unsure whether to answer Silas or the pepper pot. He went for the pepper pot. “I am indeed, Miss Pot. I am a Chartered Confidential Long-Distance Rat. At your service.”

“Good. I’m coming down.”

Marcia came down the stairs two at a time and strode across the room, book in hand, her silk robes sweeping over the floor and sending a pile of potion jars flying. Jenna followed her quickly, eager to at last see a Message Rat for herself.

“It’s so *small* in here,” complained Marcia, irritably brushing Aunt Zelda’s best multicolored **Brilliant Blends** off her cloak. “I really don’t know how you manage, Zelda.”

“I seemed to manage quite well before you arrived,” Aunt Zelda muttered under her breath as Marcia sat down at the table beside the Message Rat. The rat went pale underneath his brown fur. Never in his wildest dreams had he expected to meet the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He bowed low, far too low, and overbalanced into the remains of the cherry and parsnip delight.

“I want *you* to go back with the rat, Silas,” announced Marcia.

“What?” said Silas. “*Now?*”

“I am not certified for passengers, Your Honor,” the rat addressed Marcia hesitantly. “In fact, Your Most Graciousness, and I do say this with the greatest of respect—”

“**UnSpeeke, Rattus Rattus,**” snapped Marcia.

The Message Rat opened and closed his mouth silently for a few more words until he realized that nothing was coming out. Then he sat down, reluctantly licking the cherry and parsnip delight off his paws, and waited. The rat had no choice but to wait, for a Message Rat may leave only with a reply or a refusal to reply. And so far the Message Rat had been given neither, so, like the true professional he was, he sat patiently and gloomily remembered his wife’s words to him that morning when he had told her he

was doing a job for a Wizard.

“Stanley,” his wife, Dawnie, had said, wagging her finger at him, “if I was you, I wouldn’t have nothing to do with them Wizards. Remember Elli’s husband, who ended up bewitched by that small fat Wizard up at the Tower and got trapped in the hot pot? He didn’t come back for two weeks and then he was in a terrible state. Don’t go, Stanley. Please.”

But Stanley had been secretly flattered that the Rat Office had asked him to go on an outside job, particularly for a Wizard, and was glad for a change from his previous job. He had spent the last week taking messages between two sisters who were having an argument. The messages had become increasingly short and distinctly ruder until his previous day’s work had consisted of running from one sister to another and actually saying nothing at all, because each wished to tell the other that she was no longer speaking to her. He had been extremely relieved when their mother, horrified by the huge bill she had suddenly received from the Rat Office, had canceled the job.

And so Stanley had quite happily told his wife that, if he was needed, he must go. “I am after all,” he told her, “one of the few Confidential Long-Distance Rats in the Castle.”

“And one of the silliest,” his wife had retorted.

And so Stanley sat on the table among the remains of the oddest supper he had ever eaten and listened to the surprisingly grumpy ExtraOrdinary Wizard telling the Ordinary Wizard what to do. Marcia thumped her book down on the table, rattling the plates.

“I have been going through Zelda’s *The Undoing of the Darkenesse*. I only wish I had had a copy back at Wizard Tower. It’s invaluable.” Marcia tapped the book approvingly. The book misunderstood her. It suddenly left the table and flew back to its place in Aunt Zelda’s book pile, much to Marcia’s irritation.

“Silas,” said Marcia, “I want you to go and get my **KeepSafe** back from Sally. We need it here.”

“All right,” said Silas.

“You *must* go, Silas,” said Marcia. “Our safety may depend upon it. Without it I have less power than I thought.”

“Yes, yes. *All right*, Marcia,” said Silas impatiently, preoccupied with his thoughts about Simon.

“In fact, as ExtraOrdinary Wizard, I am *ordering* you to go,” Marcia persisted.

“Yes! Marcia, I said *yes*. I’m *going*. I was going anyway,” said Silas, exasperated. “Simon has disappeared. I am going to look for him.”

“Good,” said Marcia, paying little attention, as ever, to what Silas was saying. “Now, where’s that rat?”

The rat, still unable to speak, raised his paw.

“Your message is this Wizard, returned to sender. Do you understand?”

Stanley nodded uncertainly. He wanted to tell the ExtraOrdinary Wizard that this was against Rat Office regulations. They did not deal in packages, human or otherwise. He sighed. How right his wife had been.

“You will convey this Wizard safely and properly by appropriate means to the return address. Understood?”

Stanley nodded unhappily. Appropriate means? He supposed that meant that Silas wasn’t going to be able to swim the river. Or hitch a lift in the baggage of a passing peddler. Great.

Silas came to the rat’s rescue.

“I do not need to be booked in like a parcel, thank you, Marcia,” he said. “I will take a canoe, and the rat can come with me and show me the way.”

“Very well,” said Marcia, “but I want confirmation of order. **Speeke, Rattus Rattus.**”

“Yes,” said the rat weakly. “Order confirmed.”

Silas and the Message Rat left early the next morning, just after sunrise, taking the *Muriel One* canoe. The haar had disappeared overnight, and the winter sun cast long shadows over the marshes in the gray early morning light.

Jenna, Nicko and Maxie had got up early to wave Silas off and give him messages for Sarah and the boys. The air was cold and frosty, and their breath hung in white clouds. Silas wrapped his heavy blue woolen cloak around him and pulled up his hood, while the Message Rat stood beside him shivering a little, and not entirely with the cold.

The rat could hear horrible choking noises from Maxie close behind him as Nicko kept a tight grip on the wolfhound's neckerchief, and, as if that wasn't enough, he had just caught sight of the Boggart.

"Ah, Boggart." Aunt Zelda smiled. "Thank you very much, Boggart dear, for staying up. Here's some sandwiches to keep you going. I'll put them in the canoe. There's some for you and the rat too, Silas."

"Oh. Well, thank you, Zelda. What kind of sandwiches would they be, exactly?"

"Best boiled cabbage."

"Ah. Well, that's most...thoughtful." Silas was glad he had smuggled some bread and cheese in his sleeve.

The Boggart was floating grumpily in the Mott and was not completely placated by the mention of cabbage sandwiches. He did not like being out in the daylight, even in the middle of winter. It made his weak Boggart eyes ache, and the sunlight burned his ears if he was not careful.

The Message Rat sat unhappily on the bank of the Mott, caught between dog breath behind him and Boggart Breath in front of him.

"Right," said Silas to the rat. "In you get. I expect you'll want to sit at the front. Maxie always does."

"I am *not* a dog," sniffed Stanley, "and I *don't* travel with Boggarts."

"This Boggart is a safe Boggart," Aunt Zelda told him.

"There's no such thing as a safe Boggart," muttered Stanley. Catching a glimpse of Marcia coming out of the cottage to wave Silas off, he said no more, but jumped smartly into the canoe and hid under the seat.

"Be careful, Dad," Jenna told Silas, hugging him tightly.

Nicko hugged Silas too. “Find Simon, Dad. And don’t forget to stay by the edge of the river if the tide’s against you. The tide always flows faster in the middle.”

“I won’t forget.” Silas smiled. “Look after each other, both of you. And Maxie.”

“Bye, Dad!”

Maxie whined and yelped as he saw, to his dismay, that Silas really *was* leaving him.

“Bye!” Silas waved as he unsteadily steered the canoe along the Mott to the familiar Boggart inquiry: “You followin’?”

Jenna and Nicko watched the canoe make its way slowly along the winding ditches and out into the wide expanse of the Marram Marshes until they could no longer make out Silas’s blue hood.

“I hope Dad’ll be all right,” said Jenna quietly. “He’s not very good at finding places.”

“The Message Rat will make sure he gets there,” said Nicko. “He knows he’ll have some explaining to do to Marcia if he doesn’t.”

Deep in the Marram Marshes the Message Rat sat in the canoe surveying the first package he had ever had to deliver. He had decided not to mention it to Dawnie, or to the rats at the Rat Office; it was all, he sighed to himself, highly irregular.

But after a while, as Silas took them slowly and somewhat erratically through the twisting channels of the marsh, Stanley began to see that this was not such a bad way to travel. He did after all have a ride all the way to his destination. And all he had to do was sit there, tell a few stories and enjoy the ride while Silas did all the work.

And that, as Silas said good-bye to the Boggart at the end of Deppen Ditch and started paddling up the river on his way to the Forest, is exactly what the Message Rat did.



That evening the east wind blew in across the marshes.

Aunt Zelda closed the wooden shutters on the windows and **CharmLocked** the door to the cat tunnel, making sure that Bert was safely indoors first. Then she walked around the cottage, lighting the lamps and placing storm candles at the windows to keep the wind at bay. She was looking forward to a quiet time at her desk updating her potion list.

But Marcia had got there first. She was leafing through some small **Magyk** books and busily making notes. Every now and then she tried out a quick spell to see if it still worked, and there would be a small popping noise and a peculiar-smelling puff of smoke. Aunt Zelda was not pleased to see what Marcia had done to the desk either. Marcia had given the desk duck feet to stop it from wobbling and a pair of arms to help with organizing the paperwork.

“When you’ve quite finished, Marcia, I’d like my desk back,” said Aunt Zelda irritably.

“All yours, Zelda,” Marcia said cheerily. She picked up a small square

book and took it over to the fireside with her, leaving a pile of mess on the desk. Aunt Zelda swept the mess onto the floor before the arms could grab it and sat herself down with a sigh.

Marcia joined Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 by the fire. She sat down next to them and opened the book, which Jenna could see was called:

**Safety Spelles
and Unharm Charms**

For the Use of the Beginner

and Those of Simple Mind

Compiled and Guaranteed by the Wizard Assurance League

“*Simple Mind?*” said Jenna. “That’s a bit rude, isn’t it?”

“Pay no attention to that,” said Marcia. “It’s very old-fashioned. But the old ones are often the best. Nice and simple, before every Wizard tried to get their own name on spells just by tinkering with them a little, which is when you get trouble. I remember I found what seemed like an easy **Fetch Spell** once. Latest edition with lots of brand-new unused **Charms**, which I suppose should have warned me. When I got it to **Fetch** my python shoes, it **Fetchd** the wretched python as well. Not exactly what you want to see first thing in the morning.”

Marcia was busy leafing through the book.

“There’s an easy version of **Cause Yourself to be Unseen** somewhere here. I found it yesterday...Ah, yes, here it is.”

Jenna peered over Marcia’s shoulder at the yellowed page that Marcia had open. Like all **Magyk** books, each page had a different spell or incantation on it, and in the older books these would be carefully written by hand in various strange colored inks. Underneath each spell the page was folded back on itself to form a pocket in which the **Charms** were placed. The **Charm** contained the **Magyk** imprint of the spell. It was often a piece of parchment, although it could be anything. Marcia had seen **Charms** written on bits of silk, wood, shells and even toast, although that one had not worked properly, as mice had

nibbled the ending.

And so this was how a **Magyk** book worked: the first Wizard to create the spell wrote down the words and instructions on whatever he or she had at hand. It was best to write it down at once, as Wizards are notoriously forgetful creatures, and also the **Magyk** will fade if not captured quickly. So possibly, if the Wizard were in the middle of having breakfast when he or she thought of the spell, they might just use a piece of (preferably unbuttered) toast. This was the **Charm**. The number of **Charms** made would depend on how many times the Wizard wrote down the spell. Or on how many pieces of toast were made for breakfast.

When a Wizard had collected enough spells together, he or she would usually bind them into a book for safekeeping; although, many **Magyk** books were collections of older books that had fallen apart and been remixed in various forms. A full **Magyk** book with all its **Charms** still in their pockets was a rare treasure. It was far more common to find a virtually empty book with only one or two of the less popular **Charms** still in place.

Some Wizards only made one or two **Charms** for their more complicated spells, and these were very hard to find, although most **Charms** could be found in the Pyramid Library back at the Wizard Tower. Marcia missed her library more than anything else in the Tower, but she had been surprised and very pleased with Aunt Zelda's collection of **Magyk** books.

"Here you are," said Marcia, passing the book to Jenna. "Why don't you take out a **Charm**?"

Jenna took the small and surprisingly heavy book. It was open at a grubby and much-thumbed page that was written in faded purple ink and large neat writing, which was easy to read.

The words said:

Cause Yourself to be Unseen

a Valued and Esteem'd Spelle

for all those Persons who might wishe

(for Reasons only Pertaining to their

Owne or Others' safekeeping)
to be Missed by those who may cause
them Harme

Jenna read the words with a feeling of apprehension, not wanting to think about who may cause her harm, and then felt inside the thick paper pocket that held the **Charms**. Inside the pocket were what felt like a lot of smooth, flat counters. Jenna's fingers closed around one of the counters and drew out a small oval piece of polished ebony.

"Very nice," said Marcia approvingly. "Black as the night. Just right. Can you see the words on the **Charm**?"

Jenna screwed up her eyes in an effort to see what was written on the sliver of ebony. The words were tiny, written in an old-fashioned script in a faded golden ink. Marcia fished a large flat magnifying glass from her belt, which she unfolded and passed to Jenna.

"See if that helps," she said.

Jenna slowly passed the glass over the golden letters, and as they jumped into view she read them out:

Let me Fade into the Aire
Let all against me know not Where
Let them that Seeke me pass me by
Let Harme not reach me from their Eye.

"Nice and simple," said Marcia. "Not too hard to remember if things get a bit tricky. Some spells are all well and good, but try and remember them in a crisis and it's not so easy. Now you need to **Imprint** the spell."

"Do what?" asked Jenna.

“Hold the **Charm** close to you and say the words of the spell as you hold it. You need to remember the *exact* words. And as you say the words you have to imagine the spell actually happening—that’s the really important part.”

It wasn’t as easy as Jenna expected, particularly with Nicko and Boy 412 watching her. If she remembered the words right, she forgot to imagine the **Fade into the Aire** bit, and if she thought too much about **Fade into the Aire**, she forgot the words.

“Have another go,” Marcia encouraged her after Jenna had, to her exasperation, got everything right except one little word. “Everyone thinks spells are easy, but they’re not. But you’re nearly there.”

Jenna took a deep breath. “Stop *looking* at me,” she told Nicko and Boy 412.

They grinned and pointedly stared at Bert instead. Bert shifted uncomfortably in her sleep. She always knew when someone was looking at her.

So Nicko and Boy 412 missed Jenna’s first **Disappearance**.

Marcia clapped her hands. “You did it!” she said.

“Did I? *Have* I?” Jenna’s voice came from out of the air.

“Hey, Jen, where are you?” asked Nicko, laughing.

Marcia looked at her timepiece. “Now don’t forget, the first time you do a spell it doesn’t last very long. You’ll **Reappear** in a minute or so. After that it should last as long as you want it to.”

Boy 412 watched Jenna’s blurred shape slowly **Materialize** out of the flickering shadows cast by Aunt Zelda’s candles. He stared openmouthed. *He* wanted to do that.

“Nicko,” said Marcia, “your turn.”

Boy 412 felt cross with himself. What had made him think Marcia would ask *him*? Of course she wouldn’t. He didn’t belong. He was just a Young Army Expendable.

“I’ve got my own **Disappear**, thanks,” said Nicko. “Don’t want to get it muddled up with this one.”

Nicko had a workmanlike approach to **Magyk**. He had no intention of becoming a Wizard, even though he was from a **Magykal** family and had been taught **Basyk Magyk**. Nicko didn’t see why he needed more than one of each kind of spell. Why clog your brain up with all that stuff? He reckoned he already had all the spells in his head that he would ever need. He’d rather use his brain space for useful things like tide times and sail rigging.

“Very well,” said Marcia, who knew better than to try and make Nicko do anything he wasn’t interested in, “but just remember that only those within the same **Unseen** can see each other. If you have a different one, Nicko, you will not be visible to anyone who has a different spell, even if they too are **Unseen**. All right?”

Nicko nodded vaguely. He didn’t really see why it mattered.

“Now, then”—Marcia turned to Boy 412—“it’s your turn.”

Boy 412 went pink. He stared at his feet. *She had asked him*. More than anything he wanted to try the spell, but he hated the way everyone was looking at him, and he was sure he was going to look stupid if he tried it.

“You really should have a go,” said Marcia. “I want you *all* to be able to do this.”

Boy 412 looked up, surprised. Did Marcia mean he was just as important as the two other kids? The two who *belonged*?

Aunt Zelda’s voice came from the other end of the room. “Of *course* he’ll have a go.”

Boy 412 stood up awkwardly. Marcia fished out another **Charm** from the book and gave it to him. “Now you **Imprint** it,” she told him.

Boy 412 held the **Charm** in his hand. Jenna and Nicko looked at him, curious to see what he would do now that it was his turn.

“Say the words,” Marcia prompted gently. Boy 412 said nothing, but the words to the spell whizzed around his brain and filled his head with a strange buzzing sensation. Underneath his red beanie hat, the stubbly hairs on the back of his head stood up. He could feel the **Magyk** tingling through his

hand.

“He’s gone!” gasped Jenna.

Nicko gave a low whistle of admiration. “He doesn’t hang about, does he?”

Boy 412 felt cross. There was no need to make fun of him. And why was Marcia giving him such a weird look? Had he done something wrong?

“Come back now,” Marcia said very quietly. Something in Marcia’s voice made Boy 412 a little scared. What had happened?

Then an amazing thought crossed Boy 412’s mind. Very quietly he stepped over Bert, slipped past Jenna without touching her and wandered into the middle of the room. No one watched him go. They were all still staring at the space where he had just been standing.

A thrill of excitement ran through Boy 412. He could *do* it. He could do **Magyk**. He could **Fade into the Aire!** No one could see him. He was *free!*

Boy 412 gave a small hop of excitement. No one noticed. He put his arms in the air and waved them above his head. No one noticed. He put his thumbs in his ears and waggled his fingers. No one noticed. Then, silently, he skipped over to blow out a storm candle, caught his foot under a rug and crashed to the floor.

“*There* you are,” said Marcia crossly.

And there he was, sitting on the floor nursing a bruised knee and slowly **Appearing** to his impressed audience.

“You’re *good*,” said Jenna. “How did you do that so easily?”

Boy 412 shook his head. He had no idea how he had done it. It had just happened. But it felt great.

Marcia was in a strange mood. Boy 412 thought she would be pleased with him, but she seemed to be anything but.

“You shouldn’t **Imprint** a spell so fast. It can be dangerous. You might not have been able to come back properly.”

What Marcia didn’t say to Boy 412 was that she had never seen a first-

timer master a spell so quickly. It unsettled her. And she felt even more unsettled when Boy 412 gave her back the **Charm** and she felt a buzz of **Magyk**, like a small click of static electricity, jump from his hand.

“No,” she said, giving it back to him, “you keep the **Charm**. And Jenna too. It’s best for beginners to keep the **Charms** for spells they might want to use.”

Boy 412 put the **Charm** in his trouser pocket. He felt confused. His head still swam with the excitement of the **Magyk**, and he knew he had done the spell perfectly. So why was Marcia cross? What had he done wrong? Maybe the Young Army was right. Maybe the ExtraOrdinary Wizard really was crazy—what was it they used to chant every morning in the Young Army before they went off to guard the Wizard Tower and spy on the comings and goings of all the Wizards, particularly the ExtraOrdinary Wizard?

Crazy as a cuttlefish,

Nasty as a RAT,

Put her in a pie dish,

Give her to the CAT!

But the rhyme didn’t make Boy 412 laugh anymore, and it didn’t seem to have much to do with Marcia at all. In fact, the more he thought about the Young Army, the more Boy 412 realized the truth.

The *Young Army* was crazy.

Marcia was **Magyk**.

23

WINGS



That night the easterly wind blew up into a gale. It rattled the shutters, shook the doors and unsettled the whole cottage. Every now and then a great gust of wind howled around the cottage, blowing the smoke back down the chimney and leaving the three occupants of the fireside quilts choking and spluttering.

Upstairs, Maxie had refused to leave his master's bed and was snoring as loudly as ever, much to the irritation of Marcia and Aunt Zelda, neither of whom could sleep.

Aunt Zelda got up quietly and peered out of the window as she always did on stormy nights, ever since her younger brother Theo, a Shape-Shifter like her older brother, Benjamin Heap, had decided he had had enough of living his life below the clouds. Theo wanted to soar up through them into the sunlight forever. One winter's day he had come to say good-bye to his sister, and at dawn the next day she had sat by the Mott and watched as he **Shifted** for the last time into his chosen Shape, a storm petrel. The last Aunt Zelda had seen of Theo was the powerful bird heading out over the Marram

Marshes toward the sea. As she watched the bird go, she knew that she was unlikely to ever see her brother again, for storm petrels spend their lives flying over the oceans and rarely return to land, unless blown in by a storm. Aunt Zelda sighed and tiptoed back to bed.

Marcia had stuffed her pillow over her head in an effort to drown out the dog snores and the high-pitched howl of the wind as it swept over the marshes and, finding the cottage in its way, tried to batter its way through and out the other side. But it wasn't just the noise that kept her awake. There was something else on her mind. Something she had seen that evening had given her some hope for the future. A future back at the Castle, free from **Darke Magyk**. She lay awake planning her next move.

Downstairs, Boy 412 couldn't sleep at all. Ever since he had done the spell he felt odd, as if a swarm of bees was buzzing inside his head. He imagined little bits of **Magyk** left behind from the spell, spinning around and around. He wondered why Jenna, who was now sleeping soundly, wasn't awake. Why wasn't her head buzzing too? He slipped his ring on, and the golden glow lit up the room, giving Boy 412 an idea. It must be the ring. That was why his head was buzzing, and that was why he could do the spell so easily. He had found a **Magyk** ring.

Boy 412 started thinking about what had happened after he had done the spell. How he had sat with Jenna looking through the spell book until Marcia had noticed and made them put it away, saying that she didn't want any more fooling around, thank you very much. Then, later in the evening, when no one else was about, Marcia had cornered him and told him she wanted to talk to him the next day. By himself. To Boy 412's way of thinking, that could only mean trouble.

Boy 412 felt unhappy. He couldn't think straight, so he decided to make a list. The Young Army Facts List. It had always worked before.

Fact One. No early morning roll call: GOOD.

Fact Two. Much better food: GOOD.

Fact Three. Aunt Zelda nice: GOOD.

Fact Four. Princess-girl friendly: GOOD.

*Fact Five. Have **Magyk** ring: GOOD.*

Fact Six. ExtraOrdinary Wizard cross: BAD.

Boy 412 was surprised. Never before in his life had the GOOD outnumbered the BAD. But somehow that made the one BAD even worse. Because, for the first time, Boy 412 felt he had something to lose. Eventually he fell into an uneasy sleep and woke early with the dawn.

The next morning the east wind had died down, and there was a general air of expectation in the cottage.

Aunt Zelda was out at dawn checking for storm petrels blown in after the windy night. There weren't any, which was what she expected, although she always hoped otherwise.

Marcia was expecting Silas back with her **KeepSafe**.

Jenna and Nicko were expecting a message from Silas.

Maxie was expecting his breakfast.

Boy 412 was expecting trouble.

“Don't you want your porridge chunks?” Aunt Zelda asked Boy 412 at breakfast. “You had two helpings yesterday, and you've hardly touched them today.”

Boy 412 shook his head.

Aunt Zelda looked concerned. “You're looking a bit peaky,” she said. “Are you feeling all right?”

Boy 412 nodded, even though he wasn't.

After breakfast, while Boy 412 was carefully folding his quilt as neatly as he had always folded his Army blankets every morning of his life, Jenna asked him if he wanted to come out in the *Muriel Two* with her and Nicko to watch for the Message Rat coming back. He shook his head. Jenna wasn't surprised. She knew Boy 412 did not like boats.

“See you later, then,” she called out cheerily as she ran off to join Nicko in the canoe.

Boy 412 watched Nicko steer the canoe out along the Mott and into the marshes. The marshland looked bleak and cold that morning, as though the night's east wind had rubbed it raw. He was glad he was staying in the cottage by the warm fire.

“Ah, there you are,” said Marcia behind him. Boy 412 jumped. “I’d like a word with you.”

Boy 412’s heart sank. Well, that was it, he thought. She’s going to send me away. Back to the Young Army. He should have realized it was all too good to last.

Marcia noticed how pale Boy 412 had suddenly become.

“Are you all right?” she asked him. “Was it the pig-foot pie last night? I found it a bit indigestible myself. Didn’t get much sleep either, especially with that awful east wind. And speaking of wind, I don’t see why that disgusting dog can’t sleep somewhere else.”

Boy 412 smiled. He for one was glad that Maxie slept upstairs.

“I thought you might like to show me the island,” Marcia continued. “I expect you already know your way around.”

Boy 412 looked at Marcia in alarm. What did she suspect? Did she know he’d found the tunnel?

“Don’t look so worried.” Marcia smiled. “Come on, why don’t you show me the Boggart patch? I’ve never seen where a Boggart lives.”

Regretfully leaving the warmth of the cottage behind, Boy 412 set off with Marcia to the Boggart patch.

Together they made a strange pair: Boy 412, ex–Young Army Expendable, a small, slight figure even in his bulky sheepskin jacket and baggy rolled-up sailor’s trousers, was made instantly visible by his bright red hat, which so far he had refused to take off, even for Aunt Zelda. Towering above him, Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard, strode along at a brisk pace, which Boy 412 had to occasionally break into a trot to keep up with. Her gold and platinum belt flashed in the weak winter sunlight, and her heavy silk and fur robes flowed out behind her in a rich purple stream.

They soon arrived at the Boggart patch.

“Is that *it*?” asked Marcia, a little shocked at how any creature could live in such a cold and muddy place.

Boy 412 nodded, proud that he could show Marcia something she didn’t already know.

“Well, well,” said Marcia. “You learn something every day. And yesterday,” she said, looking Boy 412 in the eye before he had a chance to look away. “Yesterday I learned something too. Something very interesting.”

Boy 412 shuffled his feet uneasily and looked away. He didn’t like the sound of this.

“I learned,” said Marcia in a low voice, “that you have a natural **Magyk** gift. You did that spell as easily as if you had been studying **Magyk** for years. But you’ve never been near a spell in your life, have you?”

Boy 412 shook his head and looked at his feet. He still felt as though he had done something wrong.

“Quite,” said Marcia. “I didn’t think so. I suppose you have been in the Young Army since you were, what...two and a half? That’s when they usually take them.”

Boy 412 had no idea how long he had been in the Young Army. He could remember nothing else in his life, so he supposed Marcia was right. He nodded again.

“Well, we all know that the Young Army is the last place you’d come up against any **Magyk**. And yet somehow you have your own **Magyk** energy. It gave me quite a shock when you handed me the **Charm** last night.”

Marcia took something small and shiny from a pocket in her belt and placed it in Boy 412’s hand. Boy 412 looked down and saw a tiny pair of silver wings nestling in his grubby palm. The wings shimmered in the light and looked to Boy 412 as though they might fly away at any moment. He peered closer and saw some minute letters set into each wing in a fine gold inlay. Boy 412 knew what that meant. He was holding a **Charm**, but this time it wasn’t just a piece of wood—it was a beautiful jewel.

“Some **Charms** for higher **Magyk** can be very beautiful,” said Marcia. “They’re not all pieces of soggy toast. I remember when Alther first showed this one to me. I thought it was one of the most simple and beautiful **Charms**

I had ever seen. And I still do.”

Boy 412 gazed at the wings. On one beautiful silver wing were the words FLY FREE, and on the other wing were the words WITH ME.

Fly Free With Me, Boy 412 said to himself, loving how the words sounded inside his head. And then...

He couldn't help it.

He didn't really know he was doing it.

He just said the words to himself, his flying dream came into his head and...

“I knew you would do it!” exclaimed Marcia excitedly. “I just *knew* it!”

Boy 412 wondered what she meant. Until he realized that he seemed to be the same height as Marcia. Or even taller—in fact, he was floating above her. Boy 412 looked down in surprise, expecting Marcia to tell him off like she had done the evening before, to tell him to stop fooling around and come back down *this minute*, but to his relief she had a huge smile on her face and her green eyes flashed with excitement.

“It's amazing!” Marcia shielded her eyes against the morning sun as she squinted up to look at Boy 412 floating over the Boggart patch. “This is advanced **Magyk**. This is stuff you don't do for years. I just don't *believe* it.”

Which was probably the wrong thing to say, because Boy 412 didn't believe it either. Not really.

There was a huge splash as he landed in the middle of the Boggart patch.

“Oi! Can't a poor Boggart have no peace?” An indignant pair of black-button eyes blinked reproachfully out of the mud.

“Aaah...” gasped Boy 412, struggling to the surface and grabbing hold of the Boggart.

“I bin awake all yesterday,” the Boggart complained as he pulled the spluttering boy toward the edge of the mud patch. “Went all the way ter the river, sun in me eyes, rat yammering in me ear”—the Boggart pushed Boy 412 up onto the bank beside the mud patch—“an all I hope fer is a bit a sleep

the next day. Don't want no visitors. Just want ter sleep. Got it? You all right, lad?"

Boy 412 nodded, still spluttering.

Marcia had knelt down and was wiping Boy 412's face with a rather fine purple silk handkerchief. The short-sighted Boggart looked taken aback.

"Oh, mornin', Yer Majesty," said the Boggart respectfully. "Didunt see you there."

"Good Morning, Boggart. I'm so sorry we disturbed you. Thank you very much for your help. We'll be off now and leave you in peace."

"Think nothin' of it. Bin a pleasure."

With that the Boggart sank to the bottom of the mud patch, leaving nothing more than a few bubbles on the surface.

Marcia and Boy 412 slowly made their way back to the cottage. Marcia decided to ignore the fact that Boy 412 was covered from head to toe in mud. There was something she wanted to ask him. She had made up her mind, and she didn't want to wait.

"I wonder," she said, "if you would consider being my Apprentice?"

Boy 412 stopped in his tracks and stared at Marcia, the whites of his eyes shining out from his mud-covered face. *What* had she said?

"You would be my first one. I have never found anyone suitable before."

Boy 412 just stared at Marcia in disbelief.

"What I mean is," said Marcia, trying to explain, "that I have never found anyone with any **Magykal** spark before now, but you have it. I don't know why you have it or how you got it, but you do. And with your power and mine together I think we can dispel the **Darke**, the **Other** side. Maybe forever. What do you say? Will you be my Apprentice?"

Boy 412 was shocked. How could he *possibly* help Marcia, *the ExtraOrdinary Wizard*? She had it all wrong. He was a fraud—it was the dragon ring that was **Magykal**, not him. As much as he longed to say yes, he couldn't.

Boy 412 shook his head.

“No?” Marcia sounded shocked. “Do you mean *no*?”

Boy 412 nodded slowly.

“No...” Marcia was, for once, lost for words. It had never occurred to her that Boy 412 would turn her down. No one ever turned down the chance to be Apprenticed to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Apart from that idiot Silas, of course.

“You do realize what you are saying?” she asked.

Boy 412 did not respond. He felt wretched. He had managed to do something wrong again.

“I am asking you to think about it,” said Marcia in a more gentle voice. She had noticed how scared Boy 412 was looking. “It is an important decision for us both—and for the Castle. I hope you will change your mind.”

Boy 412 didn’t see how he *could* change his mind. He held the **Charm** out for Marcia to take back. It shone clean and bright in the middle of Boy 412’s muddy paw.

This time it was Marcia who shook her head.

“It is a token of my offer to you, and my offer is still there. Alther gave it to me when he asked me to be his Apprentice. Of course I said yes straight away, but I can see that it’s different for you. You need time to think about it. I’d like you to keep the **Charm** while you think things over.”

Marcia decided to change the subject. “Now,” she said briskly, “how good are you at catching bugs?”

Boy 412 was very good at catching bugs. He had had numerous pet bugs over the years. Stag, who was a stag beetle, Milly, a millipede, and Ernie, who was a large earwig, had been his particular favorites, but he had also kept a large black house spider with hairy legs, who went by the name of Seven-Leg Joe. Seven-Leg Joe lived in the hole in the wall above his bed. That was until Boy 412 suspected Joe of eating Ernie, and probably Ernie’s entire family too. After that Joe found himself living under the bed of the Chief Cadet, who was terrified of spiders.

Marcia was very pleased at their total bug haul. Fifty-seven assorted bugs would do nicely and was about as many bugs as Boy 412 could carry.

“We’ll get the **Preserve Pots** out when we get back and have these in them in no time,” said Marcia.

Boy 412 gulped. So that’s what they were for: bug jam.

As he followed Marcia back to the cottage, Boy 412 hoped that the tickly feeling going up his arm was not anything with too many legs.

24

SHIELD BUGS



A truly horrible smell of boiled rat and rotten fish was wafting out of the cottage as Jenna and Nicko paddled the *Muriel Two* back along the Mott after a long day on the marsh and no sign at all of the Message Rat.

“You don’t think that rat got here before us and Aunt Zelda’s boiling it up for supper, do you?” Nicko laughed as they tied up the canoe and wondered whether it was wise to venture indoors.

“Oh, *don’t*, Nicko. I liked the Message Rat. I hope Dad sends him back soon.”

Keeping their hands clamped firmly over their noses, Jenna and Nicko walked up the path to the cottage. With some trepidation, Jenna pushed open the door.

“Eurgh!”

The smell was even worse inside. Added to the powerful aromas of boiled rat and rotten fish was a definite whiff of old cat poo.

“Come in, dears. We’re just cooking.” Aunt Zelda’s voice came from the kitchen, where, Jenna now realized, the awful smell was coming from.

If this was supper, thought Nicko, he’d rather eat his socks.

“You’re just in time,” said Aunt Zelda cheerily.

“Oh, great,” said Nicko, wondering if Aunt Zelda had any sense of smell at all or whether countless years of boiling cabbage had killed it off.

Jenna and Nicko reluctantly approached the kitchen, wondering what kind of supper could possibly smell so bad.

To their surprise and relief, it wasn’t supper. And it wasn’t even Aunt Zelda doing the cooking. It was Boy 412.

Boy 412 looked very odd. He was wearing an ill-fitting multicolored knitted suit, consisting of a baggy patchwork sweater and some very droopy knitted shorts. But his red beanie hat was still crammed firmly onto his head and was steaming gently dry in the heat of the kitchen, while the rest of his clothes dried by the fire.

Aunt Zelda had at last won the battle of the bath, due only to the fact that Boy 412 was so uncomfortable when he had arrived back covered with sticky black mud from the Boggart patch that he was actually quite glad to disappear into the bath hut and soak it off. But he wouldn’t let his red hat go. Aunt Zelda had lost that one. Still, she was pleased to get his clothes clean at last and thought he looked very sweet in Silas’s old knitted suit, which he had worn as a boy. Boy 412 thought he looked very stupid and avoided looking at Jenna as she came in.

He concentrated hard on stirring the reeking glop, still not completely convinced that Aunt Zelda was *not* making bug jam, especially as she was sitting at the kitchen table with a pile of empty jam jars in front of her. She was busy unscrewing the lids and passing the jars to Marcia, who sat across the table taking out **Charms** from a very thick spell book titled:

Shield Bug Preserves

500 Charms

Each Guaranteed Identical and 100% Effective

Ideal for the Safety-Conscious Wizard of Today

“Come and sit down,” said Aunt Zelda, clearing a space at the table for them. “We’re making up **Preserve Pots**. Marcia’s doing the **Charms**, and you can do the bugs if you like.”

Jenna and Nicko sat down at the table, taking care to breathe only through their mouths. The smell was coming from the pan of bright green gloop that Boy 412 was slowly stirring with great concentration and care.

“Here you are. Here’re the bugs.” Aunt Zelda pushed a large bowl over to Jenna and Nicko. Jenna peeked in. The bowl was crawling with bugs of all possible shapes and sizes.

“Yuk.” Jenna shuddered; she didn’t like creepy-crawlies at all. Nicko wasn’t exactly pleased either. Ever since Edd and Erik had dropped a millipede down his neck when he was little he had avoided anything that scuttled or crawled.

But Aunt Zelda took no notice. “Nonsense, they’re just tiny creatures with lots of little legs. And they’re much more scared of you than you are of them. Now, first Marcia will pass around the **Charm**. We each hold the **Charm** so that the bug will **Imprint** us and recognize us when it’s released, then she’ll put the **Charm** in a jar. You two can add a bug and pass it to, er, Boy 412. He’ll top the jar with the **Preserve**, and I’ll screw the lids back on nice and tight. That way we’ll get this done in no time.”

And that’s what they did, except Jenna ended up screwing on the jar lids after the first bug ran up her arm and was only dislodged by her jumping up and down and screaming loudly.

It was a relief when they were on the last jar. Aunt Zelda unscrewed the lid and passed it to Marcia, who turned the page of the spell book and took out yet another small shield-shaped **Charm**. She passed the **Charm** around so that each of them held it for a moment, then dropped it into the jam jar and passed the jar to Nicko. Nicko wasn’t looking forward to this one. At the bottom of the bowl lurked the last bug, a large red millipede, just like the one

that had gone down the back of his neck all those years ago. It was running frantically around and around the bowl looking for somewhere to hide. If it hadn't made Nicko shudder quite so much, he might have felt sorry for it, but all Nicko could think was that he had to *pick it up*. Marcia was waiting with the **Charm** already in the jar. Boy 412 was poised with the last disgusting ladleful of **Preserve** gloop, and everyone was *waiting*.

Nicko took a deep breath, closed his eyes and plunged his hand into the bowl. The millipede saw him coming and ran to the opposite side. Nicko felt around the bowl, but the millipede was too quick for him. It scuttled this way and that, until it spotted the shelter of Nicko's dangling sleeve and ran for it.

"You've got it!" said Marcia. "It's on your sleeve. Quick, in the jar." Not daring to look, Nicko frantically shook his sleeve over the jar and knocked it over. The **Charm** skittered across the table, fell onto the floor and **Disappeared**.

"Bother," said Marcia. "These are a bit unstable." She fished out another **Charm** and quickly dropped it into the jar, forgetting to **Imprint** it.

"Hurry up, do," said Marcia irritably. "The **Preserve** is wearing off fast. Come *on*."

She reached over and deftly flicked the millipede off Nicko's sleeve, straight into the jar. It was quickly covered in sticky green **Preserve** by Boy 412. Jenna screwed the lid on tight, plonked the jar down on the table with a flourish, and everyone watched the last **Preserve Pot** transform.

The millipede lay in the **Preserve Pot** in a state of shock. It had been asleep under its favorite rock when Something Huge with a Red Head had picked up the rock and lifted it into Space. The worst was yet to come: the millipede, who was a solitary creature, had been thrown into a pile of noisy, dirty and downright *rude* bugs who jostled it and pushed it and even tried to *bite its legs*. The millipede didn't like anything messing with its legs. It had a lot of legs, and each one needed to be kept in perfect working order; otherwise the millipede was in trouble. One dodgy leg and that was it—a bug could be forever running around in circles. So the millipede had headed for the bottom of the pile of low-life bugs and sulked, until it suddenly realized that all the bugs had gone and there *was nowhere to hide*. Every millipede knew that *nowhere to hide* meant the end of the world, and now the millipede knew that that was indeed true because sure enough, here it was, floating in a thick green goo and something *terrible* was happening to it. One by one it was *losing its legs*.

Not only that, but now its long, sleek body was getting shorter and fatter, and the millipede was now shaped like a stubby triangle with a little pointy head. On its back it had a stout pair of armored green wings, and its front was covered in heavy green scales. And if that wasn't bad enough, the millipede now had *only four legs*. Four thick green legs. If you could call them legs. They certainly weren't what it would call legs. There were two at the top and two at the bottom. The top two legs were shorter than the two bottom legs. They had five pointy things on the ends of each of them, which the millipede could move about, and one of the top legs was holding a small sharp metal stick. The bottom two legs had big flat green things on the ends of them, and each one of those had five more little pointy green things on it. It was a complete disaster. How could anything live with only four fat legs ending in pointy bits? What kind of creature was *that*?

That kind of creature, although the millipede didn't know it, was a Shield Bug.

The ex-millipede, now a completed Shield Bug, lay suspended in the thick green **Preserve**. The bug moved slowly, as if testing out its new shape. It wore a surprised expression as it stared out at the world through its green haze, waiting for the moment when it would be released.

"The perfect Shield Bug," said Marcia proudly, holding up the jam jar to the light and admiring the ex-millipede. "That's the best one we've done. Well done, everyone."

Soon, the fifty-seven jam jars were lined up along the windowsills, guarding the cottage. They were an eerie sight, their bright green occupants dreamily floating in the green goo, sleeping the time away until someone unscrewed the lids of their jars and released them. When Jenna asked Marcia what happened when you unscrewed the lid, Marcia told her that the Shield Bug would leap out and defend you until its last breath, or until you managed to catch it and put it back in the jar, which did not usually happen. A released Shield Bug had no intention of getting back into any jar ever again.

While Aunt Zelda and Marcia cleared up the pots and pans, Jenna sat by the door, listening to the clatter from the kitchen. As the twilight fell, she watched the fifty-seven little pools of green light reflected onto the pale stone floor, and saw in each one a small shadow slowly moving, waiting for its moment of freedom to arrive.

THE WENDRON WITCH

By midnight everyone in the cottage was asleep except Marcia. The east wind had blown in again, this time bringing snow with it. All along the windowsills the **Preserve Pots** clinked mournfully as the creatures in them shifted about, disturbed by the snowstorm blowing outside.

Marcia was sitting at Aunt Zelda's desk with one small flickering candle so as not to wake the sleepers by the fireside. She was deep into her book, *The Undoing of the Darkenese*.

Outside, floating just below the surface of the Mott to stay out of the snow, the Boggart kept a lonely midnight watch.

Far away in the Forest, Silas too kept a lonely midnight vigil in the middle of the snowfall, which was heavy enough to find its way down through the tangled bare branches of the trees. He was standing, shivering a little, under a tall and sturdy elm tree, waiting for the arrival of Morwenna Mould.

Morwenna Mould and Silas went back a long way. Silas had been a young Apprentice out on a night errand for Alther in the Forest when he had heard the bloodcurdling sounds of a baying pack of wolverines. He knew what that meant: they had found their prey for the night and were closing in for the kill. Silas pitied the poor animal. He knew only too well how terrifying it was to be surrounded by a circle of glinting yellow wolverine eyes. It had happened to him once, and he had never forgotten it but, being a Wizard, he was lucky. He had done a quick **Freeze** and hurried away.

However, that night on his errand, Silas heard a faint voice in his head.
Help me...

Alther had taught him to take notice of such things, and so Silas followed where the voice led him and found himself on the outside of a wolverine circle. On the inside was a young witch. **Frozen**.

At first Silas had thought that the young witch was simply frozen with fear. She stood in the middle of the circle, eyes wide with terror, her hair tangled from running through the Forest to escape the wolverine pack and her heavy black cloak clutched tightly to her.

It took Silas a few moments to realize that, in her panic, the young witch had **Frozen** herself rather than the wolverines, leaving them the easiest supper the pack had had since the last Young Army Do-or-Die night exercise. As Silas watched, the wolverines began to close in for the kill. Slowly and deliberately, enjoying the prospect of a good feed, they circled the young witch, drawing in ever closer. Silas waited until he had all the wolverines in his sight, then quickly he **Froze** the entire pack. Unsure how to **UnDo** a witch spell, Silas lifted up the witch, who was luckily one of the smaller and lighter Wendron Witches, and carried her to safety. Then he waited with her all through the night while the **Freeze** wore off.

Morwenna Mould had never forgotten what Silas had done for her. From then on, whenever he ventured into the Forest, Silas knew he had the Wendron Witches on his side. And he also knew that Morwenna Mould would be there to help him if he needed it. All he had to do was to wait beside her

tree at midnight. And that is what, after all those years, he was doing.

“Well, I do believe it is my dear brave Wizard. Silas Heap, what brings you here tonight of all nights, on our MidWinter Eve?” A quiet voice, spoken with a soft Forest burr like the rustling of the leaves on the trees, came out of the dark.

“Morwenna, is that you?” asked Silas, a little flustered, jumping to his feet and looking around him.

“It surely is,” said Morwenna, appearing out of the night and surrounded by a flurry of snowflakes. Her black fur cloak was dusted with snow, as was her long dark hair, which was held in place by the traditional green leather Wendron Witch headband. Her bright blue eyes flashed in the dark the way that all witches’ eyes do; they had been watching Silas standing under the elm tree for some time before Morwenna had decided it was safe to appear.

“Hello, Morwenna,” said Silas, suddenly shy. “You haven’t changed a bit.” Actually Morwenna had changed quite a lot. There was a good deal more of her since the last time Silas had seen her. He would certainly no longer be able to pick her up and carry her out of a slaver’s circle of wolverines.

“Neither have you, Silas Heap. I see you’ve still got your crazy straw hair and those lovely deep-green eyes. What can I do for you? I have waited a long time to repay your favor. A Wendron Witch never forgets.”

Silas felt very nervous. He wasn’t sure why, but it was something to do with Morwenna looming up close to him. He hoped he’d done the right thing by meeting her.

“I, er... You remember my eldest son, Simon?”

“Well, Silas, I remember you had a baby boy called Simon. You told me all about him while I was **DeFrosting**. He was having trouble with his teeth I remember. And you were not getting much sleep. How are his teeth now?”

“Teeth? Oh, fine, as far as I know. He’s eighteen years old now, Morwenna. And two nights ago he disappeared in the Forest.”

“Ah. That’s not good. There are **Things** abroad in the Forest now. **Things** have come out of the Castle. **Things** we have not seen before. It is not good for a boy to be out among them. Nor a Wizard, Silas Heap.” Morwenna placed her hand on Silas’s arm. He jumped.

Morwenna lowered her voice to a husky whisper. “We witches are *sensitive*, Silas.”

Silas managed nothing more than a small squeak in reply. Morwenna really was quite overpowering. He had forgotten how **Forceful** a real grown-up Wendron Witch actually was.

“We know that a terrible **Darknesse** has come into the hub of the Castle. Into the Wizard Tower no less. It may have **Taken** your boy.”

“I had hoped you might have seen him,” said Silas dismally.

“No,” said Morwenna. “But I will look out for him. If I find him, I will return him to you safe, have no fear.”

“Thank you, Morwenna,” said Silas gratefully.

“It is nothing, Silas, compared with what you did for me. I am very grateful to be here to help you. If I can.”

“If—if you have any news, you can find us at Galen’s tree house. I am staying there with Sarah and the boys.”

“You have *more* boys?”

“Er, yes. Five more. We had seven altogether, but...”

“Seven. A gift. A seventh son of the seventh son. **Magykal** indeed.”

“He died.”

“Ah. I am sorry, Silas. A great loss. To us all. We could do with him now.”

“Yes.”

“I will leave you for now, Silas. I will take the tree house and all who are in her under our protection, for what it may be worth with the encroaching **Darknesse**. And tomorrow, all in the tree house are invited to join us for our MidWinter Feast.”

Silas was touched.

“Thank you, Morwenna. That is very kind.”

“Until the next time, Silas. I bid you good speed and a joyful Feast Day tomorrow.” With that the Wendron Witch disappeared back into the Forest, leaving Silas standing alone under the tall elm tree.

“Good-bye, Morwenna,” he whispered into the darkness and hurried off through the snow, back to the tree house where Sarah and Galen were waiting to hear what had happened.

By the next morning Silas had decided that Morwenna was right. Simon must have been **Taken** into the Castle. Something told him that Simon was there.

Sarah was not convinced.

“I don’t see why you are taking so much notice of that *witch*, Silas. It’s not as though she knows anything for sure. Suppose Simon’s in the Forest and *you* end up being **Taken**. What then?”

But Silas would not be swayed. He **Changed** his robes to the short gray hooded tunic of a worker, said good-bye to Sarah and the boys and climbed down from the tree house. The smell of cooking from the Wendron Witches’ MidWinter Feast almost persuaded Silas to stay, but he resolutely set off in search of Simon.

“Silas!” Sally called after him as he reached the Forest floor. “Catch!”

Sally threw down the **KeepSafe** Marcia had given her.

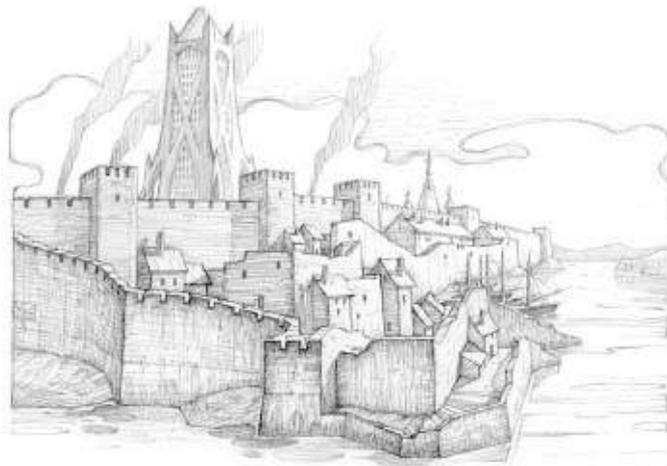
Silas caught it. “Thank you, Sally.”

Sarah watched as Silas pulled his hood down over his eyes and set off through the Forest toward the Castle, his parting words thrown over his shoulder, “Don’t worry. I’ll be back soon. With Simon.”

But she did.

And he wasn’t.

MIDWINTER FEAST DAY



N*o, thank you, Galen.* I'm not going to those witches' MidWinter Feast. We Wizards don't celebrate it," Sarah told Galen after Silas had left that morning.

"Well, I shall go," said Galen, "and I think we all should go. You don't turn down a Wendron Witch invitation lightly, Sarah. It's an honor to be asked. In fact, I can't imagine how Silas managed to get us all an invitation."

"Humph" was Sarah's only response.

But as the afternoon wore on and the delicious smell of roast wolverine drifted through the Forest and up to the tree house, the boys became very restless. Galen only ate vegetables, roots and nuts, which was, as Erik had pointed out in a loud voice after their first meal with Galen, exactly what they fed the rabbits at home.

The snow was falling heavily through the trees as Galen opened the tree

house trapdoor. Using a clever pulley system she had devised herself, she pulled down the long wooden ladder so that it was resting on the blanket of snow that now covered the ground. The tree house itself was built on a series of platforms running across three ancient oak trees and had been part of the oaks ever since they had reached their full height, many hundreds of years ago. A higgledy-piggledy collection of huts had been put up on the platform over the years. They were covered with ivy and blended in with the trees so well that they were invisible from the floor of the Forest.

Sam, Edd and Erik, and Jo-Jo were sharing the guest hut at the very top of the middle tree and had their own rope down to the Forest. While the boys fought over who was going down the rope first, Galen, Sarah and Sally made a more sedate exit down the main ladder.

Galen had dressed up for the MidWinter Feast. She had been asked to one many years ago, after she had healed a witch's child, and she knew it was quite an occasion. Galen was a small woman, somewhat weather-beaten after years of outdoor living in the Forest. She had cropped tousled red hair, laughing brown eyes and generally wore a simple short green tunic, leggings and a cloak. But today she wore her MidWinter Feast dress.

"Goodness, Galen, you've gone to a lot of trouble," said Sarah, slightly disapprovingly. "I haven't seen that dress before. It's...quite something."

Galen didn't get out much, but when she did, she really dressed up for it. Her dress looked as though it was made from hundreds of multicolored leaves all sewn together and tied in the middle with a brilliant green sash.

"Oh, thank you," said Galen, "I made it myself."

"I thought you had," said Sarah.

Sally Mullin pushed the ladder back up through the trapdoor, and the party set off through the Forest, following the delicious smell of roasting wolverine.

Galen led them through the Forest paths, which were covered with a thick fall of new snow and crisscrossed with all shapes and sizes of animal tracks. After a long trudge through a maze of tracks, ditches and gullies, they came to what had once been a slate quarry for the Castle. This was now where the Wendron Witches' Moots took place.

Thirty-nine witches, all dressed in their red MidWinter Feast robes, were

gathered around a roaring fire down in the middle of the quarry. The ground was strewn with freshly cut greenery dusted by the snow that fell softly around them, much of it melting and sizzling in the heat of the fire. There was a heady smell of spicy food in the air: spits were turning, wolverines were roasting, rabbits were stewing in bubbling cauldrons and squirrels were baking in underground ovens. A long table was piled high with all kinds of sweet and spicy foods. The Witches had bartered for these treats with the Northern Traders and had saved them for this, the most important day of the year. The boys' eyes opened wide with amazement. They had never seen so much food all in one place in their whole lives. Even Sarah had to admit to herself that it was impressive.

Morwenna Mould spotted them hovering uncertainly at the entrance to the quarry. She gathered up her red fur robes and swept over to greet them.

“Welcome to you all. Please join us.”

The assembled witches parted respectfully to allow Morwenna, the Witch Mother, to escort her somewhat overawed guests to the best places by the fire.

“I am so glad to meet you at last, Sarah.” Morwenna smiled. “I feel as if I know you already. Silas told me so much about you the night he saved me.”

“Did he?” asked Sarah.

“Oh, yes. He talked of you and the baby the whole night long.”

“Really?”

Morwenna put her arm around Sarah's shoulder. “We are all looking for your boy. I am sure all will be well in the end. And with your other three who are away from you now. All will be well there too.”

“My other three?” asked Sarah.

“Your other three children.”

Sarah did a hurried count. Sometimes even she could not remember how many there were.

“Two,” she said, “my other two.”

The MidWinter Feast carried on far into the night, and after a good deal of

Witches' Brew Sarah completely forgot her worries about Simon and Silas. Unfortunately they all came back to her the next morning, along with a very bad headache.

Silas's MidWinter Feast Day was altogether more subdued.

He took the riverside track that ran along the outside of the Forest and then skirted around the Castle walls, and blown along by chill flurries of snow, he headed for the North Gate. He wanted to get to familiar territory before he decided what he was going to do. Silas pulled his gray hood right down over his green Wizard eyes, took a deep breath and walked across the snow-covered drawbridge, which led to the North Gate.

Gringe was on duty at the gatehouse, and he was in a bad temper. Things were not happy in the Gringe household just then, and Gringe had been pondering his domestic problems all morning.

"Oi, you," grunted Gringe, stamping his feet in the cold snow, "get a move on. You're late for the compulsory street cleaning."

Silas hurried by.

"Not so fast!" barked Gringe. "That'll be one groat from you."

Silas scabbled around in his pocket and fished out a groat, sticky with some of Aunt Zelda's cherry and parsnip delight, which he had shoved into his pocket to avoid eating. Gringe took the groat and sniffed it suspiciously, then he rubbed it on his jerkin and put it to one side. Mrs. Gringe had the delightful task of washing any sticky money each night, so he added it to her pile and let Silas pass.

"'Ere, don't I know you from somewhere?" Gringe called out as Silas rushed by.

Silas shook his head.

"Morris dancing?"

Silas shook his head again and kept walking.

"Lute lessons?"

“No!” Silas slipped into the shadows and disappeared down an alleyway.

“I *do* know ’im,” muttered Gringe to himself. “And ’e ain’t no worker neither. Not with them green eyes shinin’ out like a couple o’ caterpillars in a coal bucket.” Gringe thought for a few moments. “That’s Silas ’eap! ’E’s got a nerve comin’ ’ere. I’ll soon sort ’im out.”

It was not long before Gringe found a passing Guard, and soon the Supreme Custodian had been informed of Silas’s return to the Castle. But try as he might, he could not find him. Marcia’s **KeepSafe** was doing its job well.

Silas, meanwhile, had scurried off into the old Ramblings, gratefully getting out of the way of both Gringe and the snow. He knew where he was going; he wasn’t sure why, but he wanted to see his old place once again. Silas slipped down the familiar dark corridors. He was glad of his disguise, for no one paid any attention to a lowly worker, but Silas had not realized how little respect they were given. No one stood by to let him pass. People pushed him out of the way, allowed doors to slam in his face, and twice he was roughly told he should be out cleaning the streets. Maybe, thought Silas, being just an Ordinary Wizard was not so bad after all.

The door to the Heap room hung open forlornly. It appeared not to recognize Silas as he tiptoed into the room in which he had spent much of the last twenty-five years of his life. Silas sat down on his favorite homemade chair and surveyed the room sadly, lost in his thoughts. It looked strangely small now that it was empty of children, noise and Sarah presiding over the comings and goings of the days. It also looked embarrassingly dirty, even to Silas, who had never minded a bit of dirt here and there.

“They lived in a tip, didn’t they? Dirty Wizards. Never did have no time for them meself,” said a rough voice. Silas spun around to see a burly man standing in the doorway. Behind him Silas could see a large wooden cart in the corridor.

“Didn’t think they’d send anyone along to ’elp. Good thing they did. It ’ud take all day on me own. Right, cart’s outside. It’s all to go to the dump. **Magyk** books to be burned. Got that?”

“*What?*”

“Gawd. They sent me a daft one ’ere. Junk. Cart. Dump. It ain’t exactly *Alchemy*. Now give us that heap a wood you’re parked on and let’s get goin’.”

Silas got up from his chair as if in a dream and handed it to the removal man, who took it and hurled it into the cart. The chair shattered and lay in pieces at the bottom of it. Before long it was underneath a huge pile of the Heaps' lifetime accumulation of possessions and the cart was full to overflowing.

"Right, then," said the removal man. "I'll get this down to the dump before it closes while you put them **Magyk** books outside. The firemen will collect 'em tomorrow on their rounds."

He handed Silas a large broom. "I'll leave yer to sweep up all that disgustin' dog hair and what-have-ye. Then you can get off 'ome. You look a bit done in. Not used to 'ard work, eh!" The removal man chuckled and thumped Silas on the back in what was meant to be a friendly manner. Silas coughed and smiled wanly.

"Don't forget them **Magyk** books" was the man's parting advice as he trundled the teetering cart off down the corridor on its journey to the Riverside Amenity Rubbish Dump.

In a daze, Silas swept up twenty-five years' worth of dust, dog hair and dirt into a neat pile. Then he gazed regretfully at his **Magyk** books.

"I'll give you a hand if you like," Alther's voice said next to him. The ghost put his arm around Silas's shoulder.

"Oh. Hello, Alther," said Silas gloomily. "What a day."

"Yes, it's not good. I'm very sorry, Silas."

"All...gone," mumbled Silas, "and now the books too. We had some good ones there. A lot of rare **Charms**...all going up in flames."

"Not necessarily," said Alther. "They'd fit nicely into your bedroom in the roof. I'll help you with the **Remove Spell** if you like."

Silas brightened a little.

"Just remind me how it goes, Alther, then I can do it. I'm sure I can."

Silas's **Remove** worked well. The books lined up neatly, the trapdoor flew open, and book by book they flew up through it and stacked up in Silas and Sarah's old bedroom. One or two of the more contrary books headed out the

door and were halfway down the corridor before Silas managed to **Call** them back, but by the end of the spell all the **Magyk** books were safely in the roof and Silas had even **Disguised** the trapdoor. Now no one could possibly guess what was there.

And so Silas walked out of his empty, echoing room for the last time and took off down Corridor 223. Alther floated along with him.

“Come and sit with us for a while,” Alther offered, “down at the Hole in the Wall.”

“Where?”

“I only recently discovered it myself. One of the Ancients showed me. It’s an old tavern inside the Castle walls. Got bricked up years ago by one of the Queens who disapproved of beer. Seems as long as you’ve walked the Castle walls—and who hasn’t?—a ghost can get in, so it’s packed. It’s got a great atmosphere—might cheer you up.”

“I don’t know if I really fancy it, thanks all the same, Alther. Isn’t that the one where they bricked up the nun?”

“Oh, she’s great fun, is Sister Bernadette. Loves a pint of beer. Life and soul of the party. So to speak. Anyway, I’ve got some news of Simon that I think you should hear.”

“Simon! Is he all right? Where *is* he?” asked Silas.

“He’s here, Silas. In the Castle. Come along to the Hole in the Wall. There’s someone you need to talk to.”

The Hole in the Wall Tavern was buzzing.

Alther had led Silas to a tumbledown pile of stones heaped up against the Castle wall just along from the North Gate. He had shown him a small gap in the wall hidden behind the pile of rubble, and Silas had barely managed to squeeze through. Once through he had found himself in another world.

The Hole in the Wall was an ancient tavern built inside the wide Castle wall. When Marcia had taken her shortcut to the North Side those few days ago, part of her journey had taken her over the roof of the tavern, but she had

been unaware of the motley collection of ghosts talking the long years away right beneath her feet.

It took Silas a few minutes for his eyes to adjust from the brightness of the snow to the dull glow of the lamps that flickered along the walls. But as they did he became aware of a most amazing collection of ghosts. They were gathered around long trestle tables, standing together in small groups beside the ghostly fire or just sitting in solitary contemplation in a quiet corner. There was a large contingent of ExtraOrdinary Wizards, their purple cloaks and robes spanning the different styles fashionable through the centuries. There were knights in full armor, pages in extravagant liveries, women with wimples, young Queens with rich silk dresses and older Queens in black, all enjoying one another's company.

Alther led Silas through the crowd. Silas did his best not to walk through any of them, but once or twice he felt a cold breeze as he passed through a ghost. No one seemed to mind—some nodded to him in a friendly manner and others were too intent on their endless conversation to notice him—and Silas got the impression that any friend of Alther's was a welcome guest in The Hole in the Wall.

The ghostly landlord of the tavern had long ago given up hovering by the beer barrels, for the ghosts all nursed the same tankard of beer that they had been given when they first arrived, and some tankards had lasted for many hundreds of years. Alther bade a cheery hello to the landlord, who was deep in conversation with three ExtraOrdinary Wizards and an old tramp who had long ago fallen asleep under one of the tables and never woken up again. Then he steered Silas over to a quiet corner where a plump figure in a nun's habit was sitting waiting for them.

“May I introduce Sister Bernadette,” said Alther. “Sister Bernadette, this is Silas Heap—the one I was telling you about. He is the boy's father.”

Despite Sister Bernadette's bright smile Silas felt a sense of foreboding.

The round-faced nun turned her twinkling eyes to Silas and said in a soft lilting voice, “He's quite a lad, your boy, isn't he? He knows what he wants, and isn't afraid of going out to get it.”

“Well, I suppose so. He certainly wants to be a Wizard, I know that. He wants an Apprenticeship, but of course with the ways things are now...”

“Ah, to be sure it's not a good time to be a young and hopeful Wizard,”

agreed the nun, “but that’s not why he came back to the Castle, you know.”

“So he *has* come back. Oh, that’s a relief. I thought he had been captured. Or—or *killed*.”

Alther put his hand on Silas’s shoulder. “Unfortunately Silas, he was captured yesterday. Sister Bernadette was there. She will tell you.”

Silas put his head in his hands and groaned.

“How?” he asked. “What happened?”

“Well, now,” said the nun, “it would seem that young Simon had a girlfriend.”

“Did he?”

“Yes indeed. Lucy Gringe is her name.”

“Not Gringe the Gatekeeper’s daughter? Oh, *no*.”

“I’m sure she’s a nice lass, Silas,” remonstrated Sister Bernadette.

“Well, I hope she’s nothing like her father, that’s all I can say. *Lucy Gringe*. Oh, goodness.”

“Well now, Silas, it seems Simon took himself back to the Castle for a pressing reason. He and Lucy had a secret appointment at the chapel. To be married. So romantic.” The nun smiled dreamily.

“*Married?* I don’t *believe* it. I’m related to the ghastly Gringe.” Silas looked whiter than some of the occupants of the tavern.

“No, Silas, you are not,” said Sister Bernadette disapprovingly. “Because unfortunately young Simon and Lucy did not actually get married.”

“*Unfortunately?*”

“Gringe found out and tipped off the Custodian Guards. He no more wanted his daughter to marry a Heap than you wanted Simon to marry a Gringe. The Guards stormed the chapel, sent the distraught lass home and took Simon away.” The nun sighed. “So cruel, so cruel.”

“Where have they taken him?” Silas asked quietly.

“Well, now, Silas,” said Sister Bernadette in her soft voice, “I was in the chapel myself for the wedding. I love a wedding. And the Guard that had hold of Simon walked right through me, and so I knew what he was thinking just at that moment. He was thinking that he was to take your boy to the Courthouse. To the Supreme Custodian no less. I am so sorry to be telling you this, Silas.” The nun put her ghostly hand on Silas’s arm. It was a warm touch but held little comfort for Silas.

This was the news Silas had been dreading. Simon was in the hands of the Supreme Custodian—how was he to break the terrible news to Sarah? Silas spent the rest of the day in The Hole in the Wall waiting, while Alther sent out as many ghosts as he could to the Courthouse to search for Simon and find out what was happening to him.

None of them had any luck. It was as if Simon had vanished.

STANLEY'S JOURNEY



On *MidWinter Feast Day*, Stanley was woken by his wife. He had an urgent message from the Rat Office.

“I don’t know why they can’t at least let you have *today* off,” his wife complained. “It’s work, work, work with you, Stanley. We need a holiday.”

“Dawnie dear,” said Stanley patiently. “If I don’t do the work, we don’t get the holiday. It’s as simple as that. Did they say what they wanted me for?”

“Didn’t ask.” Dawnie shrugged grumpily. “I expect it’s those no-good Wizards again.”

“They’re not so bad. Even the ExtraOrdinary Wiz—oops.”

“Oh, is *that* where you’ve been?”

“No.”

“Yes, it is. You can’t hide anything from me, even if you are a Confidential. Well, let me give you one piece of advice, Stanley.”

“Only one?”

“Don’t get involved with Wizards, Stanley. They are *trouble*. Trust me, I know. The last one, that Marcia woman, you know what she did? She stole some poor Wizard family’s only daughter and ran off with her. No one knows why. And now the rest of the family—what was their name? Oh that’s it, Heap—well, they’ve all upped and gone looking for her. Of course the one good thing is we’ve got a nice new ExtraOrdinary out of it, but goodness knows he’s got enough on his plate sorting out the mess the last one left, so we won’t be seeing *him* for a while. And isn’t it awful about all those poor homeless rats?”

“What poor homeless rats?” said Stanley wearily, itching to get off to the Rat Office and see what his next job was.

“All the ones from Sally Mullin’s Tea and Ale House. You know the night we got the new ExtraOrdinary? Well, Sally Mullin left some of that ghastly barley cake in the oven for too long and burned the whole place down. There’re *thirty* rat families homeless now. Terrible thing in this weather.”

“Yes, terrible. Well, I’ll be off now, dear. I’ll see you when I get back.” Stanley hurried off to the Rat Office.

The Rat Office was at the top of the East Gate Lookout Tower. Stanley took the quick route, running along the top of the Castle wall, over The Hole in the Wall Tavern, which even Stanley did not know existed. The rat quickly reached the Lookout Tower and scurried into a large drainpipe that ran up the side. Soon he emerged at the top, jumped onto the parapet and knocked on the door of a small hut bearing the words:

OFFICIAL RAT OFFICE

MESSAGE RATS ONLY

CUSTOMER OFFICE ON GROUND FLOOR

BY RUBBISH BINS

“Enter!” called a voice that Stanley did not recognize. Stanley tiptoed in.

He didn't like the sound of the voice at all.

Stanley didn't care much for the look of the rat who owned the voice either. An unfamiliar large black rat sat behind the message desk. His long pink tail was looped over the desk and flicked impatiently as Stanley took in his new boss.

"You the Confidential I sent for?" barked the black rat.

"That's right," said Stanley, a little uncertainly.

"That's right, *sir*, to you," the black rat told him.

"Oh," said Stanley, taken aback.

"Oh, *sir*," corrected the black rat. "Right, Rat 101—"

"Rat 101?"

"Rat 101, *sir*. I demand some respect around here, Rat 101, and I intend to get it. We start with numbers. Each Message Rat is to be known by number only. A numbered rat is an efficient rat where I come from."

"Where *do* you come from?" ventured Stanley.

"*Sir*. Never you mind," barked the black rat. "Now, I have a job for you, 101." The black rat fished out a piece of paper from the basket that he had winched up from the Customer Office below. It was a message order, and Stanley noticed that it was written on headed note paper from the Palace of the Custodians. And it was signed by the Supreme Custodian no less.

But for some reason that Stanley did not understand, the actual message he was to deliver was not from the Supreme Custodian, but from Silas Heap. And it was to be delivered to Marcia Overstrand.

"Oh, bother," said Stanley, his heart sinking. Another trip across the Marram Marshes dodging that Marsh Python was not what he had hoped for.

"Oh, bother, *sir*," corrected the black rat. "The acceptance of this job is not optional," he barked. "And one last thing, Rat 101. Confidential status withdrawn."

"*What?* You can't do that!"

“*Sir*. You can’t do that, *sir*. Can do it. Have, in fact, *done* it.” The black rat allowed a smug smile to drift past his whiskers.

“But I’ve got all my exams, and I’ve only just done my Higher Continentals. *And* I came top—”

“*And I came top, sir*. Too bad. Confidential status revoked. End of story. Dismissed.”

“But—but—” spluttered Stanley.

“Now *push off*,” snapped the black rat, his tail flicking angrily.

Stanley pushed off.

Downstairs, Stanley dropped the paperwork off at the Customer Office as usual. The Office Rat scrutinized the message sheet and poked a stubby paw at Marcia’s name.

“Know where to find her, do you?” he inquired.

“Of course,” said Stanley.

“Good. That’s what we like to hear,” said the rat.

“Weird,” muttered Stanley to himself. He didn’t much like the new staff at the Rat Office, and he wondered what had happened to the nice old rats who used to run it.

It was a long and perilous journey that Stanley undertook that MidWinter Feast Day.

First he hitched a lift on a small barge taking wood down to the Port. Unfortunately for Stanley, the barge skipper believed in keeping the ship’s cat lean and mean, and mean it certainly was. Stanley spent the journey desperately trying to avoid the cat, which was an extremely large orange animal with big yellow fangs and very bad breath. His luck ran out just before Deppen Ditch when he was cornered by the cat and a burly sailor wielding a large plank, and Stanley was forced to make an early exit from the barge.

The river water was freezing, and the tide was running fast, sweeping Stanley downstream as he struggled to keep his head above water in the tide

race. It was not until Stanley had reached the Port that he was finally able to struggle ashore at the harbor.

Stanley lay on the bottom of the harbor steps, looking like nothing more than a limp piece of wet fur. He was too exhausted to go any farther. Voices drifted past above him on the harbor wall.

“Ooh, Ma, look! There’s a dead rat on those steps. Can I take it home and boil it up for its skeleton?”

“No, Petunia, you can’t.”

“But I haven’t got a rat skeleton, Ma.”

“And you’re not having one either. Come on.”

Stanley thought to himself that if Petunia had taken him home he wouldn’t have objected to a nice soak in a pan of boiling water. At least it would have warmed him up a bit.

When he did finally stagger to his feet and drag himself up the harbor steps, he knew he had to get warm and find food before he could carry on his journey. And so he followed his nose to a bakery and sneaked inside, where he lay shivering beside the ovens, slowly warming through. A scream from the baker’s wife and a hefty swipe with a broom eventually sent him on his way, but not before he had managed to eat most of a jam doughnut and nibble holes through at least three loaves of bread and a custard tart.

Feeling much refreshed, Stanley set about looking for a lift to Marram Marshes. It was not easy. Although most people in the Port did not celebrate the MidWinter Feast Day, many of the inhabitants had taken it as an excuse to eat a big lunch and fall asleep for most of the afternoon. The Port was almost deserted. The cold northerly wind that was bringing in flurries of snow kept anyone off the streets who did not have to be there, and Stanley began to wonder if he was going to find anyone foolish enough to be traveling out to the Marshes.

And then he found Mad Jack and his donkey cart.

Mad Jack lived in a hovel on the edge of Marram Marshes. He made his living by cutting reeds to thatch the roofs of the Port houses. He had just made his last delivery of the day and was on his way home when he saw Stanley hanging about by some rubbish bins, shivering in the chill wind. Mad

Jack's spirits rose. He loved rats and longed for the day when someone would send him a message by Message Rat, but it wasn't the message that Mad Jack really longed for—it was the rat.

Mad Jack stopped the donkey cart by the bins.

“Ere, Ratty, need a lift? Got a nice warm cart goin' to the edge of the Marshes.”

Stanley thought he was hearing things. Wishful thinking, Stanley, he told himself sternly. Stop it.

Mad Jack peered down from the cart and smiled his best gap-toothed smile at the rat.

“Well, don't be shy, boy. Hop in.”

Stanley hesitated only for a moment before he hopped in.

“Come and sit up by me, Ratty.” Mad Jack chuckled. “Ere, you get this blanket wrapped around ya. Keep them winter chills out yer fur, that will.”

Mad Jack wrapped Stanley up in a blanket that smelled strongly of donkey and geed up the cart. The donkey put its long ears back and plodded off through the flurries of snow, taking the route it knew so well back along the causeway to the hovel that it shared with Mad Jack. By the time they arrived, Stanley felt warm again and very grateful to Jack.

“Ere we are. 'Ome at last,” said Jack cheerfully as he unharnessed the donkey and led the animal inside the hovel. Stanley stayed in the cart, reluctant to leave the warmth of the blanket but knowing that he must.

“Yer welcome to come in and stay a while,” Mad Jack offered. “I likes to 'ave a rat around the place. Brightens things up a bit. Bit a company. Know what I mean?”

Stanley very regretfully shook his head. He had a message to deliver, and he was a true professional, even if they had withdrawn his Confidential status.

“Ah, well, I expect yer one a them.” Here Mad Jack lowered his voice and looked about him as if to check there was no one listening. “I expect yer one a them *Message Rats*. I know most folk don't believe in 'em, but I do. Bin a pleasure to meet you.” Mad Jack knelt down and offered Stanley his hand to

shake, and Stanley could not resist offering Mad Jack his paw in return. Mad Jack took it.

“You is, isn’t you? You is a Message Rat,” he whispered.

Stanley nodded. The next thing he knew Mad Jack had his right paw in a vicelike grip and had thrown the donkey blanket over him, bundled him up so tightly that he could not even try to struggle and had taken him into the hovel.

There was a loud clang, and Stanley was dropped into a waiting cage. The door was firmly closed and padlocked. Mad Jack giggled, put the key into his pocket and sat back, surveying his captive with delight.

Stanley rattled the bars of the cage in fury. Fury with himself rather than with Mad Jack. How *could* he have been so stupid? How could he forget his training: A Message Rat *always* travels undetected. A Message Rat *never* makes himself known to strangers.

“Ah, Ratty, what good times we’ll have,” said Mad Jack. “Just you and me, Ratty. We’ll go out cuttin’ them reeds together, and if you’re good we’ll go to the circus when it comes to town and see the clowns. I love them clowns, Ratty. We’ll have a good life together. Yes, we will. Oh, yes.” He chuckled happily to himself and fetched two withered apples from a sack hanging from the ceiling. He fed one apple to the donkey and then opened his pocketknife and carefully divided the second apple in half, giving the larger half to Stanley, who refused to touch it.

“You’ll eat it soon enough, Ratty,” said Mad Jack with his mouth full, spraying apple spit all over Stanley. “There ain’t no other food comin’ your way until this snow stops. An’ that’ll be a while. The wind’s shifted to the north—the Big Freeze is comin’ now. Always ’appens round about MidWinter Feast Day. Sure as eggs is eggs, and rats is rats.”

Mad Jack cackled to himself at his joke, then he wrapped himself up in the donkey-smelling blanket that had been Stanley’s undoing and fell fast asleep.

Stanley kicked the bars of his cage and wondered how thin he would have to get before he could squeeze out.

Stanley sighed. Very thin indeed was the answer.

THE BIG FREEZE



The remains of the *MidWinter Feast* of stewed cabbage, braised eel heads and spicy onions lay abandoned on the table as Aunt Zelda tried to coax some life into the spluttering fire at Keeper’s Cottage. The inside of the windows were glazing over with ice, and the temperature in the cottage was plummeting, but still Aunt Zelda could not get the fire going. Bert swallowed her pride and snuggled up to Maxie to keep warm. Everyone else sat wrapped in their quilts, staring at the struggling fire.

“Why don’t you let me have a go at that fire, Zelda?” Marcia asked crossly. “I don’t see why we have to sit here and freeze when all I have to do is this.” Marcia clicked her fingers and the fire blazed up in the grate.

“You know I don’t agree with **Interfering** with the elements, Marcia,” said Aunt Zelda sternly. “You Wizards have no respect for Mother Nature.”

“Not when Mother Nature is turning my feet into blocks of ice,” Marcia grumbled.

“Well, if you wore some sensible boots like I do instead of prancing

around in little purple snakey things, your feet would be fine,” Aunt Zelda observed.

Marcia ignored her. She sat warming her purple snakey feet by the blazing fire and noted with some satisfaction that Aunt Zelda had made no attempt to return the fire to Mother Nature’s spluttering state.

Outside the cottage, the North Wind howled mournfully. The snow flurries from earlier in the day had thickened, and now the wind brought with it a thick, swirling blizzard that blew in over the Marram Marshes and began to cover the land with deep drifts of snow. As the night wore on and Marcia’s fire at last began to warm them up, the noise of the wind became muffled by the snowdrifts piling up outside. Soon the inside of the cottage had become full of a soft, snowy silence. The fire burned steadily in the grate, and one by one they all followed Maxie’s example and fell asleep.

Having successfully buried the cottage up to its roof in snow, the Big Freeze continued its journey. Out over the marshes it traveled, covering the brackish marsh water with a thick white layer of ice, freezing the bogs and quags and sending the marsh creatures burrowing down into the depths of the mires where the frost could not reach. It swept up the river and spread across the land on either side, burying cow barns and cottages and the occasional sheep.

At midnight it arrived at the Castle, where all was prepared.

During the month before the advent of the Big Freeze, the Castle dwellers stockpiled their food, ventured into the Forest and brought back as much wood as they could carry, and spent a fair amount of time knitting and weaving blankets. It was at this time of year that the Northern Traders would arrive, bringing their supplies of heavy wool cloth, thick arctic furs and salted fish, not forgetting the spicy foods that the Wendron Witches loved so much. The Northern Traders had an uncanny instinct for the timing of the Big Freeze, arriving about a month before it was due and leaving just before it set in. The five Traders who had sat in Sally Mullin’s cafe on the night of the fire had been the last ones to leave, and so no one in the Castle was at all surprised by the arrival of the Big Freeze. In fact, the general opinion was that it was somewhat late, although the truth was that the last of the Northern Traders had left a little earlier than they had expected, due to unforeseen circumstances.

Silas, as ever, had forgotten that the Big Freeze was due and had found

himself marooned in The Hole in the Wall Tavern after a huge snowdrift blocked the entrance. As he had nowhere else to go anyway, he settled down and decided to make the best of things while Alther and a few of the Ancients pursued their task of trying to find Simon.

The black rat in the Rat Office, who was awaiting Stanley's return, found himself marooned at the top of the iced-up East Gate Lookout Tower. The drainpipe had filled with water from a burst pipe and then promptly froze, blocking his way out. The rats in the Customer Office downstairs left him to it and went home.

The Supreme Custodian was also waiting for Stanley's return. Not only did he want information from the rat—where exactly Marcia Overstrand was—he was also anxiously awaiting the outcome of the message that the rat was to deliver. But nothing happened. From the day the rat was sent, a platoon of fully armed Custodian Guards was posted at the Palace Gate, stamping their frozen feet and staring into the blizzard, waiting for the ExtraOrdinary Wizard to **Appear**. But Marcia did not return.

The Big Freeze set in. The Supreme Custodian, who had spent many hours boasting to DomDaniel about his brilliant idea of stripping the Message Rat of his Confidential status and sending a false message to Marcia, now did his best to avoid his Master. He spent as much time as he could in the Ladies' Washroom. The Supreme Custodian was not a superstitious man, but he was not a stupid man either, and it had not escaped his notice that any plans he had discussed while he was in the Ladies' Washroom had a habit of working out, though he had no idea why. He also enjoyed the comfort of the small stove, but most of all he relished the opportunity to *lurk*. The Supreme Custodian loved lurking. He had been one of those small boys who was always listening around a corner to other people's conversations, and consequently he was often able to have a hold over someone and was not afraid to use it to his advantage. It had served him well during his advancement up the ranks of the Custodian Guard and had played a large part in his appointment as Supreme Custodian.

And so, during the Big Freeze, the Supreme Custodian holed up in the washroom, lit the stove and lurked with glee, hiding behind the innocent-seeming door with the faded gold lettering and listening to conversations as people passed by. It was such a pleasure to see the blood drain from their faces as he jumped out and confronted them with whatever insulting comment they had just made about him. It was even more of a pleasure to call the Guard and have them marched straight off to the dungeons, especially if they

went in for a bit of pleading. The Supreme Custodian liked a bit of pleading. So far he had had twenty-six people arrested and thrown into the dungeons for making rude comments about him, and it had never crossed his mind even once to wonder why he had yet to hear something nice being said.

But the most interesting project that occupied the Supreme Custodian was Simon Heap. Simon had been brought straight from the chapel to the Ladies' Washroom and chained to a pipe. As Jenna's adopted brother, the Supreme Custodian reckoned he would know where she had gone, and he was looking forward to persuading Simon Heap to tell him.

As the Big Freeze set in and neither the Message Rat nor Marcia returned to the Castle, Simon languished in the Ladies' Washroom, constantly questioned about Jenna's whereabouts. At first he was too terrified to talk, but the Supreme Custodian was a subtle man, and he set about gaining Simon's confidence. Whenever he had a spare moment, the unpleasant little man would prance into the washroom and prattle on to Simon about his tedious day, and Simon would listen politely, too scared to speak. After a while Simon dared to venture a few comments, and the Supreme Custodian seemed delighted to have a reaction from him, and began to bring him extra food and drink. And so Simon relaxed a little, and it was not long before he found himself confiding his desire to be the next ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and his disappointment with the way that Marcia had fled. It was not, he told the Supreme Custodian, the kind of thing that *he* would have done.

The Supreme Custodian listened approvingly. Here at last was a Heap who made some sense. And when he offered Simon the possibility of an Apprenticeship with the new ExtraOrdinary Wizard—"seeing as, and I know this will just remain between you and me, young Simon, the present boy is proving *most* unsatisfactory, despite our high hopes for him,"—Simon Heap began to see a new future for himself. A future where he might be respected and be able to use his **Magykal** talent, and not treated merely as "one of those wretched Heaps." So, late one evening, after the Supreme Custodian had sat down companionably beside him and offered him a hot drink, Simon Heap told him what he wanted to know—that Marcia and Jenna had gone to Aunt Zelda's cottage in the Marram Marshes.

"And where *exactly* would that be, lad?" asked the Supreme Custodian with a sharp smile on his face.

Simon had to confess he did not know *exactly*.

In a fit of temper the Supreme Custodian stormed out and went to see the

Hunter, who listened in silence to the Supreme Custodian ranting on about the stupidity of all Heaps in general and of Simon Heap in particular.

“I mean, Gerald—” (For that was the Hunter’s name. It was something he liked to keep quiet about, but to his irritation the Supreme Custodian used “Gerald” at every possible opportunity.) “—I *mean*,” said the Supreme Custodian indignantly as he strode up and down the Hunter’s sparsely furnished room in the barracks, waving his arms dramatically in the air, “how can anyone not know *exactly* where their aunt lives? How, Gerald, can he visit her if he doesn’t know *exactly* where she lives?”

The Supreme Custodian was a dutiful visitor of his numerous aunts, most of whom wished that their nephew did not know *exactly* where they lived.

But Simon had provided enough information for the Hunter. As soon as the Supreme Custodian had gone, the Hunter set to work with his detailed maps and charts of the Marram Marshes and before long had pinpointed the likely whereabouts of Aunt Zelda’s cottage. He was ready once again for the Chase.

And so, with some trepidation, the Hunter went to see DomDaniel.

DomDaniel was skulking at the top of the Wizard Tower, passing the Big Freeze by digging out the old **Necromancy** books that Alther had locked away in a cupboard and **Summoning** his library assistants, two short and extremely nasty Magogs. DomDaniel had found the Magogs after he had jumped from the Tower. Normally they lived far below the earth and consequently bore a close resemblance to huge blind worms with the addition of long, boneless arms. They had no legs but advanced over the ground on a trail of slime with a caterpillarlike movement, and were surprisingly fast when they wanted to be. The Magogs had no hair, were a yellowish-white color and appeared to have no eyes. They did in fact have one small eye that was also yellowish-white; it lay just above the only features in their face, which were two glistening round holes where a nose should be and a mouth slit. The slime they extruded was unpleasantly sticky and foul-smelling although DomDaniel himself found it quite agreeable.

Each Magog would probably have been about four feet tall if you had stretched it out straight; although that was something no one had ever attempted. There were better ways to fill your days, like scratching your nails down a blackboard or eating a bucket of frog spawn. No one ever touched a

Magog unless it was by mistake. Their slime had such a revolting quality to it that just remembering the smell of it was enough to make many people sick on the spot. Magogs hatched underground from larvae left in unsuspecting hibernating animals, such as hedgehogs or dormice. They avoided tortoises as it was hard for the young Magogs to get out of the shells. Once the first rays of the spring sunshine had warmed the earth, the larvae would burst out, consume what was left of the animal and then burrow deeper into the ground until it reached a Magog chamber. DomDaniel had hundreds of Magog chambers around his hideout in the Badlands and always had a steady supply. They made superb Guards; they could deliver a bite that gave most people rapid blood poisoning and saw them off in a few hours, and a scratch from a Magog's claw would become so infected that it could never heal. But their greatest deterrent was how they looked: their bulbous yellowish-white head, apparently blind, and their constantly moving little jaw with its rows of spiked yellow teeth were gruesome and kept most people at bay.

The Magogs had arrived just before the Big Freeze. They had terrified the Apprentice out of his wits, which had given DomDaniel some amusement and an excuse to leave the boy shivering out on the landing while he tried, yet again, to learn the **Thirteen Times Tables**.

The Magogs gave the Hunter a bit of a shock too. As he made it to the top of the spiral stairs and strode past the Apprentice on the landing, deliberately ignoring the boy, the Hunter slipped on the trail of Magog slime that led into DomDaniel's apartment. He just got his balance back in time, but not before he had heard a snigger coming from the Apprentice.

Before long the Apprentice had a little more to snigger about, for at last DomDaniel was shouting at someone other than him. He listened with delight to his Master's angry voice, which traveled extremely well through the heavy purple door.

"No, no, *No!*" DomDaniel was shouting. "You must think I am completely *mad* to let you go off again on a Hunt on your own. You are a bumbling *fool*, and if there was anyone else I could get to do the job, believe me, I *would*. You will wait until I *tell* you when to go. And then you will go under *my supervision*. Don't *interrupt!* No! I will *not* listen. Now *get out*—or would you like one of my Magogs to *assist* you?"

The Apprentice watched as the purple door was flung open and the Hunter made a quick exit, skidding over the slime and rattling down the stairs as fast as he could. After that the Apprentice almost managed to learn his

Thirteen Times Tables. Well, he got up to thirteen times seven, which was his best yet.

Alther, who had been busy mixing up DomDaniel's pairs of socks, heard everything. He blew out the fire and followed the Hunter out of the Tower, where he **Caused** a huge snowfall to drop from the Great Arch just as the Hunter walked under it. It was hours before anyone bothered to dig the Hunter out, but that was little consolation to Alther. Things were not looking good.

Deep in the frozen Forest, the Wendron Witches set out their traps in the hope of catching an unwary wolverine or two to tide them over the lean time ahead. Then they retired to the communal winter cave in the slate quarry, where they burrowed into their furs, told each other stories and kept a fire burning day and night.

The occupants of the tree house gathered around the wood-burning stove in the big hut and steadily ate their way through Galen's stores of nuts and berries. Sally Mullin huddled into a pile of wolverine furs and quietly mourned her cafe while comfort-eating her way through a huge pile of hazelnuts. Sarah and Galen kept the stove going and talked about herbs and potions through the long cold days.

The four Heap boys made a snow camp down on the Forest floor some distance away from the tree house and took to living wild. They trapped and roasted squirrels and anything else they could find, much to Galen's disapproval, but she said nothing. It kept the boys occupied and out of the tree house, and it also conserved her winter food supplies, which were being rapidly nibbled through by Sally Mullin. Sarah visited the boys every day, and although at first she was worried about them being out on their own in the Forest, she was impressed by the network of igloos they built and noticed that some of the younger Wendron Witches had taken to dropping by with small offerings of food and drink. Soon it became rare for Sarah to find her boys without at least two or three young witches helping them cook a meal or just sitting around the campfire laughing and telling jokes. It surprised Sarah just how much fending for themselves had changed the boys—they all suddenly seemed so grown up, even the youngest, Jo-Jo, who was still only thirteen. After a while Sarah began to feel a bit of an interloper in their camp, but she persisted in visiting them every day, partly to keep an eye on them and partly because she had developed quite a taste for roast squirrel.

PYTHONS AND RATS



T*he morning after the arrival* of the Big Freeze, Nicko opened the front door of the cottage to find a wall of snow before him. He set to work with Aunt Zelda's coal shovel and dug a tunnel about six feet long through the snow and into the bright winter sun. Jenna and Boy 412 came out through the tunnel, blinking in the sunlight.

“It's so bright,” said Jenna. She shaded her eyes against the snow, which glinted almost painfully with a sparkling frost. The Big Freeze had transformed the cottage into an enormous igloo. The marshland that surrounded them had become a wide arctic landscape, all the features changed by the windblown snowdrifts and the long shadows cast by the low winter sun. Maxie completed the picture by bounding out and rolling in the snow until he resembled an overexcited polar bear.

Jenna and Boy 412 helped Nicko dig a path down to the frozen Mott, then they raided Aunt Zelda's large stock of brooms and began the task of

sweeping the snow off the ice so that they could skate all around the Mott. Jenna made a start while the two boys threw snowballs at each other. Boy 412 turned out to be a good shot and Nicko ended up looking rather like Maxie.

The ice was already about six inches thick and was as smooth and slippery as glass. A myriad of tiny bubbles was suspended in the frozen water, giving the ice a slightly cloudy appearance, but it was still clear enough to see the frozen strands of grass trapped within it and to see what lay beneath. And what lay beneath Jenna's feet as she swept away the first swathe of snow were the two unblinking yellow eyes of a giant snake, staring straight at her.

"Argh!" screamed Jenna.

"What's that, Jen?" asked Nicko.

"Eyes. *Snake eyes*. There's a massive snake underneath the ice."

Boy 412 and Nicko came over.

"Wow. It's *huge*," Nicko said.

Jenna knelt down and scraped away some more snow.

"Look," she said, "there's its tail. Right by its head. It must stretch all around the Mott."

"It can't," Nicko disagreed.

"It must."

"I suppose there might be more than one."

"Well, there's only one way to find out." Jenna picked up the broom and started sweeping. "Come on, get going," she told the boys. Nicko and Boy 412 reluctantly picked up their brooms and got going.

By the end of the afternoon they had discovered that there was indeed only one snake.

"It must be about a mile long," said Jenna as at last they got back to where they had started. The Marsh Python stared at them grumpily through the ice. It didn't like being looked at, particularly by *food*. Although the snake preferred goats and lynxes, it regarded anything on legs as food and had occasionally partaken of the odd traveler, if one had been so careless as to fall

into a ditch and splash around too much. But generally it avoided the two-legged kind; it found their numerous wrappings indigestible, and it particularly disliked boots.

The Big Freeze set in. Aunt Zelda settled down to wait it out, just as she did every year, and informed the impatient Marcia that there was no chance whatsoever of Silas returning with her **KeepSafe** now. The Marram Marshes were completely cut off. Marcia would just have to wait for the Big Thaw like everyone else.

But the Big Thaw showed no sign of coming. Every night the north wind brought yet another howling blizzard to pile the drifts even deeper.

The temperatures plummeted and the Boggart was frozen out of his mud patch. He retreated to the hot spring bath hut, where he dozed contentedly in the steam.

The Marsh Python lay trapped in the Mott. It made do with eating whatever unwary fish and eels came its way and dreaming of the day it would be free to swallow as many goats as it could manage.

Nicko and Jenna went skating. At first they were happy to circle around the iced-up Mott and irritate the Marsh Python, but after a while they began to venture into the white landscape of the marsh. They would spend hours racing along the frozen ditches, listening to the crackle of the ice beneath them and sometimes to the mournful howl of the wind as it threatened to bring yet another fall of snow. Jenna noticed that all the sounds of the marsh creatures had disappeared. Gone were the busy rustlings of the marsh voles and the quiet splishings of the water snakes. The Quake Ooze Brownies were safely frozen far below the ground and made not a single shriek between them, while the Water Nixies were fast asleep, their suckers frozen to the underside of the ice, waiting for the thaw.

Long, quiet weeks passed at Keeper's Cottage and still the snow blew in from the north. While Jenna and Nicko spent hours outside skating and making ice slides around the Mott, Boy 412 stayed indoors. He still felt chilled if he stayed out for any length of time. It was as if some small part of him had not yet warmed through from the time he had been buried in the snow outside the Wizard Tower. Sometimes Jenna sat with him beside the fire. She liked Boy 412; although she didn't know why, seeing as he never spoke to her. She

didn't take it personally, as Jenna knew he had not uttered a word to anyone since he had arrived at the cottage. Jenna's main topic of conversation with him was Petroc Trelawney, who Boy 412 had taken a liking to.

Some afternoons Jenna would sit on the sofa beside Boy 412 while he watched her take the pet rock out of her pocket. Jenna would often sit by the fire with Petroc, as he reminded her of Silas. There was something about just holding the pebble that made her sure Silas would come back safely.

"Here, you hold Petroc," Jenna would say, putting the smooth gray pebble into Boy 412's grubby hand.

Petroc Trelawney liked Boy 412. He liked him because he was usually slightly sticky and smelled of food. Petroc Trelawney would stick out his four stumpy legs, open his eyes and lick Boy 412's hand. Mmm, he'd think, not bad. He could definitely taste eel, and was there a hint of cabbage lingering as a subtle aftertaste? Petroc Trelawney liked eel and would give Boy 412's palm another lick. His tongue was dry and slightly rasping, like a minute cat's tongue, and Boy 412 would laugh. It tickled.

"He likes you." Jenna would smile. "He's never licked *my* hand."

There were many days when Boy 412 just sat by the fire reading his way through Aunt Zelda's stock of books, immersing himself in a whole new world. Before he came to Keeper's Cottage, Boy 412 had never read a book. He had been taught to read in the Young Army but had only ever been allowed to read long lists of Enemies, Orders of the Day and Battle Plans. But now Aunt Zelda kept him supplied with a happy mixture of adventure stories and **Magyk** books, which Boy 412 soaked up like a sponge. It was on one of these days, almost six weeks into the Big Freeze, when Jenna and Nicko had decided to see whether they could skate all the way to the Port, that Boy 412 noticed something.

He already knew that every morning, for some reason, Aunt Zelda lit two lanterns and disappeared into the potion cupboard under the stairs. At first Boy 412 had thought nothing of it. After all, it was dark in the potion cupboard and Aunt Zelda had many potions to tend. He knew that the potions that needed to be kept in darkness were the most unstable and required constant attention; only the day before, Aunt Zelda had spent hours filtering a muddied **Amazonian Antidote** that had gone lumpy in the cold. But what Boy 412 noticed this particular morning was how quiet it was in the potion cupboard, and he knew that Aunt Zelda was not generally a quiet person. Whenever she walked past the **Preserve Pots** they rattled and jumped, and

when she was in the kitchen the pots and pans clanged and banged; so how, wondered Boy 412, did she manage to be so quiet in the small confines of the potion cupboard? And why did she need *two* lanterns?

He put down his book and tiptoed over to the potion cupboard door. It was strangely silent considering it contained Aunt Zelda in close proximity to hundreds of little clinky bottles. Boy 412 knocked hesitantly on the door. There was no reply. He listened again. Silence. Boy 412 knew he should really just go back to his book but somehow *Thaumaturgy and Sortilage: Why Bother?* was not as interesting as what Aunt Zelda was up to. So Boy 412 pushed open the door and peered in.

The potion cupboard was empty.

For a moment, Boy 412 was half afraid that it was a joke and Aunt Zelda was going to jump out at him, but he soon realized that she was definitely not there. And then he saw why. The trapdoor was open, and the musty damp smell of the tunnel that Boy 412 remembered so well drifted up to him. Boy 412 hovered at the door, uncertain of what to do. It crossed his mind that Aunt Zelda might have fallen through the trapdoor by mistake and needed help, but he realized that if she *had* fallen, she would have got wedged halfway, as Aunt Zelda looked a good deal wider than the trapdoor did.

As he was wondering how Aunt Zelda had managed to squeeze herself through the trapdoor, Boy 412 saw the dim yellow glow of a lantern shining up through the open space in the floor. Soon he heard the heavy tread of Aunt Zelda's sensible boots on the sandy floor of the tunnel and her laborious breathing as she struggled up the steep incline toward the wooden ladder. As Aunt Zelda started to heave herself up the ladder, Boy 412 silently closed the cupboard door and scuttled back to his seat by the fire.

It was quite a few minutes later when an out-of-breath Aunt Zelda poked her head out of the potion cupboard a little suspiciously and saw Boy 412 reading *Thaumaturgy and Sortilage: Why Bother?* with avid interest.

Before Aunt Zelda had time to disappear back into the cupboard, the front door burst open. Nicko appeared with Jenna closely following. They threw down their skates and held up what looked like a dead rat.

“Look what we found,” said Jenna.

Boy 412 pulled a face. He didn't like rats. He'd had to live with too many of them to enjoy their company.

“Leave it outside,” said Aunt Zelda. “It’s bad luck to bring a dead thing across the threshold unless you’re going to eat it. And I don’t fancy eating *that*.”

“It’s not dead, Aunt Zelda,” said Jenna. “Look.” She held out the brown streak of fur for Aunt Zelda to inspect. Aunt Zelda poked at it warily.

“We found it outside that old shack,” said Jenna. “You know the one, not far from the Port at the end of the marsh. There’s a man there who lives with a donkey. And a lot of dead rats in cages. We looked through the window—it was horrible. And then he woke up and saw us, so me and Nicko went to run off and we saw this rat. I think he’d just escaped. So I picked him up and put him in my jacket and we ran for it. Well, skated for it. And the old man came out and yelled at us for taking his rat. But he couldn’t catch us, could he, Nicko?”

“No,” said Nicko, a man of few words.

“Anyway, I think it’s the Message Rat with a message from Dad,” said Jenna.

“*Never*,” said Aunt Zelda. “That Message Rat was fat.”

The rat in Jenna’s hands let out a weak squeak of protest.

“And this one,” said Aunt Zelda, poking the rat in the ribs, “is as thin as a rake. Well, I suppose you had better bring it in, whatever kind of rat it may be.”

And that is how Stanley finally reached his destination, nearly six weeks after he had been sent out from the Rat Office. Like all good Message Rats he had lived up to the Rat Office slogan: *Nothing* stops a Message Rat.

But Stanley was not strong enough to deliver his message. He lay feebly on a cushion in front of the fire while Jenna fed him pureed eel. The rat had never been a great fan of eel, particularly the pureed variety, but after six weeks in a cage drinking only water and eating nothing at all, even pureed eel tasted wonderful. And lying on a cushion in front of a fire instead of shivering at the bottom of a filthy cage was even more wonderful. Even if Bert did sneak in the odd peck when no one was looking.

Marcia did the **Speeke, Rattus Rattus** command after Jenna insisted on

it, but Stanley uttered not a word as he lay weakly on his cushion.

“I’m still not convinced it’s the Message Rat,” said Marcia a few days after Stanley had arrived and the rat had still not spoken. “That Message Rat did nothing *but* talk, if I remember rightly. And a load of drivel most of it was too.”

Stanley gave Marcia his best frown, but it passed her by.

“It is him, Marcia,” Jenna assured her. “I’ve kept loads of rats and I’m good at recognizing them. This one is definitely the Message Rat that we had before.”

And so they all waited nervously for Stanley to recover enough to **Speeke** and deliver Silas’s longed-for message. It was an anxious time. The rat developed a fever and became delirious, mumbling incoherently for hours on end and almost driving Marcia to distraction. Aunt Zelda made up copious amounts of willow bark infusions that Jenna patiently fed to the rat through a small dropper. After a long and fretful week, the rat’s fever at last abated.

Late one afternoon, when Aunt Zelda was locked in the potion cupboard (she had taken to locking the door after the day Boy 412 had peeked inside) and Marcia was working out some mathematical spells at Aunt Zelda’s desk, Stanley gave a cough and sat up. Maxie barked and Bert hissed with surprise, but the Message Rat ignored them.

He had a message to deliver.

MESSAGE FOR MARCIA



Stanley soon had an expectant audience gathered around him. He hobbled stiffly off the cushion, stood up and took a deep breath. Then he said in a shaky voice, “First I must ask. Is there anyone here answering to the name of Marcia Overstrand?”

“You know there is,” said Marcia impatiently.

“I still have to ask, Your Honor. Part of the procedure,” said the Message Rat. He continued. “I am come here to deliver a message to Marcia Overstrand, ex–ExtraOrdinary Wizard—”

“*What?*” gasped Marcia. “*Ex?* What does that idiot rat mean, ex–ExtraOrdinary Wizard?”

“Calm down, Marcia,” said Aunt Zelda. “Wait and see what he has to say.”

Stanley carried on, “The message is sent at seven o’clock in the morning...” The rat paused to work out just how many days ago it had been sent. As a true professional, Stanley had kept a record of his time imprisoned

in the cage by scratching a line for each day on one of the bars. He knew he had done thirty-nine days with Mad Jack, but he had no idea how many days he had spent delirious in front of the fire in Keeper's Cottage, "...er...a long time ago, by proxy, from one Silas Heap residing in the Castle—"

"What's proxy mean?" asked Nicko.

Stanley tapped his foot impatiently. He didn't like interruptions, especially when the message was so old that he was afraid he may not remember it. He coughed impatiently.

"Message begins:

Dear Marcia,

I hope you are keeping well. I am well and am at the Castle. I would be grateful if you would meet me outside the Palace as soon as possible. There has been a development. I will be at the Palace Gate at midnight, every night, until your arrival.

*Looking forward to seeing you,
With best wishes,
Silas Heap*

"Message ends."

Stanley sat back down on his cushion and breathed a sigh of relief. Job done. He may have taken the longest time a Message Rat had ever taken to deliver a message, but he'd done it. He allowed himself a small smile even though he was still on duty.

There was silence for a moment, and then Marcia exploded. "Typical, just *typical!* He doesn't even make an effort to get back before the Big Freeze, then, when he finally does get around to sending a message, he doesn't bother to even *mention* my **KeepSafe**. I give up. I should have gone myself."

"But what about Simon?" asked Jenna anxiously. "And why hasn't Dad sent a message to *us* too?"

"Doesn't sound much like Dad anyway," grunted Nicko.

"No," agreed Marcia. "It was far too polite."

“Well, I suppose it *was* by proxy,” said Aunt Zelda uncertainly.

“What does proxy mean?” Nicko asked again.

“It means a stand-in. Someone else gave the message to the Rat Office. Silas must have been unable to get there. Which is to be expected, I suppose. I wonder who the proxy was?”

Stanley said nothing, even though he knew perfectly well that the proxy was the Supreme Custodian. Although no longer a Confidential Rat, he was still bound by the Rat Office code. And that meant all conversations within the Rat Office were Highly Confidential. But the Message Rat felt awkward. These Wizard people had rescued him, looked after him and probably saved his life. Stanley shifted about and looked at the floor. Something was going on, he thought, and he didn’t want to be part of it. This whole message had been a complete nightmare from start to finish.

Marcia walked over to the desk and slammed her book shut with a bang.

“How dare Silas ignore something as important as my **KeepSafe?**” she said angrily. “Does he not know that the whole point of an Ordinary Wizard is to serve the ExtraOrdinary Wizard? I will not put up with his insubordinate attitude *any* longer. I intend to find him and give him a piece of my mind.”

“Marcia, is that wise?” asked Aunt Zelda quietly.

“I am still the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and I will *not* be kept away,” Marcia declared.

“Well, I suggest you sleep on it,” said Aunt Zelda sensibly. “Things always look better in the morning.”

Later that night, Boy 412 lay in the flickering light of the fire, listening to Nicko’s snuffles and Jenna’s regular breathing. He had been woken up by Maxie’s loud snores, which resonated through the ceiling. Maxie was meant to sleep downstairs but he still sneaked up to lie on Silas’s bed if he thought he could get away with it. In fact, when Maxie started snoring downstairs, Boy 412 often gave the wolfhound a shove and helped him on his way. But that night Boy 412 realized that he was listening to something else apart from the snores of a wolfhound with sinus trouble.

Creaking floorboards above his head...stealthy footsteps on the stairs...

the squeak of the second-to-last creaky step...Who was that? *What* was that? All the ghost stories that he had ever been told came back to Boy 412 as he heard the quiet swish of a cloak along the stone floor and knew that whoever, or *whatever*, it was had entered the same room.

Boy 412 sat up very slowly, his heart beating fast, and stared into the gloom. A dark figure was moving stealthily toward the book that Marcia had left on the desk. The figure picked up the book and tucked it into its cloak, then she saw the whites of Boy 412's eyes staring at her out of the darkness.

"It's me," whispered Marcia. She beckoned Boy 412 over to her. He slipped silently out of his quilt and padded across the stone floor to see what she wanted.

"How anyone is expected to sleep in the same room as that animal I do *not* understand," Marcia whispered crossly. Boy 412 smiled sheepishly. He didn't say that it was he who had pushed Maxie up the stairs in the first place.

"I'm **Returning** tonight," said Marcia. "I'm going to use the **Midnight Minutes**, just to make sure of things. You should remember that, the minutes on either side of midnight are the best time to **Travel** safely. Especially if there are those abroad who may wish you harm. Which I suspect there are. I shall make for the Palace Gate and sort that Silas Heap out. Now, what's the time?"

Marcia pulled out her timepiece.

"Two minutes to midnight. I will be back soon. Perhaps you could tell Zelda." Marcia looked at Boy 412 and remembered that he hadn't uttered a word since he had told them his rank and number in the Wizard Tower. "Oh, well, it doesn't matter if you don't. She'll guess where I've gone."

Boy 412 suddenly thought of something important. He fumbled in the pocket of his sweater and drew out the **Charm** that Marcia had given him when she had asked him to be her Apprentice. He held the tiny pair of silver wings in his palm and looked at them a little regretfully. They glinted silver and gold in the **Magykal** glow that was beginning to surround Marcia. Boy 412 offered the **Charm** back to Marcia—he thought he should no longer have it, since there was no way he was ever going to be her Apprentice—but Marcia shook her head and knelt down beside him.

"No," she whispered. "I still hope you will change your mind and decide to be my Apprentice. Think about it while I'm away. Now, it's one minute to

midnight. Stand back.”

The air around Marcia grew cold, and a shiver of strong **Magyk** swept around her and filled the air with an electric charge. Boy 412 retreated to the fireside, a little scared but fascinated too. Marcia closed her eyes and started to mutter something long and complicated in a language he had never heard before, and as he watched, Boy 412 saw the same **Magykal** haze appear that he had first seen when he was sitting in *Muriel* in the Deppen Ditch. Suddenly Marcia threw her cloak over herself so that she was covered from head to toe, and as she did so, the purple of the **Magyk** haze and the purple of the cloak mixed together. There was a loud hiss, like water dropping onto hot metal, and Marcia disappeared, leaving only a faint shadow that lingered for a few moments.

At the Palace Gate, at twenty minutes past midnight, a platoon of Guards was on duty, just as it had been every night for the past fifty bitterly cold nights. The Guards were frozen and were expecting yet another long boring night doing nothing but stamping their feet and humoring the Supreme Custodian, who had some strange idea that the ex–ExtraOrdinary Wizard was going to turn up right there. Just like that. Of course she never had, and they didn’t expect her to either. But still, every night he sent them out to wait and get their toes frozen into blocks of ice.

So when a faint purple shadow began to emerge in their midst, none of the Guards really believed what was happening.

“It’s *her*,” one of them whispered, half afraid of the **Magyk** that suddenly swirled in the air and sent uncomfortable charges of electricity through their black metal helmets. The Guards unsheathed their swords and watched as the hazy shadow composed itself into a tall figure wrapped in the purple cloak of an ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

Marcia Overstrand had **Appeared** right in the middle of the Supreme Custodian’s trap. She was taken by surprise, and without her **KeepSafe** and the protection of the **Midnight Minutes**—for Marcia was twenty minutes late—she was not able to stop the Captain of the Guard from ripping the Akhu Amulet from her neck.

Ten minutes later Marcia was lying at the bottom of Dungeon Number One, which was a deep, dark chimney buried in the foundations of the Castle. Marcia lay stunned, trapped in the middle of a **Vortex of Shadows and**

Shades that DomDaniel had, with great pleasure, set up especially for her. That night was the worst night of Marcia's life. She lay helpless in a pool of foul water, resting on a pile of bones of the dungeon's previous occupants, tormented by the moaning and the screaming of the **Shadows and Shades** that whirled around her and drained her **Magykal** powers. It was not until the next morning—when, luckily, an Ancient ghost got lost and happened to pass through the wall of Dungeon Number One—that anyone apart from DomDaniel and the Supreme Custodian knew where she was.

The Ancient brought Alther to her, but there was nothing he could do except sit by her and encourage her to stay alive. Alther needed all his powers of persuasion, for Marcia was in despair. In a fit of temper with Silas she knew she had lost everything that Alther had fought for when he deposed DomDaniel. For once again DomDaniel had the Akhu Amulet tied around his fat neck, and it was he, not Marcia Overstrand, who truly was now the ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

THE RAT'S RETURN



Aunt Zelda did not possess a timepiece or a clock. Timepieces never worked properly at Keeper's Cottage; there was too much **Disturbance** under the ground. Unfortunately, this was something that Aunt Zelda had never bothered to mention to Marcia as she herself was not too concerned with the exact time of day. If Aunt Zelda wanted to know the time, she would content herself with looking at the sundial and hoping that the sun was out, but she was much more concerned with the passing of the phases of the moon.

The day the Message Rat was rescued, Aunt Zelda had taken Jenna for a walk around the island after it got dark. The snow was as deep as ever and had such a crisp covering of frost that Jenna was able to run lightly across the top, although Aunt Zelda in her big boots sank right down. They had walked along to the end of the island, away from the lights of the cottage, and Aunt Zelda had pointed up at the dark night sky, which was brushed with hundreds of thousands of brilliant stars, more than Jenna had ever seen before.

“Tonight,” Aunt Zelda had said, “is the Dark of the Moon.”

Jenna shivered. Not from the cold but from a strange feeling she got,

standing out on the island in the middle of such an expanse of stars and darkness.

“Tonight, however hard you look, you will not see the moon,” said Aunt Zelda. “No one on earth will see the moon tonight. It is not a night to venture out alone on the marsh, and if all the marsh creatures and spirits weren’t safely frozen below the ground, we would be **CharmLocked** into the cottage by now. But I thought you would like to see the stars without the light of the moon. Your mother always liked looking at the stars.”

Jenna gulped. “My *mother*? You mean, my mother when I was *born*?”

“Yes,” said Aunt Zelda. “I mean the Queen. She loved the stars. I thought you might too.”

“I do,” breathed Jenna. “I always used to count them from my window at home if I couldn’t get to sleep. But—how did you know my mother?”

“I used to see her every year,” said Aunt Zelda. “Until she...well, until things changed. And her mother, your lovely grandmother, I saw her every year too.”

Mother, grandmother...Jenna began to realize she had a whole family that she knew nothing about. But somehow Aunt Zelda did.

“Aunt Zelda,” said Jenna slowly, daring at last to ask a question that had been bothering her ever since she had learned who she really was.

“Hmm?” Aunt Zelda was gazing out across the marsh.

“What about my father?”

“Your father? Ah, he was from the Far Countries. He left before you were born.”

“He left?”

“He had a boat. He went off to get something or other,” said Aunt Zelda vaguely. “He arrived back at the Port just after you were born with a ship full of treasures for you and your mother, so I heard. But when he was told the terrible news, he sailed away on the next tide.”

“What—what was his name?” asked Jenna.

“No idea,” said Aunt Zelda who, along with most people, had paid little attention to the identity of the Queen’s consort. The Succession was passed from mother to daughter, leaving the men in the family to live their lives as they pleased.

Something in Aunt Zelda’s voice caught Jenna’s attention, and she turned away from the stars to look at her. Jenna caught her breath. She had never really noticed Aunt Zelda’s eyes before, but now the bright piercing blue of the White Witch’s eyes was cutting through the night, shining through the darkness and staring intently out at the marsh.

“Right,” said Aunt Zelda suddenly, “time to go inside.”

“But—”

“I’ll tell you more in the summer. That’s when they used to come, MidSummer Day. I’ll take you there too.”

“Where?” asked Jenna. “Take me where?”

“Come on,” said Aunt Zelda. “I don’t like the look of that shadow over there...”

Aunt Zelda grabbed Jenna’s hand and ran back with her across the snow. Out on the marsh a ravenous Marsh Lynx stopped stalking and turned away. It was too weak now to give chase; had it been a few days earlier, it could have eaten well and seen the winter through. But now the Lynx slunk back to its snow hole and weakly chewed at its last frozen mouse.

After the Dark of the Moon, the first thin sliver of the new moon appeared in the sky. Each night it grew a little bigger. The skies were clear now that the snow had stopped falling, and every night Jenna watched the moon from the window, while the **Shield Bugs** moved dreamily in the **Preserve Pots**, waiting for their moment of freedom.

“Keep watching,” Aunt Zelda told her. “As the moon grows it draws up the things from the ground. And the cottage draws in the people that wish to come here. The pull is strongest at the full moon, which is when you came.”

But when the moon was a quarter full, Marcia had left.

“How come Marcia’s *gone*?” Jenna asked Aunt Zelda the morning they

discovered her departure. “I thought things came back when the moon was growing, not went away.”

Aunt Zelda looked somewhat grumpy at Jenna’s question. She was annoyed with Marcia for going so suddenly, and she didn’t like anyone messing up her moon theories either.

“Sometimes,” Aunt Zelda said mysteriously, “things must leave in order to return.” She stomped off into her potion cupboard and firmly locked the door behind her.

Nicko made a sympathetic face at Jenna and waved her pair of skates at her.

“Race you to Big Bog.” He grinned.

“Last one there’s a dead rat.” Jenna laughed.

Stanley woke up with a start at the words “dead rat” and opened his eyes just in time to see Nicko and Jenna grab their skates and disappear for the day.

By the time the full moon arrived and Marcia had still not returned, everyone was very worried.

“I told Marcia to sleep on it,” said Aunt Zelda, “but oh, no, *she* gets herself all worked up over Silas and just ups and goes in the middle of the night. Not a word since. It really is too bad. I can understand Silas not getting back, what with the Big Freeze, but not Marcia.”

“She might come back tonight,” ventured Jenna, “seeing as it’s the full moon.”

“She might,” said Aunt Zelda, “or she might not.”

Marcia, of course, did not return that night. She spent it as she had spent the last ten nights, in the middle of the **Vortex of Shadows and Shades**, lying weakly in the pool of filthy water at the bottom of Dungeon Number One. Sitting next to her was Alther Mella, using all the ghostly **Magyk** he could to help keep Marcia alive. People rarely survived the actual fall into Dungeon Number One, and if they did, they did not last long, but soon sank below the foul water to join the bones that lay just beneath the surface. Without Alther, there is no doubt that the same fate would have befallen Marcia eventually.

That night, the night of the full moon, as the sun set and the moon rose in the sky, Jenna and Aunt Zelda wrapped themselves up in some quilts and kept watch at the window for Marcia. Jenna soon fell asleep, but Aunt Zelda kept watch all night until the rising of the sun and the setting of the full moon put an end to any faint hopes she may have had of Marcia returning.

The next day, the Message Rat decided he was strong enough to leave. There was a limit to how much pureed eel even a rat could stomach, and Stanley thought he had well and truly reached that limit.

However, before Stanley could leave, he either had to be commanded with another message or released with no message. So that morning he coughed a polite cough and said, "Excuse me, all." Everyone looked at the rat. He had been very quiet while he was recovering, and they were unused to hearing him speak.

"It is time I returned to the Rat Office. I am already somewhat overdue. But I must ask, Do you require me to take a message?"

"Dad!" said Jenna. "Take one to Dad!"

"Who might Dad be?" asked the rat. "And where is he to be found?"

"We don't know," said Aunt Zelda snappily. "There is no message, thank you, Message Rat. You are released."

Stanley bowed, very much relieved.

"Thank you, Madam," he said. "And, ahem, thank you for your kindness. All of you. I am very grateful."

They all watched the rat run off over the snow, leaving small footprints and tailprints behind him.

"I wish we had sent a message," said Jenna wistfully.

"Best not," Aunt Zelda said. "There's something not quite right about that rat. Something different from last time."

"Well, he was a lot thinner," Nicko pointed out.

"Hmm," murmured Aunt Zelda. "Something's up. I can feel it."

Stanley had a good trip back to the Castle. It wasn't until he reached the Rat Office that things started to go wrong. He scampered up the recently defrosted drainpipe and knocked on the Rat Office door.

"Come in!" barked the black rat, only just back on duty after a belated rescue from the frozen Rat Office.

Stanley sidled in, well aware that he was going to have some explaining to do.

"*You!*" thundered the black rat. "At last. How dare you make a fool of me. Are you aware how *long* you have been away?"

"Er...two months," muttered Stanley. He was only too well aware how long he had been away and was beginning to wonder what Dawnie would have to say about it.

"*Er...two months, sir!*" yelled the black rat, thumping his tail on the desk in anger. "Are you aware just how *stupid* you have made me look?"

Stanley said nothing, thinking that at least some good had come out of his ghastly trip.

"You will pay for this," bellowed the black rat. "I will personally see that you never get another job as long as I am in charge here."

"But—"

"But, *sir!*" the black rat screamed. "What did I tell you? Call me *sir!*"

Stanley was silent. There were many things he could think of calling the black rat, but "sir" was not one of them. Suddenly Stanley was aware of something behind him. He wheeled around to find himself staring at the largest pair of muscle-bound rats he had ever seen. They stood threateningly in the Rat Office doorway, cutting out the light and also any chance that Stanley might have had of making a run for it, which he suddenly felt an overpowering urge to do.

The black rat, however, looked pleased to see them.

"Ah, good. The boys have arrived. Take him away, boys."

“Where?” squeaked Stanley. “Where are you taking me?”

“Where...are...you...taking...me...*sir*,” said the black rat through gritted teeth. “To the proxy who sent this message in the first place. He wishes to know where *exactly* you found the recipient. And as you are no longer a Confidential, you will of course have to tell him.

“Take him to the Supreme Custodian.”

THE BIG THAW



The day after the Message Rat left, the Big Thaw set in. It happened first in the Marram Marshes, which were always a little warmer than anywhere else, and then it spread up the river, through the Forest and into the Castle. It was a great relief to everyone in the Castle, as they had been running out of food supplies due to the Custodian Army having looted many of the winter storerooms to provide DomDaniel with the ingredients for his frequent banquets.

The Big Thaw also came as a relief to a certain Message Rat who was shivering glumly in a rat trap underneath the floor of the Ladies' Washroom. Stanley had been left there on account of his refusal to divulge the whereabouts of Aunt Zelda's cottage. He was not to know that the Hunter had already successfully worked it out from what Simon Heap had told the Supreme Custodian, neither was he to know that no one had any intention of setting him free, although Stanley had been around long enough to guess as much. The Message Rat kept himself going as best he could: he ate what he could catch, mainly spiders and cockroaches; he licked the drips from the

thawing drain; and he found himself thinking almost fondly about Mad Jack. Dawnie, meanwhile, had given up on him and gone to live with her sister.

The Marram Marshes were now awash with water from the rapidly thawing snow. Soon the green of the grass began to show through, and the ground became heavy and wet. The ice in the Mott and the ditches was the last to thaw, but as the Marsh Python began to feel the temperature rise, he started to move about, flicking his tail impatiently and flexing his hundreds of stiffened ribs. Everyone at the cottage was waiting with bated breath for the giant snake to break free. They were not sure how hungry he might be, or how cross. To make sure that Maxie stayed inside, Nicko had tied the wolfhound to the table leg with a thick piece of rope. He was pretty sure that fresh wolfhound would be top of the menu for the Marsh Python once he was released from his icy prison.

It happened the third afternoon of the Big Thaw. Suddenly there was a loud *crack!* and the ice above the Marsh Python's powerful head shattered and sprayed up into the air. The snake reared up, and Jenna, who was the only one around, took refuge behind the chicken boat. The Marsh Python cast a glance in her direction but did not fancy chewing its way through her heavy boots, so it set off rather painfully and slowly around the Mott until it found the way out. It was then that it ran into a spot of bother: the giant snake had seized up. It was stuck in a circle. When it tried to bend in the other direction nothing seemed to work. All it could do was swim around and around the Mott. Every time it tried to turn off into the ditch that would lead it out into the marsh, its muscles refused to work.

For days the snake was forced to lie in the Mott, snapping at fish and glaring angrily at anyone who came near. Which no one did after it had flicked its long forked tongue out at Boy 412 and sent him flying. At last, one morning the early spring sun came out and warmed the snake up just enough for its stiffened muscles to relax. Creaking like a rusty gate, it swam off painfully in search of a few goats, and slowly over the next few days it *almost* straightened out. But not completely. To the end of its days, the Marsh Python had a tendency to swim to the right.

When the Big Thaw reached the Castle, DomDaniel took his two Magogs upriver to Bleak Creek where, in the dead of night, the three beings crossed a narrow mildewed gangplank and boarded his **Darke** ship, *The Vengeance*. There they waited some days until the high spring tide that DomDaniel

needed to get his ship out of the creek floated them free.

The morning of the Big Thaw, the Supreme Custodian called a meeting of the Council of the Custodians, unaware that the day before he had forgotten to lock the door to the Ladies' Washroom. Simon was no longer chained to a pipe, for the Supreme Custodian had begun to see him more as a companion than a hostage, and Simon sat and waited patiently for his usual midmorning visit from him. Simon liked hearing the gossip about DomDaniel's unreasonable demands and temper tantrums and felt disappointed when the Supreme Custodian did not return at the normal time. He was not to know that the Supreme Custodian, who recently had become somewhat bored with Simon Heap's company, was at that moment gleefully plotting what DomDaniel called "Operation Compost Heap," which included the disposal of not only Jenna but the entire Heap family, including Simon.

After a while, more out of boredom than a desire to escape, Simon tried the door. To his amazement it opened, and he found himself staring into an empty corridor. Simon leaped back inside the washroom and slammed the door shut in a panic. What should he do? Should he escape? Did he *want* to escape?

He leaned against the door and thought things over. The only reason for staying was the Supreme Custodian's vague offer of becoming DomDaniel's Apprentice. But it had not been repeated. And Simon Heap had learned a lot from the Supreme Custodian in those six weeks he had spent in the Ladies' Washroom. At the top of the list was not to trust anything the Supreme Custodian said. Next on the list was to look after Number One. And, from now on, Number One in Simon Heap's life was definitely Simon Heap.

Simon opened the door again. The corridor was still deserted. He made his decision and strode out of the washroom.

Silas was wandering mournfully along Wizard Way, gazing up into the grubby windows above the shops and offices that lined the Way, wondering if Simon might be held prisoner somewhere in the dark recesses behind them. A platoon of Guards marched briskly past, and Silas shrank back into a doorway, clutching Marcia's **KeepSafe**, hoping it still worked.

"Psst," hissed Alther.

"What?" Silas jumped in surprise. He hadn't seen much of Alther

recently, as the ghost was spending most of his time with Marcia in Dungeon Number One.

“How’s Marcia today?” Silas whispered.

“She’s been better,” said Alther grimly.

“I really think we should let Zelda know,” said Silas.

“Take my advice, Silas, and don’t go *near* that Rat Office. It’s been taken over by DomDaniel’s rats from the Badlands. Vicious bunch of thugs. Don’t worry now, I’ll think of something,” said Alther. “There must be a way to get her out.”

Silas looked dejected. He missed Marcia more than he liked to admit.

“Cheer up, Silas,” said Alther. “I’ve got someone waiting for you in the tavern. Found him wandering around the Courthouse on my way back from Marcia. Smuggled him out through the tunnel. Better hurry up before he changes his mind and goes off again. He’s a tricky one, your Simon.”

“*Simon!*” Silas broke into a broad smile. “Alther, why didn’t you say? Is he all right?”

“*Looks* all right,” said Alther tersely.

Simon had spent nearly two weeks back with his family when, on the day before the full moon, Aunt Zelda stood on the cottage doorstep **Listening** to something far away.

“Boys, boys, not now,” she said to Nicko and Boy 412, who were having a duel with some spare broom handles. “I need to concentrate.”

Nicko and Boy 412 suspended their fight while Aunt Zelda became very still and her eyes took on a faraway look.

“Someone’s coming,” she said after a while. “I’m sending Boggart out.”

“At last!” said Jenna. “I wonder if it’s Dad or Marcia. Maybe Simon’s with them? Or Mum? Maybe it’s *everyone!*”

Maxie jumped up and bounded over to Jenna, his tail wagging madly.

Sometimes Maxie seemed to understand exactly what Jenna was saying. Except when it was something like “Bath time, Maxie!” or “No more biscuits, Maxie!”

“Calm down, Maxie,” said Aunt Zelda, rubbing the wolfhound’s silky ears. “The trouble is it doesn’t feel like anyone I know.”

“Oh,” said Jenna, “but who else knows we’re here?”

“I don’t know,” replied Aunt Zelda. “But whoever it is, they’re in the marshes now. Just arrived. I can feel it. Go and *lie down*, Maxie. Good boy. Now, where’s that Boggart?”

Aunt Zelda gave a piercing whistle. The squat brown figure climbed out of the Mott and waddled up the path to the cottage.

“Not so loud,” he complained, rubbing his small round ears. “Goes right through me that does.” He nodded to Jenna. “Evenin’, miss.”

“Hello, Boggart.” Jenna smiled. The Boggart always made her smile.

“Boggart,” said Aunt Zelda, “there’s someone coming through the marshes. More than one perhaps. I’m not sure. Can you just nip off and find out who it is?”

“No trouble. Could do with a swim. Won’t be long,” said the Boggart. Jenna watched him waddle off down to the Mott and disappear into the water with a quiet splash.

“While we’re waiting for Boggart we should get the **Preserve Pots** ready,” said Aunt Zelda. “Just in case.”

“But Dad said you made the cottage **Enchanted** after the Brownie raid,” said Jenna. “Doesn’t that mean we’re safe?”

“Only against Brownies,” said Aunt Zelda, “and even that’s wearing off by now. Anyway, whoever is coming across the marsh feels a lot bigger than a Brownie to me.”

Aunt Zelda went to find the *Shield Bug Preserves* spell book.

Jenna looked at the **Preserve Pots**, which were still lined up on the windowsills. Inside the thick green gloop the Shield Bugs were waiting. Most

were sleeping, but some were slowly moving about as if they knew they might be needed. For who? wondered Jenna. Or *what*?

“Here we are,” said Aunt Zelda as she appeared with the spell book and thumped it down on the table. She opened it at the first page and took out a small silver hammer, which she handed to Jenna.

“Right, here’s the **Activate**,” she said to her. “If you could just go round and tap each **Pot** with this, then they’ll be **Ready**.”

Jenna took the silver hammer and walked along the lines of **Pots**, tapping on every lid. As she did so, each **Pot**’s inhabitant woke up and snapped to attention. Before long there was an army of fifty-six Shield Bugs waiting to be released. Jenna reached the last **Pot**, which contained the ex-millipede. She tapped the lid with the silver hammer. To her surprise, the lid flew off, and the Shield Bug shot out in a shower of green goo. It landed on Jenna’s arm.

Jenna screamed.

The released Shield Bug crouched, sword at the ready, on Jenna’s forearm. She stood frozen to the spot, waiting for the bug to turn and attack her, forgetting that the bug’s only mission was to defend its Releaser from her enemies. Which it was busy looking for.

The Shield’s green armored scales moved fluidly as it shifted about, sizing up the room. Its thick right arm held a razor-sharp sword that glinted in the candlelight and its short powerful legs moved restlessly as the bug shifted its weight from one large foot to the other while it sized up the potential enemies.

But the potential enemies were a disappointing lot.

There was a large patchwork tent with bright blue eyes staring at it.

“Just put your hand over the bug,” the tent whispered to the Releaser. “It will curl up into a ball. Then we’ll try and get it back into the **Pot**.”

The Releaser looked at the sharp little sword the bug was waving around, and she hesitated.

“I’ll do it if you like,” said the tent and moved toward the bug. The bug swung around menacingly, and the tent stopped in her tracks, wondering what was wrong. They had **Imprinted** all the bugs, hadn’t they? It should realize

that none of them was the enemy. But this bug realized no such thing. It crouched on Jenna's arm, continuing its search.

Now it saw what it was looking for. Two young warriors carrying pikestaves, poised to attack. And one of them was wearing a *red hat*. From a dim and distant previous life the Shield Bug remembered that red hat. It had done him wrong. The bug didn't know exactly what the wrong was, but that made no difference.

It had sighted the enemy.

With a fearsome screech, the bug leaped off Jenna's arm, flapping its heavy wings, and set off through the air with a metallic clattering noise. The bug was heading straight for Boy 412 like a tiny guided missile, its sword held high above its head. It was squealing loudly, its wide-open mouth showing rows of little pointed green teeth.

"Hit it!" yelled Aunt Zelda. "Quick, bop it on the head!"

Boy 412 gave a wild swipe with his broom handle at the advancing bug but missed. Nicko aimed a blow, but the bug swerved at the last moment, shrieking and waving its sword at Boy 412. Boy 412 stared in disbelief at the bug, terribly aware of the bug's pointy sword.

"Keep still!" said Aunt Zelda in a hoarse whisper. "Whatever you do, don't move."

Boy 412 watched, horrified, as the bug landed on his shoulder and advanced purposefully toward his neck, raising its sword like a dagger.

Jenna sprang forward.

"No!" she yelled. The bug turned toward its Releaser. It didn't understand what Jenna said, but as she clamped her hand over it, the bug sheathed its sword and curled itself obediently into a ball. Boy 412 sat down on the floor with a bump.

Aunt Zelda was ready with the empty **Pot**, and Jenna tried to stuff the curled-up Shield Bug into it. It wouldn't go in. First one arm stayed out, then another. Jenna folded both arms in, only to find that a big green foot had kicked its way out of the jar. Jenna pushed and squeezed, but the Shield Bug struggled and fought against going back into the **Pot** with all its might.

Jenna was afraid it might suddenly turn nasty and use its sword, but desperate as the bug was to stay out of the **Pot**, it never unsheathed its sword. The safety of its Releaser was its prime concern. And how could the Releaser be safe if its protector was back in its **Pot**?

“You’ll have to let it stay out,” sighed Aunt Zelda. “I’ve never known anyone able to put one back. I sometimes think they are more trouble than they’re worth. Still, Marcia was very insistent. As always.”

“But what about Boy 412?” asked Jenna. “If it stays out, won’t it just keep attacking him?”

“Not now that you’ve taken it off him. It should be all right.”

Boy 412 looked unimpressed. “Should” was not quite what he wanted to hear. “Definitely” was more what he had in mind.

The Shield Bug settled down on Jenna’s shoulder. For a few minutes it eyed everyone suspiciously, but every time it made a move, Jenna put her hand over it, and soon the bug quieted down.

Until *something* scratched at the door.

Everyone froze.

Outside on the door *something* was scratching its claws down the door.

Scritch...scratch...scritch.

Maxie whined.

The Shield Bug stood up and unsheathed its sword. This time Jenna did not stop it. The bug hovered on her shoulder, poised to jump.

“Go see if it’s a friend, Bert,” said Aunt Zelda calmly. The duck waddled over to the door, cocked its head to one side and listened, then gave one short meow.

“It’s a friend,” said Aunt Zelda. “Must be the Boggart. Don’t know why he’s scratching like that though.”

Aunt Zelda opened the door and screamed, “Boggart! Oh, Boggart!”

The Boggart lay bleeding on the doorstep.

Aunt Zelda knelt down by the Boggart, and everyone crowded around. “Boggart, Boggart, dear. What has happened?”

The Boggart said nothing. His eyes were closed, his fur dull and matted with blood. He slumped down onto the ground, having used his last ounce of strength to reach the cottage.

“Oh, Boggart...open your eyes, Boggart...” cried Aunt Zelda. There was no response. “Help me lift him, someone. Quick.”

Nicko jumped forward and helped Aunt Zelda sit the Boggart up, but he was a slippery, heavy creature, and everyone’s help was needed to get him inside. They carried the Boggart into the kitchen, trying not to notice the trail of blood that dripped onto the floor as they went, and they laid him on the kitchen table.

Aunt Zelda placed her hand on the Boggart’s chest.

“He’s still breathing,” she said, “but only just. And his heart is fluttering like a bird. It’s very weak.” She stifled a sob, then shook herself and snapped into action.

“Jenna, talk to him while I get the Physik chest. Keep talking to him and let him know we’re here. Don’t let him slip away. Nicko, get some hot water from the pot.”

Boy 412 went to help Aunt Zelda with the Physik chest, while Jenna held the Boggart’s damp and muddy paws and talked to him in a low voice, hoping that she sounded calmer than she felt.

“Boggart, it’s all right, Boggart. You’ll be better soon. You will. Can you hear me, Boggart? Boggart? Squeeze my hand if you can hear me.”

A very faint movement of the Boggart’s webbed fingers brushed against Jenna’s hand.

“That’s it, Boggart. We’re still here. You’ll be all right. You will...”

Aunt Zelda and Boy 412 came back with a large wooden chest, which they set down on the floor. Nicko put a bowl of hot water on the table.

“Right,” said Aunt Zelda. “Thank you, everyone. Now I’d like you to leave me and Boggart to get on with this. Go and keep Bert and Maxie

company.”

But they were unwilling to leave the Boggart.

“Go on,” Aunt Zelda insisted.

Jenna reluctantly let go of the Boggart’s floppy paw, then she followed Nicko and Boy 412 out of the kitchen. The door was closed firmly behind them.

Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 sat glumly on the floor by the fire. Nicko cuddled up to Maxie. Jenna and Boy 412 just stared at the fire, deep in their own thoughts.

Boy 412 was thinking about his **Magyk** ring. If he gave the ring to Aunt Zelda, he thought, maybe it would cure the Boggart. But if he did give her the ring, she would want to know where he had found it. And something told Boy 412 that if she knew where he had found it, she would be mad. Really mad. And maybe send him away. Anyway, it was stealing, wasn’t it? He had stolen the ring. It wasn’t his. But it might save the Boggart...

The more Boy 412 thought about it, the more he knew what he had to do. He had to let Aunt Zelda have the dragon ring.

“Aunt Zelda said to leave her alone,” said Jenna as Boy 412 got up and walked toward the closed kitchen door.

Boy 412 took no notice.

“Don’t,” snapped Jenna. She jumped up to stop him, but at that moment the kitchen door opened.

Aunt Zelda came out. Her face was white and drawn, and she had blood all over her apron.

“Boggart’s been shot,” she said.

WATCH AND WAIT



T*he bullet was lying on the kitchen table. A small lead ball with a tuft of Boggart fur still stuck to it, it sat menacingly in the middle of Aunt Zelda's newly scrubbed table.*

The Boggart lay quietly in a tin bath on the floor, but he looked too small, thin and unnaturally clean to be the Boggart they all knew and loved. A broad bandage made of a torn sheet was wrapped around his middle, but already a red stain was spreading across the whiteness of the cloth.

His eyes fluttered slightly as Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 crept into the kitchen.

“He’s to be sponged down with warm water as often as we can,” said Aunt Zelda. “We mustn’t let him dry out. But do not get the bullet wound wet. And he needs to be kept clean. No mud for at least three days. I’ve put some yarrow leaves under his bandage, and I’m just boiling him up some willow bark tea. It will take the pain away.”

“But will he be all right?” asked Jenna.

“Yes, he’ll be fine.” Aunt Zelda allowed herself a small, strained smile as she stirred the willow bark around a large copper pan.

“But the bullet. I mean who would do this?” Jenna found her eyes drawn to the ball of black lead, an unwelcome and threatening intruder that posed too many nasty questions.

“I don’t know,” said Aunt Zelda in a low voice. “I’ve asked Boggart, but he’s in no state to speak. I think we should keep watch tonight.”

So, while Aunt Zelda tended the Boggart, Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 took themselves and the **Preserve Pots** outside.

Once they were in the chill night air, Boy 412’s Young Army training took over. He scouted around for somewhere that would give a good view of all the approaches to the island but at the same time give them somewhere to hide. He soon found what he was looking for. The chicken boat.

It was a good choice. At night the chickens were safely shut away in the hold of the boat, leaving the deck free. Boy 412 clambered up and crouched down behind the dilapidated wheelhouse, then he beckoned Jenna and Nicko to join him. They climbed into the chicken run and passed the **Preserve Pots** up to Boy 412. Then they joined him in the wheelhouse.

It was a cloudy night, and the moon was mostly hidden, but every now and then it appeared and shone a clear white light over the marshes, giving a good view for miles around. Boy 412 cast an expert eye over the landscape, checking for movement and telltale signs of disturbance just as he had been taught to by the ghastly Deputy Hunter, Catchpole. Boy 412 still remembered Catchpole with a shudder. He was an extremely tall man, which was one of the reasons he had never made it to be Hunter—he was just too visible. There were also many other reasons, such as his unpredictable temper; his habit of clicking his fingers when he got tense, which often gave him away just as he had reached his prey; and his dislike of too many baths, which had also saved those he hunted who had a keen sense of smell—provided the wind was blowing in the right direction. But the main reason Catchpole had never made it to Hunter was due to the simple fact that no one liked him.

Boy 412 didn’t like him either, but he had learned a lot from him, once he had got used to the temper tantrums, the smell and the clicking. And one of the things that Boy 412 remembered was *watch and wait*. That’s what Catchpole used to say over and over again, until it stuck in Boy 412’s head like an irritating tune. Watch and wait, watch and wait, *watch and wait, boy*.

The theory was that if the watcher *waited* long enough, the prey would surely reveal itself. It may be only the slight movement of a small branch, the momentary rustling of leaves underfoot or the sudden disturbance of a small animal or bird, but the sign would surely come. All the watcher had to do was *wait* for it. And then, of course, recognize it when it came. That was the hardest part, and the bit that Boy 412 was not always very good at. But this time, he thought, this time without the pungent breath of the revolting Catchpole breathing down his neck, he could do it. He was sure he could.

It was cold up in the wheelhouse, but there was a pile of old sacks stacked up there, so they wrapped themselves in them and settled down to wait. And watch. And *wait*.

Although the marshes were still and calm, the clouds in the sky were racing past the moon, one moment obscuring it and plunging the landscape into gloom, the next rolling away and allowing the moonlight to flood over the marshland. It was in one of these moments, when the moonlight suddenly lit up the crisscross network of drainage ditches that covered the Marram Marshes, that Boy 412 saw something. Or he thought he did. Excited, he grabbed hold of Nicko and pointed in the direction where he thought he had seen something, but just at that moment the clouds covered the moon again. So, crouched in the wheelhouse, they waited. And watched and waited some more.

It seemed to take forever for the long, thin cloud to wander across the moon, and as they waited, Jenna knew that the last thing she wanted to see was someone, or something, making its way through the marsh. She wished that whoever it was who had shot the Boggart had suddenly remembered that they had left the kettle boiling on the fire and had decided to go home and take it off before their house burned down. But she knew they hadn't because suddenly the moon had come out from behind the cloud, and Boy 412 was pointing at something again.

At first Jenna couldn't see anything at all. The flat marshland stretched below her as she peered through the old wheelhouse like a fisherman searching the sea for the sign of a shoal of fish. And then she saw it. Slowly and steadily, a long black shape was making its way along one of the distant drainage ditches.

"It's a canoe..." whispered Nicko.

Jenna's spirits rose. "Is it Dad?"

“No,” whispered Nicko, “there’re *two* people. Maybe three. I can’t be sure.”

“I’ll go and tell Aunt Zelda,” said Jenna. She got up to go, but Boy 412 put his hand on her arm to stop her.

“What?” whispered Jenna.

Boy 412 shook his head and put his finger to his lips.

“I think he thinks you might make a noise and give us away,” whispered Nicko. “Sound travels a long way over the marsh at night.”

“Well, I wish he’d *say* so,” said Jenna edgily.

So Jenna stayed in the wheelhouse and watched the canoe make steady progress, unerringly picking its way through the maze of ditches, passing by all the other islands and heading straight for theirs. As it came closer Jenna noticed that something about the figures looked horribly familiar. The larger figure in the front of the canoe had the concentrated look of a tiger stalking its prey. For a moment Jenna felt sorry for the prey until, with a jolt, she realized who that was.

It was *her*.

It was the Hunter, and he had come for *her*.

34

AMBUSH



As the canoe drew closer the watchers in the chicken boat could see the Hunter and his companions clearly. The Hunter sat in the front of the canoe paddling at a brisk pace and behind him was the Apprentice. And behind the Apprentice was a...**Thing**. The **Thing** squatted on the top of the canoe, casting its eye around the marsh and occasionally making a grab for a passing insect or bat. The Apprentice covered in front of the **Thing**, but the Hunter appeared to take no notice. He had more important things to think about.

Jenna shuddered when she saw the **Thing**. It scared her almost more than the Hunter did. At least the Hunter was a human, albeit a deadly one. But what exactly was the creature squatting on the back of the canoe? To calm herself she lifted the Shield Bug off her shoulder, where it had been sitting quietly, and holding it carefully in the palm of her hand, she pointed out the approaching canoe and its grim trio.

“Enemies,” she whispered. The Shield Bug understood. It followed

Jenna's slightly trembling finger and locked its sharp green eyes, which had perfect night vision, on to the figures in the canoe.

The Shield Bug was happy.

It had an enemy.

It had a sword.

Soon the sword would meet the enemy.

Life was simple when you were a Shield Bug.

The boys let out the rest of the Shield Bugs. One by one, they undid each **Preserve Pot** lid. As they took each lid off, a Shield Bug leaped out in a shower of green gloop, sword at the ready. With each bug Nicko or Boy 412 pointed out the rapidly approaching canoe. Soon fifty-six Shield Bugs were lined up, crouching like coiled springs on the gunnels of the chicken boat. The fifty-seventh stayed on Jenna's shoulder, fiercely loyal to its Releaser.

And now all those on the chicken boat had to do was wait. And watch. And that is what, hearts thumping in their ears, they did. They watched the Hunter and the Apprentice change from shadowy shapes into the dreaded figures they had seen months earlier at the mouth of the Deppen Ditch, and they looked just as nasty and dangerous as they had then.

But the **Thing** remained a shadowy shape.

The canoe had reached a narrow ditch that would take it past the turning into the Mott. All three watchers held their breath as they waited for it to reach the turning. Maybe, thought Jenna, clutching at straws, maybe the **Enchantment** is working better than Aunt Zelda thinks and the Hunter can't see the cottage.

The canoe turned into the Mott. The Hunter could see the cottage only too well.

In his mind the Hunter rehearsed the three steps of the Plan:

STEP ONE: Secure the Queenling. Take prisoner and install in canoe under guard of accompanying Magog. Shoot only if necessary. Otherwise return to DomDaniel, who wished to

“do the job himself” this time.

STEP TWO: Shoot vermin, i.e., the witch woman and the Wizard boy. And the dog.

STEP THREE: A little bit of private enterprise.

Take the Young Army deserter prisoner.

Return to Young Army. Collect bounty.

Satisfied with his plan, the Hunter paddled noiselessly along the Mott, heading for the landing stage.

Boy 412 saw him drawing near and motioned Jenna and Nicko to stay still. He knew any movement would give them away. In Boy 412’s mind they had now progressed from *Watch and Wait* to *Ambush*. And in *Ambush*, Boy 412 remembered Catchpole telling him as he breathed down his neck, *Stillness Is All*.

Until the Instant of Action.

The fifty-six Shield Bugs, lined up along the gunnels, understood exactly what Boy 412 was doing. A large part of the **Charm** with which they had been created had actually been taken from the Young Army training manual. Boy 412 and the Shield Bugs were acting as one.

The Hunter, Apprentice and the Magog had no idea that very soon they would be part of an *Instant of Action*. The Hunter had tied up at the landing stage and was busy trying to get the Apprentice out of the canoe without making any noise and without the boy falling into the water. Normally the Hunter would not have cared in the slightest if the Apprentice had fallen in. In fact, he might have given him a sly push if it hadn’t been for the fact that the Apprentice would have made a loud splash and no doubt done a lot of squawking in the bargain. So, promising himself that he’d push the irritating little so-and-so into the next available cold water when he got the chance, the Hunter had silently eased himself out of the canoe and then pulled the Apprentice up onto the landing stage.

The Magog slunk down into the canoe, pulled its black hood over its blind-worm eye, which was troubled by the bright moonlight, and stayed put. What happened on the island was none of its business. It was there to take custody of the Princess and to act as a guard against the marsh creatures

during the long journey. It had done its job remarkably well, apart from one irritating incident that had been as much the fault of the Apprentice as anything. But no Marsh Wraith or Brownie had dared approach the canoe with the Magog perched on it, and the slime the Magog extruded had covered the hull of the canoe and caused all the Water Nixies' suckers to slip off, burning them unpleasantly in the process.

The Hunter was pleased with the Hunt so far. He smiled his usual smile, which never reached his eyes. At last they were here at the White Witch's hideaway, after a grueling paddle across the marsh and that wasteful encounter with some stupid marsh animal who kept getting in the way. The Hunter's smile faded at the memory of their meeting with the Boggart. He did not approve of wasting bullets. You never knew when you might need the extra one. He cradled his pistol in his hand and very slowly and deliberately loaded a silver bullet.

Jenna saw the silver pistol glint in the moonlight. She saw the fifty-six Shield Bugs lined up ready for action and decided to keep her own bug beside her. Just in case. So she put her hand over the bug to quiet it. The bug obediently sheathed its sword and rolled into a ball. Jenna slipped the bug into her pocket. If the Hunter carried a pistol, then she would carry a bug.

With the Apprentice following in the Hunter's footsteps as he'd been instructed, the pair crept silently up the little path that led from the landing stage to the cottage, passing the chicken boat on its way. As they reached the chicken boat the Hunter stopped. He had heard something. Human heartbeats. Three sets of very fast human heartbeats. He raised his pistol...

Aaeeeeiiiiigh!!

The scream of fifty-six Shield Bugs is a terrible scream. It dislocates the three tiny bones inside the ear and creates an incredible feeling of panic. Those who know about Shield Bugs will do the only thing they can: stuff their fingers in their ears and hope to control the panic. This is what the Hunter did; he stood completely still, put his fingers deep into his ears, and if he felt a flicker of panic, it did not trouble him for more than a moment.

The Apprentice of course knew nothing about Shield Bugs. So he did what anyone would do when confronted with a swarm of small green things flying toward you, waving scalpel-sharp swords and screeching so high that your ears felt like they would burst. He ran. Faster than he had ever run before, the Apprentice hurtled down to the Mott, hoping to get into the canoe and paddle to safety.

The Hunter knew that, given a choice, a Shield Bug will always chase a moving enemy and ignore a still one, which is exactly what happened. To the Hunter's great satisfaction, all fifty-six Shield Bugs decided that the enemy was the Apprentice and pursued him shrilly down to the Mott, where the terrified boy hurled himself into the freezing water to escape the clattering green swarm.

The intrepid Shield Bugs hurled themselves into the Mott after the Apprentice, doing what they had to do, following the enemy to the end, but unfortunately for them, the end they met was their own. As each bug hit the water it sank like a stone, its heavy green armor dragging it down to the sticky mud at the bottom of the Mott. The Apprentice, shocked and gasping with the cold, hauled himself out onto the bank and lay shivering under a bush, too afraid to move.

The Magog watched the scene with no apparent interest at all. Then, when all the fuss had died down, he started to trawl the depths of the mud with his long arms and pick out the drowned bugs one by one. He sat contentedly on the canoe, sucking the bugs dry and crunching them into a smooth green paste with his sharp yellow fangs—armor, swords and all—before he slowly sucked them down into his stomach.

The Hunter smiled and looked up at the wheelhouse of the chicken boat. He hadn't expected it to be this easy. All three of them waiting for him like sitting ducks.

"Are you going to come down, or am I going to come up and get you?" he asked coldly.

"Run," hissed Nicko to Jenna.

"What about *you*?"

"I'll be okay. It's you he's after. Just go. *Now*."

Nicko raised his voice and spoke to the Hunter. "Please don't shoot. I'll come down."

"Not just you, sonny. You're *all* coming down. The girl first."

Nicko pushed Jenna away. "*Go!*" he hissed.

Jenna seemed unable to move, unwilling to leave what felt like the safety of the chicken boat. Boy 412 recognized the terror on her face. He had felt like that so many times before in the Young Army, and he knew that unless he grabbed her, just as Boy 409 had once done for him to save him from a Forest wolverine, Jenna would be unable to move. And if he didn't grab her, the Hunter would. Quickly, Boy 412 propelled Jenna out of the wheelhouse, clasped her hand tightly and jumped with her off the far side of the chicken boat, away from the Hunter. As they landed on a pile of chicken dung mixed with straw, they heard the Hunter swear.

"Run!" hissed Nicko, looking down from the deck.

Boy 412 pulled Jenna to her feet, but she was still unwilling to go.

"We can't leave Nicko," she gasped.

"I'll be all right, Jen. Just *go!*" yelled Nicko, oblivious to the Hunter and his pistol.

The Hunter was tempted to shoot the Wizard boy there and then, but his priority was the Queenling, not Wizard scum. So, as Jenna and Boy 412 picked themselves up off the dung heap, clambered over the chicken wire and ran for their lives, the Hunter leaped after them as if his own life too depended on it.

Boy 412 kept hold of Jenna as he headed away from the Hunter, around the back of the cottage and into Aunt Zelda's fruit bushes. He had the advantage over the Hunter in that he knew the island, but that did not bother the Hunter. He was doing what he did best, tracking a prey and a young and terrified one at that. Easy. After all, where could they run to? It was only a matter of time before he got them.

Boy 412 and Jenna ducked and weaved through the bushes, leaving the Hunter struggling to find his way through the prickly plants, but all too soon Jenna and Boy 412 reached the end of the fruit bushes and reluctantly emerged into the exposed grassy space that led down to the duck pond. At that moment the moon came out from behind the clouds, and the Hunter saw his prey outlined against the backdrop of the marshes.

Boy 412 ran, pulling Jenna along with him, but the Hunter was slowly gaining on them and did not seem to tire, unlike Jenna, who felt she could not run another step. They skirted the duck pond and raced up to the grassy knoll at the end of the island. Horribly close behind them they could hear the

footsteps of the Hunter, echoing as he too reached the knoll and sprinted over the hollow ground.

Boy 412 dodged this way and that between the small bushes scattered about, dragging Jenna behind him, aware that the Hunter was almost near enough to reach out and grab her.

And then suddenly the Hunter *was* near enough. He lunged forward and dived at Jenna's feet.

"Jenna!" yelled Boy 412, pulling her out of the Hunter's grasp and jumping with her into a bush.

Jenna crashed into the bush after Boy 412, only to find that suddenly the bush wasn't there anymore, and she was tumbling headlong into a dark, cold, endless space.

She landed with a jolt on a sandy floor. A moment later there was a thud, and Boy 412 lay sprawled in the darkness beside her.

Jenna sat up, dazed and aching, and rubbed the back of her head where she had hit the ground. Something very strange had happened. She tried to remember what it was. Not their escape from the Hunter, not the fall through the ground, but something even stranger. She shook her head to try to clear the fuzziness in her brain. That was it. She remembered.

Boy 412 had *spoken*.

GONE TO GROUND



You can talk,” said Jenna, rubbing the bump on her head.

“Of course I can talk,” said Boy 412.

“But why haven’t you, then? You haven’t ever said *anything*. Except for your name. I mean, number.”

“That’s all we were meant to say if we were captured. Rank and number. Nothing else. So that’s what I did.”

“You weren’t captured. You were *saved*,” Jenna pointed out.

“I know,” said Boy 412. “Well, I know that *now*. I didn’t *then*.”

Jenna found it very strange to be actually having a conversation with Boy 412 after all this time. And even stranger to be having it at the bottom of a pit in complete darkness.

“I wish we had a light,” said Jenna. “I keep thinking the Hunter’s going to creep up on us.” She shivered.

Boy 412 reached up inside his hat, drew out his ring and slipped it onto his right index finger. It fitted perfectly. He cupped his other hand around the dragon ring, warming it and willing it to give out its golden glow. The ring responded, and a soft glow spread out from Boy 412's hands until he could clearly see Jenna looking at him through the darkness. Boy 412 felt very happy. The ring was brighter than ever, and soon it cast a warm circle of light around them as they sat on the sandy floor of the tunnel.

"That's amazing," said Jenna. "Where did you find it?"

"Down here," said Boy 412.

"What, you just found it? Just now?"

"No. I found it before."

"Before what?"

"Before—remember when we got lost in the haar?"

Jenna nodded.

"Well, I fell down here then. And I thought I was going to be stuck here forever. Until I found the ring. It's **Magyk**. It lit up and showed me the way out."

So that was what happened, thought Jenna. It made sense now. Boy 412 sitting smugly waiting for them when she and Nicko finally found their way back, frozen and soaked after hours of wandering around looking for him. She had just *known* he had some kind of secret. And then all that time he had been walking around with the ring and never showing anyone. There was more to Boy 412 than met the eye.

"It's a beautiful ring," she said, gazing at the gold dragon curled around Boy 412's finger. "Can I hold it?"

A little reluctantly, Boy 412 took off the ring and gave it to Jenna. She cradled it carefully in her hands, but the light began to fade and the darkness drew in around them. Soon the light from the ring had completely died.

"Have you dropped it?" Boy 412 asked accusingly.

"No," said Jenna, "it's still here in my hand. But it doesn't work for me."

“Of course it works. It’s a **Magyk** ring,” said Boy 412. “Here, give it back. I’ll show you.” He took the ring and immediately the tunnel was filled with light. “See, it’s easy.”

“Easy for you,” said Jenna, “but not for me.”

“I don’t see why,” said Boy 412, puzzled.

But Jenna had seen why. She had seen it over and over again, growing up in a household of Wizards. And although Jenna knew only too well that she was not **Magykal**, she could tell who was.

“It’s not the ring that’s **Magyk**. It’s *you*,” she told Boy 412.

“I’m not **Magyk**,” said Boy 412. He sounded so definite that Jenna didn’t argue.

“Well, whatever you are, you’d better keep hold of the ring,” she said. “So how do we get out?”

Boy 412 put the dragon ring on and set off along the tunnel, leading Jenna confidently through the twists and turns that had so confused him before, until at last they arrived at the top of the steps.

“Careful,” he said. “I fell down these last time and nearly lost the ring.”

At the bottom of the steps Jenna stopped. Something had made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

“I’ve been here before,” she whispered.

“When?” asked Boy 412, a bit put out. It was *his* place.

“In my dreams,” muttered Jenna. “I know this place. I used to dream about it in the summer when I was at home. But it was bigger than this...”

“Come on,” said Boy 412 briskly.

“I wonder if it *is* bigger, if there’s an echo.” Jenna raised her voice as she spoke. *there’s an echo there’s an echo...sounded* all around them.

“Shhh,” whispered Boy 412. “He might hear us. Through the ground. They train them to hear like dogs.”

“Who?”

“*Hunters.*”

Jenna fell silent. She had forgotten about the Hunter, and now she didn't want to be reminded.

“There're pictures all over the walls,” Jenna whispered to Boy 412, “and I know I've dreamed about *them*. They look really old. It's like they're telling a story.”

Boy 412 hadn't taken much notice of the pictures before, but now he held his ring up to the smooth marble walls that formed this part of the tunnel. He could see simple, almost primitive shapes in deep blues, reds and yellows showing what seemed to be dragons, a boat being built, then a lighthouse and a shipwreck.

Jenna pointed to more shapes farther along the wall. “And these look like plans for a tower or something.”

“It's the Wizard Tower,” said Boy 412. “Look at the Pyramid on the top.”

“I didn't know the Wizard Tower was so old,” said Jenna, running her finger over the paint and thinking that maybe she was the first person to see the pictures for thousands of years.

“The Wizard Tower is very old,” said Boy 412. “No one knows when it was built.”

“How do *you* know?” asked Jenna, surprised that Boy 412 was so definite.

Boy 412 took a deep breath and said in a singsong voice, “*The Wizard Tower is an Ancient Monument. Precious resources are squandered by the ExtraOrdinary Wizard to keep the Tower in its garish state of opulence, resources that could be used for healing the sick or making the Castle a more secure place for all to live. See, I can still remember it. We used to have to recite stuff like that every week in our Know Your Enemy lesson.*”

“Yuck,” sympathized Jenna. “Hey, I bet Aunt Zelda would be interested in all this down here,” she whispered as she followed Boy 412 along the tunnel.

“She knows all about it already,” said Boy 412, remembering Aunt

Zelda's disappearance from the potion cupboard. "And I think she knows that I know."

"Why? Did she say?" asked Jenna, wondering how she had missed all this.

"No," said Boy 412. "But she gave me a funny look."

"She gives everyone funny looks," Jenna pointed out. "It doesn't mean she thinks they've been down some secret tunnel."

They walked on a little farther. The line of pictures had just ended and they had reached some steep steps leading upward. Jenna's attention was caught by a small rock nestled beside the bottom step. She picked it up and showed it to Boy 412.

"Hey, look at this. Isn't it lovely?"

Jenna was holding a large egg-shaped green stone. It was slippery-smooth as though someone had just polished it, and it shone with a dull sheen in the light of the ring. The green had an iridescent quality to it, like a dragonfly's wing, and it lay heavily but perfectly balanced in her two cupped hands.

"It's so smooth," said Boy 412, stroking it gently.

"Here, you have it," said Jenna impulsively. "It can be your own pet rock. Like Petroc Trelawney, only bigger. We could ask Dad to get a spell for it when we go back to the Castle."

Boy 412 took the green rock. He wasn't sure what to say. No one had ever given him a present before. He put the rock into his secret pocket on the inside of his sheepskin jacket. Then he remembered what Aunt Zelda had said to him when he had brought her some herbs from the garden.

"Thank you," he said.

Something in the way he spoke reminded Jenna of Nicko.

Nicko.

Nicko and the *Hunter*.

"We've got to get back," said Jenna anxiously.

Boy 412 nodded. He knew they had to go and face whatever may be waiting for them outside. He had just been enjoying feeling safe for a while.

But he knew it couldn't last.

36

FROZEN



The trapdoor slowly rose a few inches, and Boy 412 peered out. A chill ran through him. The door to the potion cupboard had been thrown wide open, and he was looking straight at the heels of the Hunter's muddy brown boots.

Standing with his back to the potion cupboard, only a few feet away, was the figure of the Hunter, his green cloak thrown over his shoulder and his silver pistol held at the ready. He was facing the kitchen door, poised as if about to rush forward.

Boy 412 waited to see what the Hunter was about to do, but the man did nothing at all. He was, thought Boy 412, *waiting*. Probably for Aunt Zelda to walk out of the kitchen.

Willing Aunt Zelda to stay away, Boy 412 reached down and held his hand out for Jenna's Shield Bug.

Jenna stood anxiously on the ladder below him. She could tell that all was not well from how tense and still Boy 412 had become. When his hand reached down she took the rolled-up Shield Bug from her pocket and passed it up to Boy 412, as they had planned, sending it a silent good luck wish as she did so. Jenna had begun to like the bug and was sorry to see it go.

Carefully, Boy 412 took the bug and slowly pushed it through the open trapdoor. He set the tiny armored green ball down on the floor, making sure he kept hold of it, and pointed it in the right direction.

Straight at the Hunter.

Then he let go. At once the bug uncurled itself, locked its piercing green eyes on to the Hunter and unsheathed its sword with a small swishing noise. Boy 412 held his breath at the noise and hoped the Hunter had not heard, but the stocky man in green made no move. Boy 412 slowly breathed out and, with a flick of his finger, he sent the bug into the air, toward its target, with a shrill shriek.

The Hunter did nothing.

He didn't turn or even flinch as the bug landed on his shoulder and raised its sword to strike. Boy 412 was impressed. He knew the Hunter was tough, but surely this was taking things too far.

And then Aunt Zelda appeared.

"Look out!" yelled Boy 412. "The Hunter!"

Aunt Zelda jumped. Not because of the Hunter but because she had never heard Boy 412 speak before and so she had no idea who had spoken. Or where the unknown voice was coming from.

Then, to Boy 412's amazement, Aunt Zelda snatched the Shield Bug off the Hunter and tapped it to make it roll back into a ball.

And *still* the Hunter did nothing.

Briskly, Aunt Zelda put the bug into one of her many patchwork pockets and looked around her, wondering where the unfamiliar voice had come from. And then she caught sight of Boy 412 peering out from the slightly raised trapdoor.

“Is that *you*?” she gasped. “Thank goodness you’re all right. Where’s Jenna?”

“Here,” said Boy 412, half afraid to speak in case the Hunter heard. But the Hunter gave no sign of having heard anything at all, and Aunt Zelda treated him as nothing more than an awkward piece of furniture as she walked around his immobile figure, lifted up the trapdoor and helped Boy 412 and Jenna out.

“What a wonderful sight, *both* of you safe,” she said happily. “I was so worried.”

“But—what about *him*.” Boy 412 pointed to the Hunter.

“**Frozen**,” said Aunt Zelda with an air of satisfaction. “**Frozen** solid and staying that way. Until I decide what to do with him.”

“Where’s Nicko? Is he all right?” asked Jenna as she clambered out.

“He’s fine. He’s gone after the Apprentice,” said Aunt Zelda.

As Aunt Zelda finished speaking, the front door crashed open and the dripping-wet Apprentice was propelled inside, followed by an equally dripping-wet Nicko.

“Pig,” spat Nicko, slamming the door. He let go of the boy and went over to the blazing fire to get dry.

The Apprentice dripped unhappily on the floor and looked over to the Hunter for help. He dripped even more unhappily when he saw what had happened. The Hunter stood **Frozen** in mid-lunge with his pistol, staring into space with empty eyes. The Apprentice gulped—a big woman in a patchwork tent was advancing purposefully toward him, and he knew only too well who it was from the Illustrated Enemy Cards he had had to study before he came on the Hunt.

It was the Mad White Witch, Zelda Zanuba Heap.

Not to mention the Wizard boy, Nickolas Benjamin Heap, and 412, the lowlife runaway deserter. They were all here, just as he had been told they would be. But where was the one they had really come for? Where was the *Queenling*?

The Apprentice looked around and caught sight of Jenna in the shadows behind Boy 412. He took in Jenna's gold circlet shining against her long dark hair and her violet eyes, just like the picture on the Enemy Card (drawn very skillfully by Linda Lane, the spy). The Queenling was a little taller than he had expected, but it was definitely her.

A sly smile played on the Apprentice's lips as he wondered if he could grab Jenna all by himself. How pleased his Master would be with him. Surely then his Master would forget all his past failures and would stop threatening to send him into the Young Army as an Expendable. Especially if he had succeeded where even the Hunter had failed.

He was going to do it.

Taking everyone by surprise, the Apprentice, although hampered by his sodden robes, flung himself forward and seized hold of Jenna. He was unexpectedly strong for his size, and he wrapped a wiry arm around her throat, almost choking her. Then he started to drag her toward the door.

Aunt Zelda made a move toward the Apprentice, and he flicked open his pocketknife, pressing it hard against Jenna's throat.

"Anyone tries to stop me, and she gets it," he snarled, propelling Jenna out the open door and down the path to the canoe and the waiting Magog. The Magog paid the scene no attention at all. It was immersed in liquifying its fifteenth drowned Shield Bug, and its duties did not commence until the prisoner was in the canoe.

She nearly was.

But Nicko was not going to let his sister go without a fight. He hurtled after the Apprentice and threw himself onto him. The Apprentice landed on top of Jenna, and there was a scream. A trickle of blood ran from underneath her.

Nicko yanked the Apprentice out of the way.

"Jen, Jen!" he gasped. "Are you hurt?"

Jenna had jumped up and was staring at the blood on the path.

"I—I don't think so," she stammered. "I think it's *him*. I think *he's* hurt."

“Serve him right,” said Nicko, kicking the knife out of the Apprentice’s reach.

Nicko and Jenna hauled the Apprentice to his feet. He had a small cut on his arm but apart from that seemed unharmed. But he was deathly white. The Apprentice was frightened by the sight of blood, particularly his own, but he was even more frightened at the thought of what the Wizards might do to him. As they dragged him back into the cottage the Apprentice made one last attempt to escape. He twisted out of Jenna’s grasp and aimed a hefty kick at Nicko’s shins.

A fight broke out. The Apprentice landed a nasty punch to Nicko’s stomach and was just about to kick him again when Nicko twisted his arm painfully behind his back.

“Get out of that one,” Nicko told him. “Don’t think you can try and kidnap my sister and get away with it. *Pig.*”

“He’d never have got away with it,” mocked Jenna. “He’s too stupid.”

The Apprentice hated being called stupid. That was all his Master ever called him. Stupid boy. Stupid birdbrain. Stupid beetlehead. He *hated* it.

“I’m not stupid.” He gasped as Nicko tightened his grip on his arm. “I can do anything I want to. I could have shot her if I’d wanted to. I already *have* shot something tonight. So there.”

As soon as he said it, the Apprentice wished he hadn’t. Four pairs of accusing eyes stared at him.

“What exactly do you mean?” Aunt Zelda asked him quietly. “You shot *something?*”

The Apprentice decided to brazen it out.

“None of your business. I can shoot what I like. And if I want to shoot some fat ball of fur that gets in my way when I am on official business, then I will.”

There was a shocked silence. Nicko broke it.

“Boggart. He shot the Boggart. *Pig.*”

“*Ouch!*” yelled the Apprentice.

“No violence, please, Nicko,” said Aunt Zelda. “Whatever he’s done, he’s just a boy.”

“I’m not *just* a boy,” said the Apprentice haughtily. “I am Apprentice to DomDaniel, the Supreme Wizard and **Necromancer**. I am the seventh son of a seventh son.”

“What?” asked Aunt Zelda. “*What* did you say?”

“I am Apprentice to DomDaniel, the Supreme—”

“Not that. We know *that*. I can see the black stars on your belt only too well, thank you.”

“I said,” the Apprentice spoke proudly, pleased that at last someone was taking him seriously, “that I am the seventh son of a seventh son. I am **Magykal**.” Even though, thought the Apprentice, it hasn’t quite shown itself yet. But it will.

“I don’t believe you,” Aunt Zelda said flatly. “I’ve never seen anyone less like a seventh son of a seventh son in my life.”

“Well, I am,” the Apprentice insisted sulkily. “I am Septimus Heap.”

SCRYING



He's lying," Nicko said angrily, pacing up and down while the Apprentice dripped dry slowly by the fire.

The Apprentice's green woolen robes gave off an unpleasant musty odor, which Aunt Zelda recognized as being the smell of failed spells and stale **Darke Magyk**. She opened a few jars of **Stink Screen**, and soon the air smelled pleasantly of lemon meringue pie.

"He's just saying it to upset us," said Nicko indignantly. "That little pig's name is *not* Septimus Heap."

Jenna put her arm around Nicko. Boy 412 wished he understood what was happening.

"Who is *Septimus Heap*?" he asked.

"Our brother," said Nicko.

Boy 412 looked even more confused.

“He died when he was a baby,” said Jenna. “If he had lived, he would have had amazing **Magykal** powers. Our dad was a seventh son, you see,” Jenna told him, “but that doesn’t always make you any more **Magykal**.”

“It certainly didn’t with Silas,” muttered Aunt Zelda.

“When Dad married Mum they had six sons. They had Simon, Sam, Edd and Erik, Jo-Jo and Nicko. And then they had Septimus. So he was the seventh son of a seventh son. But he died. Just after he was born,” said Jenna. She was remembering what Sarah had told her one summer night when she was tucked in her box bed. “I always thought he was my twin brother. But it turns out he wasn’t...”

“Oh,” said Boy 412, thinking how complicated it seemed to be to have a family.

“So he’s definitely not our brother,” Nicko was saying. “And even if he was, I wouldn’t want him. He’s no brother of mine.”

“Well,” said Aunt Zelda, “there’s only one way to sort this out. We can see if he’s telling the truth, which I very much doubt. Although I did always wonder about Septimus...It never seemed quite right somehow.” She opened the door and checked the moon.

“A gibbous moon,” she said. “Nearly full. Not a bad time to scry.”

“What?” asked Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 in unison.

“I’ll show you,” she said. “Come with me.”

The duck pond was the last place they all expected to end up, but there they were, looking at the reflection of the moon in the still, black water, just as Aunt Zelda had told them to.

The Apprentice was wedged firmly between Nicko and Boy 412, in case he should try to make a run for it. Boy 412 was pleased that Nicko trusted him at last. Not so long ago, it was Nicko who was trying to stop *him* from making a run for it. And now here he was, watching exactly the kind of **Magyk** he had been warned about in the Young Army: a full moon and a White Witch, her piercing blue eyes blazing in the moonlight, waving her arms in the air

and talking about dead babies. What Boy 412 found difficult to believe was not that this was happening, but the fact that to him it now seemed quite normal. Not only that, but he realized that the people he was standing around the duck pond with—Jenna, Nicko and Aunt Zelda—meant more to him than anyone ever had in his whole life. Apart from Boy 409, of course.

Except, thought Boy 412, he could do without the Apprentice. The Apprentice reminded him of most of the people who had tormented him in his previous life. *His previous life*. That, decided Boy 412, was how it was going to be. Whatever happened, he was never going back to the Young Army. *Never*.

Aunt Zelda spoke in a low voice. “Now I am going to ask the moon to show us Septimus Heap.”

Boy 412 shivered and stared at the still, dark water of the pond. In the middle lay a perfect reflection of the moon, so detailed that the seas and mountains of the moon were clearer than he had ever seen before.

Aunt Zelda looked up at the moon and said, “Sister Moon, Sister Moon, show us, if you will, the seventh son of Silas and Sarah. Show us where he is now. Show us Septimus Heap.”

Everyone held their breath and looked expectantly at the the surface of the pond. Jenna felt apprehensive. Septimus was *dead*. What would they see? A small bundle of bones? A tiny grave?

A silence fell. The reflection of the moon began to grow bigger until a huge white, almost perfect circle filled the duck pond. At first, vague shadows began to appear in the circle. Slowly they became more defined until they saw...their own reflections.

“See,” said the Apprentice. “You asked to see me, and there I am. I *told* you.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” said Nicko indignantly. “It’s just our reflections.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” said Aunt Zelda thoughtfully.

“Can we see what happened to Septimus when he was born?” asked Jenna. “Then we’d know if he was still alive, wouldn’t we?”

“Yes, we would. I’ll ask. But it’s much more difficult to see things from the past.” Aunt Zelda took a deep breath and said, “Sister Moon, Sister Moon, show us, if you will, the first day of the life of Septimus Heap.”

The Apprentice snuffled and coughed.

“Quiet, please,” said Aunt Zelda.

Slowly their reflections disappeared from the surface of the water and were replaced by an exquisitely detailed scene, sharp and brilliant against the midnight darkness.

The scene was somewhere that Jenna and Nicko knew well: their home back in the Castle. Like a tableau laid before them, the figures in the room were immobile, frozen in time. Sarah lay in a makeshift bed, holding a newborn baby, with Silas beside her. Jenna caught her breath. She had not realized how much she missed home until now. She glanced at Nicko, who had a look of concentration on his face that Jenna recognized as Nicko *not* looking upset.

Suddenly everyone gasped. The figures had begun to move. Silently and smoothly, like a moving photograph, they began to play out a scene before the entranced audience—entranced, except for one.

“My Master’s Camera Obscura is a hundred times better than this old duck pond,” the Apprentice said contemptuously.

“Shut *up*,” hissed Nicko angrily.

The Apprentice sighed loudly and fidgeted about. It was all a load of rubbish, he thought. It’s nothing to do with *me*.

The Apprentice was wrong. The events he was watching had changed his life.

The scene unfolded before them:

The Heaps’ room looks subtly different. Everything is newer and cleaner. Sarah Heap is much younger too; her face is fuller and there is no sadness lingering in her eyes. In fact, she looks completely happy, holding her newborn baby, Septimus. Silas is also younger; his hair is less straggly and his face less etched with worry. There are six little boys playing together quietly.

Jenna smiled wistfully, realizing that the smallest one with the mop of unruly hair must be Nicko. He looks so cute, she thought, jumping up and down, excited and wanting to see the baby.

Silas picks Nicko up and holds him up to see his new brother. Nicko reaches out a small, pudgy hand and gently strokes the baby's cheek. Silas says something to him and then puts him down to toddle off and play with his older brothers.

Now Silas is kissing Sarah and the baby good-bye. He stops and says something to Simon, the eldest, and then he is gone.

The picture fades away, the hours are passing.

Now the Heaps' room is lit by candlelight. Sarah is nursing the baby, and Simon is quietly reading a story to his younger brothers. A large figure in dark blue robes, the Matron Midwife, bustles into view. She takes the baby from Sarah and lays him in the wooden box that serves as his cot. With her back to Sarah she slips a small vial of black liquid from her pocket and dips her finger into it. Then, glancing around her guiltily, the Midwife wipes her blackened finger along the baby's lips. At once, Septimus goes limp.

The Matron Midwife turns to Sarah, holding out the floppy baby to her. Sarah is distraught. She puts her mouth over her baby's to try to breathe life into him, but Septimus stays as limp as a rag. Soon Sarah too feels the effects of the drug. In a daze she collapses back against her pillows.

Watched by six horrified little boys, the Matron Midwife takes a huge roll of bandages out of her pocket and begins to wrap Septimus, starting with his feet and expertly working upward, until she reaches his head, where she stops for a moment and checks the baby's breathing. Satisfied, she continues with the bandaging, leaving his nose peeking out, until he looks like a tiny Egyptian mummy.

Suddenly the Matron Midwife makes for the door, taking Septimus with her. Sarah wills herself to wake from her drugged sleep just in time to see the Midwife throw open the door and bump into a shocked Silas, who has his cloak tightly wrapped around him. The Midwife pushes him aside and runs off down the corridor.

The corridors of the Ramblings are lit with brightly burning torches, which cast flickering shadows across the dark figure of the Matron Midwife as she runs, holding Septimus close. After a while she emerges into the snowy

night and slows her pace, looking about anxiously. Hunched over the baby, she hurries along the deserted narrow streets until she reaches a wide-open space.

Boy 412 gasped. It was the dreaded Young Army Parade Ground.

The large dark figure moves over the snowy expanse of the parade ground, scuttling like a black beetle across a tablecloth. The guard at the barracks door salutes the Midwife and lets her in.

Inside the dismal barracks the Matron Midwife slows her pace. She walks carefully down a steep flight of narrow steps, which lead to a dank basement room full of empty cots lined up in ranks. It is what will soon become the Young Army nursery where all the orphaned and unwanted boy children from the Castle will be raised. (The girls will go to the Domestic Service Training Hall.) Already there are four unfortunate occupants. Three are triplet sons of a Guard who dared to make a joke about the Supreme Custodian's beard. The fourth is the Matron Midwife's own baby boy, six months old and being babysat in the nursery while she is at work. The babysitter, an old woman with a persistent cough, is slumped in her chair, dozing fitfully between coughing bouts. The Matron Midwife quickly places Septimus in an empty cot and unwinds his bandages. Septimus yawns and unclenches his tiny fists.

He is alive.

Jenna, Nicko, Boy 412 and Aunt Zelda stared at the scene before them in the pond, realizing that what the Apprentice had said now seemed to be all too true. Boy 412 had a nasty feeling in the pit of his stomach. He hated seeing the Young Army barracks again.

In the semidarkness of the Young Army nursery the Matron Midwife sits down wearily. She keeps glancing anxiously at the door as if waiting for someone to come in. No one appears.

A minute or two later she heaves herself up from her chair and goes over to the cot where her own baby is crying and picks the child up. At that moment the door is flung open, and the Matron Midwife wheels around, white-faced, frightened.

A tall woman in black stands in the doorway. Over her black, well-pressed robes she wears the starched white apron of a nurse, but around her waist is a bloodred belt showing the three black stars of DomDaniel.

She has come for Septimus Heap.

The Apprentice didn't like what he saw at all. He didn't want to see the lowlife family he was rescued from—they meant nothing to him. He didn't want to see what had happened to him as a baby either. What did that matter to him now? And he was sick of standing out in the cold with the enemy.

Angrily, the Apprentice kicked a duck sitting beside his feet, and booted the bird straight into the water. Bert landed with a splash in the middle of the pond, and the picture shattered into a thousand dancing fragments of light.

The spell was broken.

The Apprentice ran for it. Down to the Mott, along the path, racing as fast as he could, heading for the thin black canoe. He didn't get far. Bert, who had not taken kindly to being kicked into the pond, was after him. The Apprentice heard the flapping of the duck's powerful wings only a moment before he felt the peck of her beak on the back of his neck and the tug of his robes almost choking him. The duck took hold of his hood and pulled him toward Nicko.

“Oh, dear,” said Aunt Zelda, sounding worried.

“I wouldn't bother about him,” said Nicko angrily as he caught up with the Apprentice and got hold of him.

“I wasn't worried about *him*,” said Aunt Zelda. “I was just hoping that Bert didn't strain her beak.”

DEFROSTING



T*he Apprentice sat huddled* in the corner by the fire, with Bert still hanging on to one of his dangling damp sleeves. Jenna had locked all the doors and Nicko had locked the windows, leaving Boy 412 to keep watch over the Apprentice while they went to see how the Boggart was.

The Boggart lay at the bottom of the tin bath, a small mound of damp brown fur against the white of the sheet that Aunt Zelda had laid underneath him. He half opened his eyes and regarded his visitors with a bleary, unfocused gaze.

“Hello, Boggart. Are you feeling better?” asked Jenna.

The Boggart did not respond. Aunt Zelda dipped a sponge into a bucket of warm water and gently bathed him.

“Just keeping Boggart damp,” she said. “A dry Boggart is not a happy Boggart.”

“He’s not looking good, is he?” Jenna whispered to Nicko as they tiptoed quietly out of the kitchen with Aunt Zelda.

The Hunter, still poised outside the kitchen door, regarded Jenna with a baleful stare as she appeared. His piercing pale blue eyes locked on to her and followed her across the room. But the rest of him was as immobile as ever.

Jenna felt the stare and glanced up. A cold shiver shot through her. “He’s *looking* at me,” she said. “His eyes are *following* me.”

“Bother,” tutted Aunt Zelda. “He’s beginning to **DeFrost**. I’d better take this before it causes any more trouble.”

Aunt Zelda pulled the silver pistol out of the Hunter’s **Frozen** hand. His eyes flashed angrily as she expertly broke open the gun and removed a small silver ball from its chamber.

“Here you are,” Aunt Zelda said, handing the silver bullet to Jenna. “It has been looking for you for ten years, and now its search is over. You are safe now.”

Jenna smiled uncertainly and rolled the solid silver sphere around her palm with a sense of revulsion; although, she could not help but admire how perfect it was. Almost perfect. She lifted it up and squinted at a tiny nick in the ball. To her surprise there were two letters carved into the silver: I.P.

“What’s I.P. mean?” Jenna asked Aunt Zelda. “Look, it’s here on the bullet.”

Aunt Zelda did not reply for a moment. She knew what the letters meant, but she was unsure about telling Jenna.

“I.P.,” murmured Jenna, thinking it over. “I.P....”

“Infant Princess,” said Aunt Zelda. “A named bullet. A named bullet will always find its target. It doesn’t matter how or when, but find you it will. As yours has done. But not in the way they intended.”

“Oh,” said Jenna quietly. “So the other one, the one for my mother, did it have...”

“Yes, it did. It had Q on it.”

“Ah. Can I keep the pistol too?” asked Jenna.

Aunt Zelda looked surprised. “Well, I suppose so,” she said. “If you really

want to.”

Jenna took the gun and held it as she had seen both the Hunter and the Assassin do, feeling its heavy weight in her hand and the strange sense of power holding it gave her.

“Thank you,” she said to Aunt Zelda, handing the pistol back to her. “Can you keep it safe for me. For now?”

The Hunter’s eyes followed Aunt Zelda as she marched the pistol off to her Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard and locked it away. They followed her back again as she walked up to him and felt his ears. The Hunter looked furious. His eyebrows twitched, and his eyes flashed angrily, but nothing else moved.

“Good,” said Aunt Zelda, “his ears are still **Frozen**. He can’t hear what we say yet. We’ve got to decide what we’ll do with him before he **DeFrosts**.”

“Can’t you just **ReFreeze** him?” asked Jenna.

Aunt Zelda shook her head. “No,” she replied regretfully. “You shouldn’t **ReFreeze** someone once they start to **DeFrost**. It’s not safe for them. They can get **Freezer Burn**. Or else go horribly soggy. Not a nice sight. But still, the Hunter’s a dangerous man and he won’t give up the Hunt. Ever. And somehow we have to stop him hunting us.”

Jenna was thinking.

“We need,” she said, “to make him forget everything. Even who he is.” She chuckled. “We could make him think he’s a lion tamer or something.”

“And then he’d join a circus and find out that he wasn’t, just after he’d put his head into a lion’s mouth,” Nicko finished.

“We must not use **Magyk** to endanger life,” Aunt Zelda reminded them.

“He could be a clown, then,” said Jenna. “He’s scary enough.”

“Well, I have heard there’s a circus due in the Port any day now. I’m sure he’d find work.” Aunt Zelda smiled. “They take all sorts, I’m told.”

Aunt Zelda fetched an old, tattered book called **Magyk Memories**.

“You’re good at this,” she said, handing the book to Boy 412. “Can you

find the right **Charm** for me? I think it's called **Rogue Recollections.**"

Boy 412 leafed through the musty old book. It was one of those where most of the **Charms** had been lost, but toward the end of the book he found what he was looking for: a small, knotted handkerchief with some smudgy black writing along the hem.

"Good," said Aunt Zelda. "Perhaps you could do the spell for us, please?"

"*Me?*" asked Boy 412, surprised.

"If you wouldn't mind," replied Aunt Zelda. "My eyesight isn't up to it in this light." She reached up and checked the Hunter's ears. They were warm. The Hunter glared at her and narrowed his eyes in that familiar cold stare. No one took any notice.

"He can hear now," she said. "Best get this done before he can speak too."

Boy 412 carefully read the spell's instructions. Then he held the knotted handkerchief and said,

Whatever your Historie may be

'tis lost to You when you see Me.

Boy 412 waved the handkerchief in front of the Hunter's angry eyes; then he undid the knot. With that, the Hunter's eyes went blank. His gaze was no longer threatening, but bewildered and maybe a little frightened.

"Good," said Aunt Zelda. "That seems to have worked well. Can you do the next bit now, please?"

Boy 412 said quietly,

So listen to your new-sprung Ways,

Remember Now your diff'rent Days.

Aunt Zelda planted herself in front of the Hunter and addressed him firmly. “This,” she told him, “is the story of your life. You were born in a hovel down in the Port.”

“You were a horrible child,” Jenna told him. “And you had pimples.”

“No one liked you,” added Nicko.

The Hunter began to look very unhappy.

“Except your dog,” said Jenna, who was beginning to feel just a bit sorry for him.

“Your dog died,” said Nicko.

The Hunter looked devastated.

“*Nicko*,” remonstrated Jenna. “Don’t be mean.”

“*Me?* What about *him?*”

And so the Hunter’s horribly tragic life unfolded before him. It was riddled with unfortunate coincidences, stupid mistakes and highly embarrassing moments that made his newly **DeFrosted** ears go red at their sudden recollection. At last the sad tale was finished off with his unhappy Apprenticeship to an irascible clown known to all who worked for him as Dog Breath.

The Apprentice watched with a mixture of glee and horror. The Hunter had tormented him for so long, and the Apprentice was glad to see someone was at last getting the better of him. But he could not help but wonder what they were planning to do to *him*.

As the sorry tale of the Hunter’s past ended, Boy 412 reknotted the handkerchief and said,

What was your Life has gone away,

Another Past does now hold sway.

With some effort, they carried the Hunter outside like a large, unwieldy plank and set him up beside the Mott, so that he could finish **DeFrosting** out of the way. The Magog paid him no attention whatsoever, having just scooped its thirty-eighth Shield Bug out of the mud and being preoccupied with whether to take the wings off this one before it liquified it or not.

“Give me a nice garden gnome any day,” said Aunt Zelda, regarding her new and, she hoped, temporary garden ornament with distaste. “But that’s a job well done. Now all we’ve got to sort out is the Apprentice.”

“Septimus...” mused Jenna. “I can’t believe it. What will Mum and Dad say? He’s so *horrible*.”

“Well, I suppose growing up with DomDaniel hasn’t done him any good,” said Aunt Zelda.

“Boy 412 grew up in the Young Army, but he’s okay,” Jenna pointed out. “He would never have shot the Boggart.”

“I know,” agreed Aunt Zelda. “But maybe the Apprentice, er, Septimus will improve with time.”

“Maybe,” said Jenna doubtfully.

Sometime later, in the early hours of the morning, when Boy 412 had carefully tucked the green rock that Jenna gave him under his quilt to keep it warm and close to him—and just as they were at last settling down to sleep—there was a hesitant knock on the door.

Jenna sat up, scared. *Who was it?* She nudged Nicko and Boy 412 awake. Then she crept over to the window and silently drew back one of the shutters.

Nicko and Boy 412 stood by the door, armed with a broom and a heavy lamp.

The Apprentice sat up in his dark corner by the fire and smiled a smug smile. DomDaniel had sent a rescue party for him.

It was no rescue party, but Jenna went pale when she saw who it was.

“It’s the *Hunter*,” she whispered.

“He’s not coming in,” said Nicko. “No way.”

But the Hunter knocked again, louder.

“Go away!” Jenna yelled at him.

Aunt Zelda came out from tending the Boggart.

“See what he wants,” she said, “and we can send him on his way.”

So, against all her instincts, Jenna opened the door to the Hunter.

She hardly recognized him. Although he still wore the uniform of a Hunter, he no longer looked like one. He had gathered his thick green cloak around him like a beggar with a blanket, and he stood in the doorway apologetically and slightly stooped.

“I am sorry to trouble you gentle folk at this late hour,” he murmured. “But I fear I have lost my way. I wonder if you could direct me to the Port?”

“That way,” said Jenna curtly, pointing out over the marshes.

The Hunter looked confused. “I am not very good at finding my way, miss. Where exactly would that be?”

“Follow the moon,” Aunt Zelda told him. “She will guide you.”

The Hunter bowed humbly.

“Thank you kindly, Madam. I wonder if I could trouble you by asking if there might be a circus due in town? I have hopes of obtaining a position there as a buffoon.”

Jenna smothered a giggle.

“Yes, there is, as it happens,” Aunt Zelda told him. “Er, would you wait a minute?” She disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a small bag containing some bread and cheese.

“Take this,” she said, “and good luck with your new life.”

The Hunter bowed again.

“Why, thank you kindly, Madam,” he said and walked down to the Mott,

passing the sleeping Magog and his thin black canoe without a flicker of recognition, and out over the bridge.

Four silent figures stood at the doorway and watched the solitary figure of the Hunter pick his way uncertainly across the Marram Marshes toward his new life in

FISHHEAD AND DURDLE'S

TRAVELING CIRCUS

AND MENAGERIE

until a cloud covered the moon and the marshes were once again plunged into darkness.

THE APPOINTMENT



Later that night the Apprentice escaped through the cat tunnel.

Bert, who still had all the instincts of a cat, liked to go wandering at night, and Aunt Zelda would leave the door on a one-way **CharmLock**. This allowed Bert to go out, but nothing to come in. Not even Bert. Aunt Zelda was very careful about stray Brownies and Marsh Wraiths.

So, when everyone except for the Apprentice had fallen asleep and Bert had decided to go out for the night, the Apprentice thought that he would follow her. It was a tight squeeze, but the Apprentice, who was as thin as a snake and twice as wriggly, wormed his way through the narrow space. As he did so, the **Darke Magyk** which clung to his robes **DisEnchanted** the cat tunnel. Soon his flustered face emerged from the tunnel into the chill night air.

Bert met him with a sharp peck on the nose, but the Apprentice was not deterred. He was much more scared of getting stuck in the cat tunnel, with his feet still inside the house and his head on the outside, than he was of Bert. He had a feeling that no one would be in much of a hurry to pull him out if he did

get stuck. So he ignored the angry duck and, with a huge effort, wriggled free.

The Apprentice made straight for the landing stage, closely pursued by Bert, who tried to grab his collar again, but this time the Apprentice was ready for her. Angrily, he swatted her away, sending her crashing to the ground and badly bruising a wing.

The Magog was lying full length in the canoe, sleeping while it digested all fifty-six Shield Bugs. The Apprentice warily stepped over it. To his relief the creature did not stir—digestion was something a Magog took very seriously. The smell of Magog slime caught in the back of the Apprentice's throat, but he picked up the slime-covered paddle and was soon away down the Mott, heading out toward the maze of winding channels that crisscrossed the Marram Marshes and would take him to the Deppen Ditch.

As he left the cottage behind and traveled into the wide moonlit expanse of the marshes, the Apprentice began to feel a little uneasy. With the Magog sleeping, the Apprentice felt horribly unprotected and he remembered all the terrifying stories he had heard about the marshes at night. He paddled the canoe as quietly as he was able to, afraid of disturbing something that may not want to be disturbed. Or, even worse, something that might be *waiting* to be disturbed. All around him he could hear the nighttime noises of the marsh. He heard the muffled underground shrieking of a pack of Brownies as they pulled an unsuspecting Marsh Cat down into the Quake Ooze. And then there was a nasty scrabbling and squelching noise as two large Water Nixies tried to clamp their sucker pads onto the bottom of the canoe and chew their way into it, but they slipped off soon enough thanks to the remnants of the Magog's slime.

Sometime after the Water Nixies had dropped off, a Marsh Moaner appeared. Although it was only a small wisp of white mist, it gave off a dank smell that reminded the Apprentice of the burrow in DomDaniel's hideout. The Marsh Moaner sat itself down behind the Apprentice and started tunelessly singing the most mournful and irritating song the Apprentice had ever heard. The tune whirled around and around inside his head—“*Weerrghh-derr-waaaah-doooooooooooo...Weerrghh-derrwaaaah-doooooooooooo...Weerrghh-derr-waaaah-doooooooooooo...*”—until the Apprentice felt he might go mad.

He tried to bat the Moaner away with his paddle, but it went straight through the wailing scrap of mist, unbalanced the canoe and nearly sent the Apprentice tumbling out into the dark water. And still the awful tune went on, a little mockingly now that the Moaner knew it had the Apprentice's

attention: “*Weerrghh-derr-waaaah-doooooooooooo...Weerrghh-derr-waaaah-doooooooooooo...oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo...*”

“Stop it!” yelled the Apprentice, unable to stand the noise a moment longer. He stuffed his fingers into his ears and started singing in a voice loud enough to shut out the ghastly tune.

“*I’m not listening, I’m not listening, I’m not listening,*” the Apprentice chanted at the top of his lungs while the triumphant Moaner swirled around the canoe, pleased with its night’s work. It usually took the Marsh Moaner much longer to reduce a Young One to a gibbering wreck, but tonight it had struck lucky. Mission completed, the Marsh Moaner flattened out into a thin sheet of mist and wafted off to spend the rest of the night contentedly hanging above its favorite bog.

The Apprentice paddled doggedly on, no longer caring about the succession of Marsh Wraiths, Bogle Bugs and a very tempting array of Marshfire that danced about his canoe for hours. By then the Apprentice did not mind what anything did, as long as it didn’t *sing*.

As the sun rose over the far reaches of the Marram Marshes, the Apprentice realized he had become hopelessly lost. He was in the middle of a featureless expanse of marshland that all looked the same to him. He paddled wearily onward, not knowing what else to do, and it was midday before he reached a wide, straight stretch of water that looked as though it actually went somewhere, rather than petering out into yet another soggy morass. Exhausted, the Apprentice turned into what was the upper reaches of the Deppen Ditch and slowly headed toward the river. His discovery of the giant Marsh Python, lurking at the bottom of the Ditch and trying to straighten itself out, hardly even bothered the Apprentice. He was far too tired to care. He was also very determined. He had an appointment with DomDaniel, and *this* time he wasn’t going to mess things up. Very soon the Queenling would be sorry. They would *all* be sorry. Particularly the duck.

That morning, back at the cottage, no one could believe that the Apprentice had managed to squeeze out through the cat tunnel. “I’d have thought his head was too big to fit through it,” Jenna said scornfully.

Nicko went out to search the island, but he was soon back again. “The Hunter’s canoe is gone,” he said, “and that was a *fast* boat. He’ll be far away by now.”

“We’ve got to stop him,” said Boy 412, who knew only too well just how dangerous a boy like the Apprentice could be, “before he tells anyone where we are, which he will do as soon as he can.”

And so Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 took *Muriel Two* and set off in pursuit of the Apprentice. As the pale spring sun rose over the Marram Marshes, sending long glancing shadows across the mires and bogs, the ungainly *Muriel Two* took them through the maze of cuts and ditches. She traveled slow and steady, far too slow for Nicko, who knew how quickly the Hunter’s canoe must have covered the same distance. Nicko kept a watchful eye out for any sign of the sleek black canoe, half expecting to see it upturned in a Brownie Quake Ooze or drifting empty along a ditch, but to his disappointment he saw nothing apart from a long black log that only momentarily raised his hopes.

They stopped for a while to eat some goat cheese and sardine sandwiches beside the Marsh Moaners’ bog. But they were left in peace as the Moaners were long gone, evaporated in the warmth of the rising sun.

It was early afternoon and a gray drizzle had set in when, at last, they paddled into the Deppen Ditch. The Marsh Python lay dozing in the mud, half covered with the sluggish water of the recently turned incoming tide. It ignored *Muriel Two*, much to the occupants’ relief, and lay waiting for the fresh influx of fish that the rising tide would bring. The tide was very low, and the canoe sat well below the steep banks that rose up on either side of them, so it was not until they rounded the very last bend of the Deppen Ditch that Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 saw what was waiting for them.

The *Vengeance*.

THE MEETING



A shocked silence fell in the *Muriel Two* canoe.

Just a short paddle away, the *Vengeance* lay quietly at anchor in the early afternoon drizzle, still and steady in the middle of the river's deepwater channel. The massive black ship was a striking sight: its bow rose up like the steep side of a cliff, and with its tattered black sails furled, its two tall masts stood out like black bones against the overcast sky. An oppressive silence surrounded the ship in the gray light. No seagulls dared wheel around hoping for scraps. Small boats using the river saw the ship and hurried quietly along the shallow waters by the riverbank, more willing to risk running aground than to go near the notorious *Vengeance*. A heavy black cloud had formed above the masts, casting a dark shadow over the entire ship, and from the stern a blood-red flag with a line of three black stars fluttered ominously.

Nicko did not need the flag to tell him whose ship it was. No other ship had ever been painted with the strong black tar that DomDaniel used, and no other ship could have been surrounded by such a malevolent atmosphere. He gestured frantically to Jenna and Boy 412 to paddle backward, and a moment later *Muriel Two* was safely hidden behind the last bend of Deppen Ditch.

“What is it?” whispered Jenna.

“It’s the *Vengeance*,” whispered Nicko. “DomDaniel’s ship. I reckon it’s waiting for the Apprentice. I bet that’s where the little toad has gone. Pass me the eyeglass, Jen.”

Nicko put the telescope to his eye and saw exactly what he had feared. There in the deep shadows cast by the steep black sides of the hull was the Hunter’s canoe. It lay bobbing in the water, empty and dwarfed by the bulk of the *Vengeance*, tied to the foot of a long rope ladder that led up to the ship’s deck.

The Apprentice had kept his appointment.

“It’s too late,” said Nicko. “He’s there. Oh, yuck, what’s that? Oh, *disgusting*. That **Thing**’s just slipped out from inside the canoe. It’s so *slimy*. But it can certainly get up a rope ladder. It’s like some gruesome monkey.” Nicko shuddered.

“Can you see the Apprentice?” whispered Jenna.

Nicko swept the eyeglass up the rope ladder. He nodded. Sure enough, the Apprentice had almost reached the top, but he had stopped and was staring down in horror at the rapidly climbing **Thing**. In a matter of moments the Magog had reached the Apprentice and scuttled over him, leaving a trail of vivid yellow slime across the back of his robes. The Apprentice seemed to falter for a moment and almost loosen his grip on the ladder, but he struggled up the last few rungs and collapsed on the deck, where he lay unnoticed for some time.

Serves him right, thought Nicko.

They decided to take a closer look at the *Vengeance* on foot. They tied *Muriel Two* to a rock and walked along to the beach where they had had the midnight picnic the night of their escape from the Castle. As they rounded the bend Jenna got a shock. Someone was already there. She stopped dead and ducked back behind an old tree trunk. Boy 412 and Nicko bumped into her.

“What is it?” whispered Nicko.

“There’s someone on the beach,” whispered Jenna. “Maybe it’s someone from the ship. Keeping guard.”

Nicko peered around the tree trunk.

“It’s not someone from the ship.” He smiled.

“How do you know?” asked Jenna. “It could be.”

“Because it’s Alther.”

Alther Mella was sitting on the beach, staring mournfully out into the drizzle. He had been there for days, hoping that someone from Keeper’s Cottage would turn up. He needed to talk to them urgently.

“Alther?” whispered Jenna.

“Princess!” Alther’s careworn face lit up. He wafted over to Jenna and enfolded her in a warm hug. “Well, I do believe you’ve grown since I last saw you.”

Jenna put her fingers to her lips. “Shhh, they might hear us, Alther,” she said.

Alther looked surprised. He wasn’t used to Jenna telling him what to do.

“They can’t hear me.” He chuckled. “Not unless I want them to. And they can’t hear you either—I’ve put up a **Scream Screen**. They won’t hear a thing.”

“Oh, Alther,” said Jenna. “It is so lovely to see you. Isn’t it, Nicko?”

Nicko had a big grin on his face. “It’s great,” he said.

Alther gave Boy 412 a quizzical look. “Here’s someone else who’s grown too.” He smiled. “Those Young Army lads are always so painfully thin. It’s nice to see you’ve filled out a bit.”

Boy 412 blushed.

“He’s nice now too, Uncle Alther,” Jenna told the ghost.

“I expect he was always nice, Princess,” said Alther. “But you’re not allowed to be nice in the Young Army. It’s forbidden.”

He smiled at Boy 412.

Boy 412 smiled shyly back.

They sat on the drizzly beach, just out of sight of the *Vengeance*.

“How’s Mum and Dad?” asked Nicko.

“And Simon?” asked Jenna. “What about Simon?”

“Ah, Simon,” said Alther. “Simon had deliberately slipped away from Sarah in the Forest. Seems he and Lucy Gringe had planned to secretly get married.”

“What?” said Nicko. “Simon got *married*?”

“No. Gringe found out and shipped him to the Custodian Guards.”

“Oh, no!” gasped Jenna and Nicko.

“Oh, don’t worry yourselves about Simon,” said Alther, strangely unsympathetic. “How he managed to spend all that time in the custody of the Supreme Custodian and come out looking like he’d had a holiday, I don’t know. Although I have my suspicions.”

“How do you mean, Uncle Alther?” asked Jenna.

“Oh, it’s probably nothing, Princess.” Alther seemed unwilling to say any more about Simon.

There was something Boy 412 wanted to ask but it felt odd talking to a ghost. But he had to ask, so he plucked up his courage and said, “Er, excuse me, but what’s happened to Marcia? Is she all right?”

Alther sighed. “No,” he said.

“No?” three voices asked at once.

“She was set up,” Alther frowned. “Set up by the Supreme Custodian and the Rat Office. He’s put his own rats in. Or rather DomDaniel’s rats. And a vicious lot they are too. They used to run the spy network back at DomDaniel’s place in the Badlands. They’ve got a very nasty reputation. Came in with the plague rats hundreds of years ago. Not nice.”

“You mean our Message Rat was one of *them*?” asked Jenna, thinking of how she had rather liked him.

“No, no. He got marched off by the Rat Office heavies. He’s disappeared. Poor rat. I wouldn’t give much for his chances,” said Alther.

“Oh. That’s awful,” said Jenna.

“And the message for Marcia wasn’t from Silas either,” said Alther.

“I didn’t think it *was*,” said Nicko.

“It was from the Supreme Custodian,” Alther said. “So when Marcia turned up at the Palace Gate to meet Silas, the Custodian Guards were waiting for her. Of course that wouldn’t have been a problem for Marcia if she had got her **Midnight Minutes** right, but her timepiece was twenty minutes slow. *And* she’d given away her **KeepSafe**. It’s a bad business. DomDaniel has taken the Amulet, so I am afraid he’s now...the ExtraOrdinary Wizard.”

Jenna and Nicko were speechless. This was worse than anything they had feared.

“Excuse me,” ventured Boy 412, who felt terrible. It was his fault. If he had been her Apprentice then he could have helped her. This never would have happened. “Marcia is still...alive, isn’t she?”

Alther looked at Boy 412. His faded green eyes had a kindly expression as, using his unsettling habit of reading people’s minds, he said, “You couldn’t have done anything, lad. They would have got you too. She *was* in Dungeon Number One, but now—”

Boy 412 put his head in his hands in despair. He knew all about Dungeon Number One.

Alther put a ghostly arm around his shoulder. “Don’t fret now,” he told him. “I was with her for most of the time and she was doing all right. Kept going pretty well, I thought. All things considered. A few days ago I just popped out to check on various little...projects I have going on in DomDaniel’s rooms at the Tower. When I got back to the dungeon she was gone. I’ve looked everywhere I can. I even have some of the Ancients looking. You know, the really old ghosts. But they’re very faded and easily confused. Most of them don’t know their way around the Castle very well anymore—they come up against a new wall or staircase and they’re stuck.

They can't work it out. I had to go and get one out of the kitchen midden yesterday. Apparently it used to be the Wizard's refectory. About five hundred years ago. Frankly the Ancients, sweet as they are, are more trouble than they are worth." Alther sighed. "Although I do wonder if..."

"If what?" asked Jenna.

"If she might be on the *Vengeance*. Unfortunately I can't get on the wretched ship to find out."

Alther was cross with himself. He would now advise any ExtraOrdinary Wizard to go to as many places as they could in their lifetime so that as a ghost they were not as thwarted as he had been. But it was too late for Alther to change what he had done while he was alive; he had to make the best of it now.

At least, when he was first appointed Apprentice, DomDaniel had insisted on taking Alther on a long and very unpleasant tour of the deepest dungeons. At the time Alther had never dreamed that one day he might come to be glad of it, but if only he had accepted an invitation to the launching party on the *Vengeance*...Alther remembered how, as one of some promising young potential Apprentices, he had been invited to a party on board DomDaniel's boat. Alther had turned down the invitation on account of the fact it was Alice Nettles's birthday. No women were allowed on the ship, and Alther was certainly not going to leave Alice alone on her birthday. At the party, the potential Apprentices had run riot and caused a great deal of damage to the ship, thus ensuring that they had no hope of being offered as much as a cleaning job with the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Not long afterward Alther was offered the ExtraOrdinary Wizard Apprenticeship. Alther had never got the chance to visit the ship again. After the disastrous party, DomDaniel took her up to Bleak Creek for a refit. Bleak Creek was an eerie anchorage full of abandoned and rotting ships. The **Necromancer** had liked it so much that he left his ship there and visited every year for his summer holiday.

The subdued group sat on the damp beach. They gloomily ate the last of the damp goat cheese and sardine sandwiches and drank the dregs from the flask of beetroot and carrot cordial.

"There are some times," said Alther reflectively, "when I really miss not being able to eat anymore..."

“But this isn’t one of them?” Jenna finished for him.

“Spot on, Princess.”

Jenna fished Petroc Trelawney out of her pocket and offered him a sticky mix of squashed sardine and goat cheese. Petroc opened his eyes and looked at the offering. The pet rock was surprised. This was the kind of food he usually got from Boy 412; Jenna always gave him biscuits. But he ate it anyway, apart from a piece of goat cheese that stuck to his head and then later to the inside of Jenna’s pocket.

When they had finished chewing the last of the soggy sandwiches, Alther said seriously, “Now, down to business.”

Three worried faces looked at the ghost.

“Listen to me, all of you. You must go *straight* back to Keeper’s Cottage. I want you to tell Zelda to take you all to the Port first thing tomorrow morning. Alice—she is Chief Customs Officer down there now—is finding you a ship. You are to go to the Far Countries while I try and sort things out here.”

“*But—*” gasped Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412.

Alther ignored their protest.

“I will meet you all at the Blue Anchor Tavern on the Harbor tomorrow morning. You *must* be there. Your mother and father are coming too, along with Simon. They are on their way down the river in my old boat, *Molly*. I am afraid that Sam, Erik and Edd and Jo-Jo have refused to leave the Forest—they have gone quite wild, but Morwenna will keep an eye on them.”

There was an unhappy silence. No one liked what Alther had said.

“That’s running away,” Jenna said quietly. “We want to stay. And fight.”

“I knew you’d say that,” sighed Alther. “It is just what your mother would have said. But you *must* go now.”

Nicko stood up.

“All right,” he said reluctantly. “We’ll see you tomorrow at the Port.”

“Good,” said Alther. “Now, be careful and I’ll see you all tomorrow.” He

floated up and watched the three of them trail disconsolately back to the *Muriel Two*. Alther stayed watching until he was satisfied that they were making good progress along the Deppen Ditch and then he sped off along the river, flying low and fast, off to join *Molly*. Soon he was just a small speck in the distance.

Which was when the *Muriel Two* turned around and headed straight back toward the *Vengeance*.

41

THE VENGEANCE



There was much discussion in the *Muriel Two*.

“I really don’t know about this. Marcia might not even *be* on the *Vengeance*.”

“I bet she is, though.”

“We’ve *got* to find her. I’m sure I could rescue her.”

“Look, just because you’ve been in the Army doesn’t mean you can go storming ships and rescuing people.”

“It means you can *try*.”

“He’s right, Nicko.”

“We’d never make it. They’ll see us coming. Every ship always has a watch on board.”

“But we could do that spell, you know the one...what was it?”

“**Cause Yourself to be Unseen.** Easy. Then we could paddle out to the

ship and I'll climb up the rope ladder, and then—"

"Whoa, stop there. That's *dangerous*."

"Marcia rescued *me* when *I* was in danger."

"And *me*."

"All right. You win."

As the *Muriel Two* rounded the last bend of the Deppen Ditch, Boy 412 reached up into the pocket inside his red beanie hat and drew out the dragon ring.

"What's that ring?" asked Nicko.

"Um, it's **Magyk**. I found it. Under the ground."

"It looks a bit like the dragon on the Amulet," said Nicko.

"Yes," said Boy 412, "I thought that too." He slipped it on his finger and felt the ring grow warm. "Shall I do the spell, then?" he asked.

Jenna and Nicko nodded and Boy 412 began to chant:

Let me Fade into the Aire

Let all against me know not Where

Let them that Seeke me pass me by

Let Harme not reach me from their Eye.

Boy 412 slowly faded into the drizzle, leaving a canoe paddle hanging eerily in midair. Jenna took a deep breath and tried the spell for herself.

"You're still there, Jen," said Nicko. "Try again."

The third time was a charm. Jenna's canoe paddle now hovered in the air next to Boy 412's.

“Your turn, Nicko,” said Jenna’s voice.

“Hang on a minute,” said Nicko. “I never did this one.”

“Well, do your own, then,” said Jenna. “It doesn’t matter as long as it works.”

“Well, er, I don’t know if it *does* work. And it doesn’t do the ‘**Harme not reach me**’ thing at all.”

“*Nicko!*” protested Jenna.

“All right, all right. I’ll try it.”

“**Not seen, Not heard**...um...I can’t remember the rest.”

“Try ‘**Not seen, not heard, not a whisper, not a word**,’” suggested Boy 412 from out of nowhere.

“Oh, yes. That’s it. Thanks.”

The spell worked. Nicko faded slowly away.

“You all right, Nicko?” asked Jenna. “I can’t see you.”

There was no reply.

“Nicko?”

Nicko’s paddle waggled frantically up and down.

“We can’t see him and he can’t see us because his **Unseen** is different from ours,” said Boy 412 slightly disapprovingly, “and we won’t be able to hear him either, because it’s mainly a silent spell. And it doesn’t protect him.”

“Not a lot of good, then,” said Jenna.

“No,” said Boy 412. “But I’ve got an idea. This should do it:

Between the spells within our power,

Give us one Harmonious Hour.

“There he is!” said Jenna, as the shadowy form of Nicko **Appeared**. “Nicko, can you see *us*?” she asked.

Nicko grinned and made a thumbs-up sign.

“Wow, you’re *good*,” Jenna told Boy 412.

It was becoming misty as Nicko, using the silent part of his spell, paddled them out from the Deppen Ditch into the open waters of the river. The water was calm and heavy, spotted with a fine drizzle. Nicko was careful to create as little disturbance as possible, just in case a pair of keen eyes from the crow’s nest might be drawn to the strange swirls on the surface of the water, steadily making their way toward the ship.

Nicko made good progress, and soon the steep black sides of the *Vengeance* reared up before them through the misty drizzle, and the **Unseen Muriel Two** reached the bottom of the rope ladder. They decided that Nicko would stay with the canoe while Jenna and Boy 412 tried to find out if Marcia was being held on the ship and, if possible, set her free. If they needed any help, Nicko would be ready. Jenna hoped they wouldn’t. She knew that Nicko’s spell would not protect him if he got into any trouble. Nicko held the canoe steady while first Jenna and then Boy 412 climbed uncertainly onto the ladder and started the long precarious climb to the *Vengeance*.

Nicko watched them with an uneasy feeling. He knew that **Unseens** can leave shadows and strange disturbances in the air, and a **Necromancer** like DomDaniel would have no trouble spotting them. But all Nicko could do was silently wish them luck. He had decided that if they did not come back by the time the tide had risen halfway up the Deppen Ditch, he would go in search of them, whether his spell protected him or not.

To pass the time, Nicko climbed into the Hunter’s canoe. He may as well make the most of his wait, he thought, and sit in a decent boat. Even if it was a bit slimy. And *smelly*. But he’d smelled worse in some of the fishing boats he used to help out on.

It was a long climb up the rope ladder and not an easy one. The ladder kept bumping against the ship’s sticky black sides and Jenna was afraid that someone on board might hear them, but all was quiet above. So quiet that she

began to wonder if it was some kind of ghost ship.

As they reached the top, Boy 412 made the mistake of looking down. He felt sick. His head swam with the giddy sensation of height, and he very nearly lost his grip on the rope ladder as his hands became suddenly clammy. The water was dizzyingly far away. The Hunter's canoe looked tiny, and for a moment he thought he saw someone sitting in it. Boy 412 shook his head. Don't look down, he told himself sternly. *Don't look down.*

Jenna had no fear of heights. She easily clambered up onto the *Vengeance* and hauled Boy 412 over the gap between ladder and deck. Boy 412 kept his eyes firmly fixed on Jenna's boots as he wriggled onto the deck and shakily stood up.

Jenna and Boy 412 looked around them.

The *Vengeance* was an eerie place. The heavy cloud hanging overhead cast a deep shadow over the entire ship, and the only sound they could hear was the quiet rhythmic creaking of the ship itself as it rocked gently on the incoming tide. Jenna and Boy 412 padded quietly along the deck, past neatly coiled ropes, orderly lines of tarred barrels and the occasional cannon pointing out menacingly over the Marram Marshes. Apart from the oppressive blackness and a few traces of yellow slime on the deck, the ship bore no clues as to who it belonged to. However, when they reached the prow, a strong **Darke** presence almost knocked Boy 412 off his feet. Jenna carried on, unaware of anything, and Boy 412 followed her, not wanting to leave her alone.

The **Darkenesse** came from an imposing throne, set up by the foremast, looking out to sea. It was a massive piece of furniture, strangely out of place on the deck of a ship. It was ornately carved from ebony and embellished with a deep red gold leaf—and it contained DomDaniel, the **Necromancer**, himself. Sitting bolt upright, his eyes closed, his mouth slightly open and a low, wet gurgle emanating from the back of his throat as he breathed in the drizzle, DomDaniel was taking his afternoon nap. Underneath the throne, like a faithful dog, lay a sleeping **Thing** in a pool of yellow slime.

Suddenly Boy 412 clutched Jenna's arm so hard that she nearly cried out. He pointed to DomDaniel's waist. Jenna glanced down and then looked at Boy 412 in despair. So it was true. She had hardly been able to believe what Alther had told them but here, in front of her eyes, was the truth. Around DomDaniel's waist, almost hidden in his dark robes, was the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's belt. *Marcia's* ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt.

Jenna and Boy 412 stared at DomDaniel with a mixture of disgust and fascination. The **Necromancer**'s fingers gripped the ebony arms of the throne; his thick yellow fingernails curved around the ends and clipped on to the wood like a set of claws. His face still had the telltale gray pallor it had acquired during his years spent **Underground**, before he had moved out into his lair in the Badlands. It was an unremarkable face in many ways—maybe the eyes were a little too deep set, and the mouth a little too cruel for it to be wholly pleasant—but it was the **Darke** that lay beneath that made Jenna and Boy 412 shudder as they gazed at it.

On his head DomDaniel wore a cylindrical black hat shaped like a short stovepipe, which, for some reason he did not understand, was always a little too big for him, regardless of how often he had a new one made to fit. This bothered DomDaniel more than he liked to admit, and he had become convinced that since his return to the Wizard Tower his head had started to shrink. While the **Necromancer** slept, the hat had slipped down and was now resting on the top of his whitish ears. The black hat was an old-fashioned Wizard hat, which no Wizard had worn, or had wanted to wear, since it had been associated with the great Wizard **Inquisition** many hundreds of years ago.

Above the throne a dark red silk canopy, emblazoned with a trio of black stars, hung heavily in the drizzle, dripping every now and then onto the hat and filling up the indentation in the top with a pool of water.

Boy 412 took hold of Jenna's hand. He remembered a small, moth-eaten pamphlet of Marcia's he had read one snowy afternoon called **The Hypnotik Effect of the Darke**, and he could feel Jenna being drawn in. He pulled her away from the sleeping figure toward an open hatch.

"Marcia's *here*," he whispered to Jenna. "I can feel her **Presence**."

As they reached the hatch there was a sound of footsteps running along the deck below and then rapidly climbing the ladder. Jenna and Boy 412 jumped back and a sailor holding a long, unlit torch ran up onto the deck. The sailor was a small, wiry man dressed in the usual Custodian black; unlike the Custodian Guards he was not shaven-headed but had long hair carefully tied back in a thin dark plait that straggled halfway down his back. He had baggy trousers that reached to just below his knee and a top with broad black and white stripes running across it. The sailor took out a tinder box, struck a spark and lit his torch. The torch flared to life, and a brilliant orange flame lit up the gray drizzly afternoon, casting dancing shadows across the deck. The sailor

walked forward with the blazing torch and placed it in a holder on the prow of the ship. DomDaniel opened his eyes. His nap was over.

The sailor hovered nervously beside the throne, awaiting his instructions from the **Necromancer**.

“Are they returned?” came a low, hollow voice that made the hair on the back of Boy 412’s neck stand up.

The sailor bowed, avoiding the **Necromancer**’s gaze.

“The boy is returned, my lord. And your servant.”

“Is that *all*?”

“Yes, my lord. But...”

“But *what*?”

“The boy says that he captured the Princess, sire.”

“The *Queenling*. Well, well. *Wonders* will never *cease*. Bring them to me. *Now!*”

“Yes, my lord.” The sailor bowed low.

“And—bring up the *prisoner*. She will be *interested* to see her erstwhile charge.”

“Her what, sire?”

“The *Queenling*, wretch. Get them *all* up here. *Now!*”

The sailor disappeared through the hatchway, and soon Jenna and Boy 412 could feel movement below their feet. Deep in the hold of the ship, things were stirring. Sailors were tumbling from their hammocks, putting down their carvings, knottings or unfinished ships in bottles and turning out onto the lower deck to do DomDaniel’s bidding.

DomDaniel eased off his throne, a little stiff from his doze in the chill drizzle, and blinked as a runnel of water from the top of his hat landed in his eye. Irritated, he kicked the sleeping Magog awake. The **Thing** oozed itself out from under the throne and followed DomDaniel along the deck, where the **Necromancer** stood, arms folded, a look of anticipation upon his face,

waiting for those he had summoned.

Soon a heavy footfall could be heard below, and a few moments later half a dozen deckhands appeared and took up their positions as guard around DomDaniel. They were followed by the hesitant figure of the Apprentice. The boy looked white, and Jenna could see that his hands were trembling. DomDaniel barely gave him a glance. His eyes were still fixed on the open hatch, waiting for his prize, the Princess, to appear.

But no one came.

Time seemed to slow down. The deckhands shifted about, unsure of what they were actually waiting for, and the Apprentice's nervous tic below his left eye started up. Every now and then he glanced up at his Master and quickly away again as if afraid DomDaniel may catch his eye. After what seemed an age DomDaniel demanded, "Well, where *is* she, boy?"

"Wh-who, sir?" stammered the Apprentice, although he knew perfectly well who the **Necromancer** meant.

"The *Queenling*, you beetlebrain. Who do you think I meant? Your idiot mother?"

"N-no, sir."

More footsteps were heard below.

"Ah," muttered DomDaniel. "At *last*."

But it was Marcia who was pushed out through the hatch by an accompanying Magog, who held her arm tightly in its long yellow claw. Marcia tried to shake it off, but the **Thing** was stuck to her like glue and had covered her with streaks of yellow slime. Marcia looked down at it in disgust, and she kept exactly the same expression on her face as she turned to meet DomDaniel's triumphant gaze. Even after a month locked away in the dark and with her **Magykal** powers drained from her, Marcia cut an impressive figure. Her dark hair, wild and unkempt, had an angry look to it; her salt-stained robes had a simple dignity and her purple python shoes were, as ever, spotless. Jenna could tell that she had unsettled DomDaniel.

"Ah, Miss Overstrand. So kind of you to drop by," he murmured.

Marcia did not reply.

“Well, Miss Overstrand, this is the reason I have been keeping you. I wanted you to see this little...*finale*. We have an interesting little bit of news for you, do we not, Septimus?” The Apprentice nodded uncertainly.

“My trusted Apprentice has been visiting some *friends* of yours, Miss Overstrand. In a *sweet* little cottage over thereabouts.” DomDaniel waved his ring-encrusted hand toward the Marram Marshes.

Something in Marcia’s expression changed.

“Ah, I see you know who I mean, Miss Overstrand. I rather *thought* you might. Now, my Apprentice here has reported a *successful* mission.”

The Apprentice tried to say something but was waved quiet by his Master.

“Even *I* have not heard the full details. I am sure *you* would want to be the *first* to hear the good news. So now Septimus is going to tell us *all*. Aren’t you, boy?”

The Apprentice stood up reluctantly. He looked very nervous. In a reedy voice, he started to speak hesitantly, “I...um...”

“Speak up, boy. No good if we can’t hear a *word* you’re saying, now *is* it?” DomDaniel told him.

“I...er, I have found the Princess. The Queenling.”

There was an air of restlessness among the audience. Jenna got the impression that this news was not entirely welcome to the assembled deckhands, and she remembered Aunt Zelda telling her that DomDaniel would never win over the seafaring people.

“Go on, boy,” prompted DomDaniel impatiently.

“I—the Hunter and me, we captured the cottage and, um, also the White Witch, Zelda Zanuba Heap, and the Wizard boy, Nickolas Benjamin Heap, *and* the Young Army deserter, Expendable Boy 412. And I *did* capture the Princess—the Queenling.”

The Apprentice paused. A look of panic had appeared in his eyes. What was he going to say? How was he going to explain away the lack of the Princess and the disappearance of the Hunter?

“You *did* capture the Queenling?” asked DomDaniel suspiciously.

“Yes, sir. I *did*. But...”

“But *what*?”

“But. Well, sir, after the Hunter was overpowered by the White Witch and left to become a buffoon—”

“A *buffoon*? Are you trying to be *funny* with me, *boy*? If you are, I would *not* advise it.”

“No, sir. I am not trying to be funny at all, sir.” The Apprentice had never felt less like being funny in his entire life. “After the Hunter left, sir, I managed to capture the Queenling single-handed, and I nearly got away but —”

“Nearly? You *nearly* got away?”

“Yes, sir. It was very close. I was attacked with a knife by the mad Wizard boy Nickolas Heap. He is very dangerous, sir. And the Queenling escaped.”

“*Escaped?!*” roared DomDaniel, towering over the trembling Apprentice. “You come back and you call your mission a success? Some *success*. First you tell me that the wretched Hunter has become a *buffoon*, then you tell me that you were thwarted by a pathetic White Witch and some pesky runaway kids. And *now* you tell me that the Queenling has *escaped*. The whole point of the mission, *the whole point*, was to capture the upstart Queenling. So what part of it *exactly* do you call a *success*?”

“Well, we know where she is now,” the Apprentice mumbled.

“We knew where she was *before*, boy. That was why you *went* there in the *first* place.”

DomDaniel raised his eyes to heaven. What was wrong with his cabbagehead Apprentice? Surely the seventh son of a seventh son should have *some Magyk* about him by now? *Surely* he should have been strong enough to triumph over a ragtag group of hopeless Wizards holed up in the middle of nowhere? A feeling of rage bubbled up through DomDaniel.

“*Why?*” he screamed. “Why am I surrounded by fools?” Spitting with anger now, DomDaniel caught sight of Marcia’s expression of contempt

mixed with relief at the news she had just heard.

“Take the prisoner away!” he yelled. “Lock her up and throw away the key. She’s *finished*.”

“Not yet,” Marcia replied quietly, deliberately turning her back on DomDaniel.

Suddenly, to Jenna’s horror, Boy 412 stepped out from the shelter of the barrel and moved silently toward Marcia. Carefully, he slipped between the **Thing** and the deckhands who were pushing Marcia roughly back toward the hatch. The contemptuous expression in Marcia’s eyes changed to astonishment, then rapidly to a studied blankness, and Boy 412 knew that she had seen him. Quickly, he took his dragon ring from his finger and pressed it into Marcia’s hand. Marcia’s green eyes met his as, unseen by the guards, she slipped the ring into her tunic pocket. Boy 412 did not linger. He turned away, and in his haste to get back to Jenna, he brushed against a deckhand.

“Halt!” shouted the man. “Who goes there?”

Everyone on the deck froze. Except for Boy 412, who darted away and grabbed hold of Jenna. It was time to go.

“Interlopers!” screamed DomDaniel. “I can see *shadows*! *Get them!!*”

In a panic the crew of the *Vengeance* looked around. They could see nothing. Had their Master finally gone mad? They had been expecting it long enough.

In the confusion, Jenna and Boy 412 made it back to the rope ladder and down to the canoes faster than they would have thought possible. Nicko had seen them coming. They were just in time—the **Unseen** was wearing off.

Above them the commotion on the ship raged as torches were lit and all possible hiding places were searched. Someone cut the rope ladder and, as the *Muriel Two* and the Hunter’s canoe paddled away into the mist, it fell with a splash and sank into the dark waters of the rising tide.

42

THE STORM



Get them! I want them caught!” DomDaniel’s bellows of rage echoed through the mist.

Jenna and Boy 412 paddled *Muriel Two* as hard as they could toward the Deppen Ditch, and Nicko, who would not be parted from the Hunter’s canoe, followed them.

Another yell from DomDaniel caught their attention: “Send the swimmers out. *Now!*”

There was a lull in the sounds emanating from the *Vengeance* while the only two sailors on board who could swim were pursued around the deck and caught. Two loud splashes followed as they were thrown overboard to give

chase.

The occupants of the canoes ignored the gasps coming from the water and pressed on toward the safety of the Marram Marshes. Far behind them the two swimmers, who had been knocked half unconscious by the huge drop, swam around in circles in a state of shock, realizing that what the old seafarers had told them was true: it was indeed unlucky for a sailor to know how to swim.

On the deck of the *Vengeance*, DomDaniel retreated to his throne. The deckhands had shrunk away after being made to throw two of their shipmates overboard, and DomDaniel had the deck to himself. A deep chill surrounded him as he sat on his throne and immersed himself in his **Darke Magyk**, chanting and wailing his way through a long and complicated **Reverse Incantation**.

DomDaniel was **Summoning** up the tides.

The incoming tide obeyed him. It gathered itself up from the sea and poured in, tumbling and churning past the Port, funneling itself up into the river, dragging with it dolphins and jellyfish, turtles and seals as they were all swept along with the irresistible current. The water rose. Higher and higher it climbed while the canoes struggled slowly across the surging river. As the canoes reached the mouth of the Deppen Ditch, it became even more difficult to control them in the tide race that was quickly filling up the Ditch.

“It’s too rough,” yelled Jenna over the rush of the water, fighting with her paddle against yet another eddy as *Muriel Two* pitched from side to side in the swirling waters. The flood tide carried the canoes along with it, taking them into the Ditch at breakneck speed, twisting and turning helplessly in the wild surge. As they were thrown along like so much flotsam and jetsam, Nicko could see that already the water was brimming to the top of the Ditch. He had never known anything like it before.

“Something’s wrong,” he yelled back at Jenna. “It shouldn’t be like this!”

“It’s him!” shouted Boy 412, waving his paddle in the direction of DomDaniel and immediately wishing he hadn’t as *Muriel Two* lurched sickeningly to one side. “Listen!”

As the *Vengeance* had begun to rise high in the water and tug on her anchor chain, DomDaniel had changed his **Commands** and was shouting above the roar of the tide. “**Blow! Blow! Blow!**” he screamed. “**Blow! Blow! Blow!**”

The wind gathered and did what it was **Commanded** to do. It came in fast with a wild howl, throwing the surface of the water into waves and pitching the canoes violently from side to side. It blew away the mist and, perched high up in the water at the top of Deppen Ditch, Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 could now see the *Vengeance* clearly.

The *Vengeance* could also see them.

On the prow of the ship DomDaniel took out his eyeglass and searched until he saw what he was looking for.

Canoes.

And as he studied the occupants his worst fears were realized. There was no mistaking the long dark hair and the golden circlet of the girl in the front of the strange green canoe. It was the *Queenling*. The *Queenling* had been on board his ship. She had been running around, under his very nose, and he had let her escape.

DomDaniel became strangely quiet as he gathered his energies and **Summoned** the most powerful **Storm** he could muster.

The **Darke Magyk** turned the howl of the wind into an earsplitting shriek. Black storm clouds came sweeping in and piled high over the bleak expanse of the Marram Marshes. The late afternoon light grew dim, and dark cold waves began to break over the canoes.

“The water’s coming in. I’m soaked,” yelled Jenna as she fought to keep control of *Muriel Two* while Boy 412 frantically bailed out the water. Nicko was having trouble in the Hunter’s canoe—a wave had just crashed over him and the canoe was now awash. Another wave like that, thought Nicko, and he’d be at the bottom of the Deppen Ditch.

And then suddenly there *was* no Deppen Ditch.

With a roar the banks of Deppen Ditch gave way. A massive wave surged through the breach and roared out across the Marram Marshes, taking all with it: dolphins, turtles, jellyfish, seals, swimmers...and two canoes.

The speed at which Nicko was traveling was faster than he had ever dreamed possible. It was both terrifying and exciting at once. But the Hunter’s canoe rode the crest of the wave lightly and easily, as though this was the moment it had been waiting for.

Jenna and Boy 412 were not quite as thrilled as Nicko at the turn of events. *Muriel Two* was a contrary old canoe, and she did not take to this new way of traveling at all. They had to fight hard to stop her from being rolled over by the massive wave that was thundering across the marsh.

As the water spread across the marsh, the wave began to lose some of its power, and Jenna and Boy 412 were able to steer *Muriel Two* more easily. Nicko maneuvered the Hunter's canoe along the wave toward them, deftly twisting and turning it as he went.

"That is the best thing ever!" he shouted above the rush of the water.

"You're crazy!" yelled Jenna, still struggling with her paddle to stop *Muriel Two* from tipping over.

The wave was fading fast now, slowing its pace and losing most of its power as the water that drove it sank into the wide expanse of the marshes, filling the ditches, the bogs, the slimes and the Ooze with clear, cold salt water and leaving an open sea behind it. Soon the wave was gone, and Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 were adrift on an open sea that stretched into the distance as far as they could see, dotted with little islands here and there.

As they paddled the canoes in what they hoped was the right direction, a threatening darkness began to fall as the storm clouds gathered high above them. The temperature dropped sharply, and the air became charged with electricity. Soon a warning roll of thunder rumbled across the sky and large spots of heavy rain began to fall. Jenna looked out over the cold gray mass of water before them and wondered how they were going to find their way home.

In the distance on one of the farthest islands, Boy 412 saw a flickering light. Aunt Zelda was lighting her storm candles and placing them in the windows.

The canoes picked up speed and headed home as the thunder rolled and sheets of silent lightning began to light up the sky.

Aunt Zelda's door was open. She was expecting them.

They tied the canoes to the boot scraper by the front door and walked into the strangely silent cottage. Aunt Zelda was in the kitchen with the Boggart.

“We’re back!” yelled Jenna. Aunt Zelda came out of the kitchen, quietly closing the door behind her.

“Did you find him?” she asked.

“Find who?” said Jenna.

“The Apprentice boy. Septimus.”

“Oh, *him*.” So much had happened since they had set off that morning that Jenna had forgotten why they went in the first place.

“My goodness, you got back just in time. It’s dark already,” said Aunt Zelda, bustling over to close the door.

“Yes, it’s—”

“Aargh!” screamed Aunt Zelda as she reached the door and saw the water lapping at the doorstep, not to mention two canoes bobbing up and down outside.

“We’re flooded. The animals! They’ll drown.”

“They’re all right,” Jenna reassured her. “The chickens are all there on top of the chicken boat—we counted them. And the goat has climbed up onto the roof.”

“The *roof*?”

“Yes, she was eating the thatch when we saw her.”

“Oh. Oh, well.”

“The ducks are fine and the rabbits...well, I think I saw them just kind of floating around.”

“Floating around?” cried Aunt Zelda. “Rabbits don’t float.”

“*These* rabbits were. I passed quite a few, just lying on their backs. Like they were sunbathing.”

“Sunbathing?” squeaked Aunt Zelda. “At night?”

“Aunt Zelda,” said Jenna sternly, “forget the rabbits. There’s a storm

coming.”

Aunt Zelda stopped fussing and surveyed the three damp figures in front of her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “What was I thinking about? Go and get dry by the fire.”

While Jenna, Nicko and Boy 412 stood steaming by the fire, Aunt Zelda peered out into the night again. Then she quietly closed the cottage door.

“There’s a **Darkenese** out there,” she whispered. “I should have noticed, but Boggart’s been bad, very bad...and to think you’ve been out in it...on your own.” Aunt Zelda shivered.

Jenna started to explain, “It’s DomDaniel,” she said. “He’s—”

“He’s what?”

“Horrible,” Jenna said. “We saw him. On his ship.”

“You *what?*” said Aunt Zelda, openmouthed, not daring to believe what she was hearing. “You saw *DomDaniel*? On the *Vengeance*? Where?”

“Near the Deppen Ditch. We just climbed up and—”

“Climbed up what?”

“The ladder. We got on the ship—”

“You—you’ve been on the *Vengeance*?” Aunt Zelda could hardly understand what she was hearing. Jenna noticed that her aunt had suddenly gone very pale, and her hands were trembling slightly.

“It’s a bad ship,” said Nicko. “Smells bad. Feels bad.”

“*You* were on there too?”

“No,” said Nicko, wishing now that he had been. “I would have gone, but my **Unseen** wasn’t good enough, so I stayed behind. With the canoes.”

It took Aunt Zelda a few seconds to take this all in. She looked at Boy 412.

“So you and Jenna have been on that **Darke** ship...on your own...in the middle of all that **Darke Magyk**. *Why?*”

“Oh, well, we met Alther—” Jenna tried to explain.

“*Alther?*”

“And he told us that Marcia—”

“*Marcia?* What’s *Marcia* got to do with it?”

“She’s been captured by DomDaniel,” said Boy 412. “Alther said he thought she might be on the ship. And she was. We saw her.”

“Oh, my. This just gets worse.” Aunt Zelda collapsed into her chair by the fire. “That interfering old ghost should know better,” snapped Aunt Zelda. “Sending three youngsters off to a **Darke** ship. What *was* he thinking of?”

“He didn’t send us, really he didn’t,” said Boy 412. “He told us not to, but we had to *try* to rescue Marcia. But we couldn’t though...”

“Marcia’s captured,” whispered Aunt Zelda. “This is bad.” She stabbed at the fire with a poker, and a few flames shot into the air.

A long, loud rumble of thunder rolled across the sky right above the cottage, shaking it to its foundations. A wild gust of wind found its way through the windows, blowing out the storm candles and leaving only the flickering fire to light the room. A moment later a sudden downpour of hail clattered against the windows and fell down the chimney, putting out the fire with an angry hiss.

The cottage was plunged into darkness.

“The lanterns!” said Aunt Zelda, getting up and finding her way through the dark to the lantern cupboard.

Maxie whined and Bert hid her head under her one good wing.

“Bother, now where’s the key?” muttered Aunt Zelda, scrabbling around in her pockets and finding nothing. “Bother, bother, bother.”

Crack!

A bolt of lightning shot past the windows, illuminating the scene outside,

and struck the water very close to the cottage.

“Missed,” said Aunt Zelda grimly, “just.”

Maxie yelped and burrowed under the rug.

Nicko was staring out the window. In the brief glare of the lightning he had seen something he had not wanted to see again.

“He’s coming,” he said quietly. “I saw the ship. In the distance. Sailing over the marshes. He’s coming *here*.”

Everyone scrambled to the window. At first all they could see was the darkness of the approaching storm, but as they watched, staring into the night, a flicker of sheet lightning played across the clouds and showed them the sight that Nicko had glimpsed before.

Silhouetted against the lightning, still far away but with its sails flying in the howling wind, the huge **Darke** ship was cutting through the waves and heading toward the cottage.

The *Vengeance* was coming.

THE DRAGON BOAT



Aunt Zelda was panicking.

“Where is the key? I can’t find the *key*! Oh, here it is.”

With shaking hands she drew the key out of one of her patchwork pockets and opened the door to the lantern cupboard. She took out a lantern and gave it to Boy 412.

“You know where to go, don’t you?” asked Aunt Zelda. “The trapdoor in the potion cupboard?”

Boy 412 nodded.

“Go down into the tunnel. You’ll be safe there. No one will find you. I’ll make the trapdoor **Disappear.**”

“But aren’t *you* coming?” Jenna asked Aunt Zelda.

“No,” she said quietly. “Boggart’s very sick. I’m afraid he may not last if I move him. Don’t worry about me. It’s not *me* they want. Oh, look, take this, Jenna. You may as well have him with you.” Aunt Zelda fished Jenna’s Shield Bug out of yet another pocket and gave the rolled-up bug to her. Jenna tucked the bug into her jacket pocket.

“Now, go!”

Boy 412 hesitated, and another crack of lightning split the air.

“Go!” squeaked Aunt Zelda, waving her arms about like a demented windmill. “Go!”

Boy 412 opened the trapdoor in the potion cupboard and held the lantern high, his hand trembling a little, while Jenna scrambled down the ladder. Nicko hung back, wondering where Maxie had got to. He knew how much the wolfhound hated thunderstorms, and he wanted to take him with him.

“Maxie,” he called out. “Maxie boy!” From underneath the rug a faint wolfhound whine came in reply.

Boy 412 was already halfway down the ladder.

“Come *on*,” he told Nicko. Nicko was busy wrestling with the recalcitrant wolfhound who refused to come out from what he considered to be the safest place in the world. Under the hearth rug.

“Hurry *up*,” said Boy 412 impatiently, his head sticking back up through the trapdoor. What Nicko saw in that heap of smelly fur Boy 412 had no idea.

Nicko had grabbed hold of the spotted scarf that Maxie wore around his neck. He heaved the terrified dog out from under the rug and was dragging him across the floor. Maxie’s claws made a hideous scraping noise on the stone flags and as Nicko shoved him into the dark potion cupboard he whined piteously. Maxie knew he must have been *very* bad to deserve this. He wondered what it was he had done. And why he hadn’t enjoyed it more at the time.

In a flurry of fur and dribble, Maxie fell through the trapdoor and landed on Boy 412, knocking the lantern from his hand, putting it out and sending it rolling away down the steep incline.

“Now look what you’ve done,” Boy 412 told the dog crossly as Nicko

joined him at the bottom of the wooden ladder.

“What?” asked Nicko. “*What* have I done?”

“Not you. *Him*. Lost the lantern.”

“Oh, we’ll find it. Stop worrying. We’re safe now.” Nicko hauled Maxie to his feet, and the wolfhound skittered down the sandy slope, his claws scrabbling on the rock underneath, dragging Nicko with him. They both slipped and slid down the steep slope, coming to rest in an unruly heap at the bottom of some steps.

“Ow!” said Nicko. “I think I’ve found the lantern.”

“Good,” said Boy 412 grumpily. He picked up the lantern, which sprang to life again and lit up the smooth marble walls of the tunnel.

“There’re those pictures again,” said Jenna. “Aren’t they amazing?”

“How come everyone’s been down here except for me?” complained Nicko. “No one asked if *I* might have liked to look at the pictures. Hey, there’s a boat in this one, look.”

“We know,” said Boy 412 shortly. He put down the lantern and sat on the ground. He felt tired and wished Nicko would be quiet. But Nicko was excited by the tunnel.

“It’s amazing down here,” he said, staring at the hieroglyphs that ran along the wall as far as they could see in the flickering light of the lantern.

“I know,” said Jenna. “Look, I really like this one. This circle thing with a dragon in it.” She ran her hand over the small blue and gold image inscribed on the marble wall. Suddenly she felt the ground begin to shake. Boy 412 jumped to his feet.

“What’s that?” he gulped.

A long, low rumble sent tremors up through their feet and reverberated through the air.

“It’s moving!” gasped Jenna. “The tunnel wall is *moving*.”

One side of the tunnel wall was parting, ponderously rolling back, leaving a wide-open space in front of them. Boy 412 held up the lantern. It flared into

a brilliant white light and showed, to their astonishment, a vast subterranean Roman temple laid out before them. Beneath their feet was an intricate mosaic floor, and rising into the darkness were huge round marble columns. But that was not all.

“Oh.”

“Wow.”

“Phew.” Nicko whistled. Maxie sat down and breathed respectful clouds of dog breath into the chill air.

In the middle of the temple, resting on the mosaic floor, lay the most beautiful boat anyone had ever seen.

The golden Dragon Boat of Hotep-Ra.

The huge green and gold head of the dragon reared up from the prow, its neck arched gracefully like a giant swan's. The body of the dragon was a broad open boat with a smooth hull of golden wood. Folded neatly back along the outside of the hull were the dragon's wings; great iridescent green folds shimmered as the multitude of green scales caught the light of the lantern. And at the stern of the Dragon Boat the green tail arched far up into the darkness of the temple, its golden barbed end almost hidden in the gloom.

“How did *that* get here?” breathed Nicko.

“Shipwrecked,” said Boy 412.

Jenna and Nicko looked at Boy 412 in surprise. “How do you know?” they both asked.

“I read about it in *A Hundred Strange and Curious Tales for Bored Boys*. Aunt Zelda lent it to me. But I thought it was a legend. I never thought the Dragon Boat was *real*. Or that it was *here*.”

“So what is it?” asked Jenna, entranced by the boat and getting the strangest feeling she had seen it somewhere before.

“It's the Dragon Boat of Hotep-Ra. Legend has it he was the Wizard who built Wizard Tower.”

“He *did*,” said Jenna. “Marcia told me.”

“Oh. Well, there you are, then. The story said Hotep-Ra was a powerful Wizard in a Far Country and he had a dragon. But something happened and he had to leave quickly. So the dragon offered to become his boat, and she carried him safely to a new land.”

“So that boat is—or was—a real dragon?” whispered Jenna, in case the boat could hear her.

“I suppose so,” said Boy 412.

“Half boat, half dragon,” muttered Nicko. “Weird. But why is she *here*?”

“She was wrecked off some rocks by the Port lighthouse,” said Boy 412. “Hotep-Ra towed her into the marshes and had her pulled out of the water into a Roman temple that he found on a sacred island. He started rebuilding her, but he couldn’t find any skilled craftsmen at the Port. It was a really rough place in those days.”

“Still is,” grunted Nicko, “and they’re still no good at building boats either. If you want a proper boatbuilder you come upriver to the Castle. Everyone knows that.”

“Well, that was what they told Hotep-Ra too,” said Boy 412. “But when this oddly dressed man turned up at the Castle claiming to be a Wizard, they all laughed at him and refused to believe his stories about his amazing Dragon Boat. Until one day the Queen’s daughter fell ill, and he saved her life. The Queen was so grateful that she helped him build the Wizard Tower. One summer he took her and her daughter out to the Marram Marshes to see the Dragon Boat. And they fell in love with it. After that Hotep-Ra had as many boatbuilders working on it as he wanted, and because the Queen loved the boat, and she liked Hotep-Ra too, she used to bring her daughter out every summer just to see how they were getting on. The story says the Queen still does that. Oh, er...well, not any more, of course.”

There was a silence.

“Sorry. I didn’t think,” muttered Boy 412.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Jenna a little too brightly.

Nicko went over to the boat and expertly ran his hand over the gleaming golden wood of the hull.

“Nice repair,” he said. “Someone knew what they were doing. Shame no one has sailed her since though. She’s so beautiful.”

He began to climb an old wooden ladder that was propped up against the hull.

“Well, don’t just stand there, you two. Come and have a look!”

The inside of the boat was like no other boat anyone had ever seen. It was painted a deep lapis lazuli blue with hundreds of hieroglyphs running along the deck inscribed in gold.

“That old chest in Marcia’s room at the Tower,” said Boy 412 as he wandered along the deck, trailing his fingers along the polished wood, “it had the same kind of writing on it.”

“Did it?” said Jenna doubtfully. As far as she remembered, Boy 412 had his eyes closed most of the time he was in the Wizard Tower.

“I saw it when the Assassin came in. I can still see it now in my head,” said Boy 412, who was often troubled with a photographic memory of the most unfortunate of times.

They wandered along the deck of the Dragon Boat, past coiled green ropes, golden cleats and shackles, silver blocks and halyards and endless hieroglyphs. They passed by a small cabin with its deep blue doors firmly closed and carrying the same dragon symbol enclosed in a flattened oval shape that they had seen on the door in the tunnel, but none of them felt quite brave enough to open the doors and see what was below. They tiptoed past and, at last, reached the stern of the boat.

The tail of the dragon.

The massive tail arched high above them, disappearing into the gloom and making them all feel very small and a little vulnerable. All the Dragon Boat had to do was swish its tail down at them, and that, thought Boy 412 with a shiver, would be that.

Maxie had become very subdued and was walking obediently behind Nicko, his tail between his legs. He still had the feeling he had done something very wrong, and being on the Dragon Boat had not made him feel any better.

Nicko was at the stern of the boat, casting an expert eye over the tiller. It met with his approval. It was an elegant, smoothly curved piece of mahogany, carved so expertly that it fit into the hand as if it had known you forever.

Nicko decided to show Boy 412 how to steer.

“Look, you hold it like this,” he said, taking hold of the tiller, “and then you push it to the right if you want the boat to go left, and you pull it to the left if you want the boat to go right. Easy.”

“Doesn’t sound very easy,” said Boy 412 doubtfully. “Sounds back to front to me.”

“See, like this.” Nicko pushed the tiller to the right. It moved smoothly, turning the huge rudder at the stern in the opposite direction.

Boy 412 looked over the side of the boat.

“Oh, *that’s* what it does,” he said. “I see now.”

“You try,” said Nicko. “It makes more sense when you’re holding it yourself.” Boy 412 took the tiller in his right hand and stood beside it as Nicko had shown him.

The dragon’s tail twitched.

Boy 412 jumped. “*What was that?*”

“Nothing,” said Nicko. “Look, just push it away from you, like this...”

While Nicko was doing what he liked to do best, telling someone about how boats worked, Jenna had wandered up to the prow to look at the handsome golden dragon head. She gazed at it and found herself wondering why its eyes were closed. If she had a wonderful boat like this, thought Jenna, she would give the dragon two huge emeralds for eyes. It was no more than the dragon deserved. And then, on impulse, she wrapped her arms around the dragon’s smooth green neck and laid her head against it. The neck felt smooth and surprisingly warm.

A shiver of recognition ran through the dragon at Jenna’s touch. Distant memories came flooding back to the Dragon Boat...

Long days of convalescence after her terrible accident. Hotep-Ra

bringing the beautiful young Queen from the Castle to visit her on MidSummer Day. Days turning into months dragging into years as the Dragon Boat lies on the floor of the temple and is slowly, so slowly, put back together by Hotep-Ra's boatbuilders. And each MidSummer Day the Queen, now accompanied by her baby daughter, visited the Dragon Boat. The years wearing on and still the boatbuilders have not finished. Endless lonely months when the builders disappear and leave her alone. And then Hotep-Ra becoming older and more frail, and when at last she is restored to her former glory, Hotep-Ra is too ill to see her. He orders the temple to be covered over with a huge mound of earth to protect her until the day she will again be needed, and she is plunged into darkness.

But the Queen does not forget what Hotep-Ra has told her—that she must visit the Dragon Boat each MidSummer Day. Every summer she comes to the island. She orders a simple cottage to be built for her ladies and herself to stay in, and every MidSummer Day she lights a lantern, takes it down into the temple and visits the boat she has come to love. As the years go by, each successive Queen pays a midsummer visit to the Dragon Boat, no longer knowing why, but doing it because her own mother did so before her, and because each new Queen grows to love the dragon too. The dragon loves each Queen in return, and although each one is different in her own way, they all possess the same distinctive, gentle touch, as does this one.

And so the centuries pass. The Queen's midsummer visit becomes a secret tradition, watched over by a succession of White Witches who live in the cottage, keeping the secret of the Dragon Boat and lighting the lanterns to help the dragon through her days. The dragon dozes the centuries away, buried under the island, hoping one day to be released and waiting for each magical MidSummer Day when the Queen herself brings a lantern and pays her respects.

Until one MidSummer Day ten years ago when the Queen did not come. The dragon was tormented with worry, but there was nothing to be done. Aunt Zelda kept the cottage ready for the advent of the Queen, should she ever arrive, and the dragon had waited, her spirits kept up by Aunt Zelda's daily visit with yet another freshly lit lantern. But what the dragon was really waiting for was the moment when the Queen would again throw her arms around her neck.

As she had just done.

The dragon opened her eyes in surprise. Jenna gasped. She must be

dreaming, she thought. The dragon's eyes were indeed green, just as she had imagined, but they were not emeralds. They were living, seeing dragon eyes. Jenna let go of the dragon's neck and stepped back, and the dragon eyes followed her movement, taking a long look at the new Queen. It is a young one, thought the dragon, but none the worse for that. She bowed her head respectfully.

From the stern of the boat, Boy 412 saw the dragon bow her head, and he *knew* he was not imagining things. Neither was he imagining something else. The sound of running water.

“Look!” yelled Nicko.

A narrow dark gap had appeared in the wall between the two marble pillars holding up the roof. A small trickle of water had begun to pour ominously through the opening as if a sluice gate had been nudged open. As they watched, the trickle soon became a stream, with the gap opening wider and wider. Soon the mosaic floor of the temple was awash with water, and the stream pouring in had become a torrent.

With a thunderous roar, the earth bank outside gave way, and the wall between the two pillars collapsed. A river of mud and water swept into the cavern, churning around the Dragon Boat, lifting and rocking her from side to side, until suddenly she was floating free.

“She's afloat!” yelled Nicko excitedly.

Jenna stared down from the prow at the muddy water swirling below them and watched as the small wooden ladder was caught up in the flood and swept away. Far above her, Jenna became aware of some movement: slowly and painfully, with a neck stiff from all the years of waiting, the dragon was turning her head to see who, at last, was at the helm. She rested her deep-green eyes on her new Master, a surprisingly small figure in a red hat. He did not look anything like her last Master, Hotep-Ra, a tall dark man whose gold and platinum belt would flash in the sunlight glancing off the waves and whose purple cloak would fly wildly in the wind as they sped together over the ocean. But the dragon recognized the most important thing of all: the hand that once again held the tiller was **Magykal**.

It was time to go to sea once more.

The dragon reared her head, and the two massive leathery wings, which had been folded along the sides of the boat, began to loosen. Before her, for

the first time in many hundreds of years, she could see open water.

Maxie growled, the hair on his neck standing up on end.

The boat began to move.

“What are you *doing?*” Jenna yelled at Boy 412.

Boy 412 shook his head. *He* wasn’t doing anything. It was the *boat*.

“Let go!” Jenna yelled at him above the noise of the storm outside. “Let go of the tiller. It’s *you* making this happen. *Let go!*”

But Boy 412 would not let go. Something kept his hand firmly on the tiller, guiding the Dragon Boat as she began to move between the two marble pillars, taking with her her new crew: Jenna, Nicko, Boy 412 and Maxie.

As the dragon’s barbed tail cleared the confines of the temple, a loud creaking began on either side of the boat. The dragon was lifting her wings, unfurling and spreading each one like an enormous webbed hand stretching its long bony fingers, cracking and groaning as the leathery skin was pulled taut. The crew of the Dragon Boat stared into the night sky, amazed at the sight of the huge wings towering above the boat like two giant green sails.

The dragon’s head reared up into the night, and her nostrils flared, breathing in the smell she had dreamed of all those years. The smell of the sea.

At last the dragon was free.

44

To SEA



S*teer her into the waves!*” yelled Nicko as a wave caught the side of the boat and crashed over them, soaking them with freezing-cold water. But Boy 412 was struggling hard to shift the tiller against the wind and the force of the water. The gale screaming in his ears and the driving rain in his face did not help either. Nicko threw himself at the tiller, and together they put all their weight against it, pushing the tiller away from them. The dragon set her wings to catch the wind, and the boat slowly came around to face the oncoming waves.

Up at the prow, Jenna, soaked with the rain, was clinging to the dragon’s neck. The boat pitched up and down as it rode through the waves, flinging her helplessly from side to side.

The dragon reared her head, breathing in the storm and loving every minute of it. It was the start of a voyage, and a storm at the beginning of a voyage was always a good omen. But where did her new Master wish her to take him? The dragon turned her long green neck and looked back at this new Master at the helm, struggling with his shipmate, red hat sodden with the rain, rivulets of water teeming down his face.

Where do you wish me to go? asked the dragon's green eyes.

Boy 412 understood the look.

"Marcia?" he yelled at the top of his voice to Jenna and Nicko.

They nodded. *This* time they were going to do it.

"Marcia!" Boy 412 shouted at the dragon.

The dragon blinked uncomprehendingly. Where was Marcia? She had not heard of that country. Was it far away? The Queen would know.

Suddenly the dragon dipped her head and scooped Jenna up in the playful way she had done with so many Princesses over the centuries. But in the howling wind the effect was more terrifying than playful. Jenna found herself flying through the air above the surging waves, and a moment later, soaked by the sea spray, she was perched on top of the dragon's golden head, sitting just behind her ears and hanging on to them as though her life depended on it.

Where is Marcia, my lady? Is it a long voyage? Jenna heard the dragon ask hopefully, already looking forward to many happy months sailing the oceans with her new crew in search of the land of Marcia.

Jenna risked letting go of a surprisingly soft golden ear and pointed to the *Vengeance* which was coming up fast.

"Marcia's there. She's our ExtraOrdinary Wizard. And she's a prisoner on that ship. We want her back."

The dragon's voice came to her again, a little disappointed not to be traveling any farther. *Whatever you wish, my lady, it shall be done.*

Deep in the hold of the *Vengeance*, Marcia Overstrand sat listening to the **Storm** raging above her. On the little finger of her right hand, which was the only one on which it would fit, she wore the ring Boy 412 had given her. Marcia sat in the dark hold, turning over in her mind all the possible ways Boy 412 could have found the long-lost Dragon Ring of Hotep-Ra. None of them made much sense to her. However he had found it, the ring had done for Marcia the wonderful thing it used to do for Hotep-Ra. It had taken away her seasickness. It was also, Marcia knew, slowly restoring her **Magykal** strength. Little by little she could feel the **Magyk** returning, and as it did so, the

Shadows that had haunted her and followed her from Dungeon Number One began to slink away. The effect of DomDaniel's terrible **Vortex** was disappearing. Marcia risked a small smile. It was the first time she had smiled for four long weeks.

Beside Marcia, her three seasick guards lay slumped in pathetically groaning heaps, wishing that they too had learned to swim. At least they would have been thrown overboard by now.

Far above Marcia, in the full force of the **Storm** he had created, DomDaniel was sitting bolt upright on his ebony throne, while his miserable Apprentice shivered beside him. The boy was meant to be helping his Master to prepare his final lightning **Strike**, but he was so seasick that all he could do was stare glassily ahead and give the occasional moan.

“Quiet, boy!” snapped DomDaniel, trying to concentrate on gathering the electrical forces together for the most powerful **Strike** he had ever done. Soon, thought DomDaniel triumphantly, not only would that interfering witch's nasty little cottage be gone but the whole island too, evaporated in a blinding flash. DomDaniel fingered the ExtraOrdinary Wizard Amulet, which was now back in its rightful place. It was back around *his* neck, not the scrawny neck of some half-baked stick insect woman Wizard.

DomDaniel laughed. It was all so *easy*.

“Ship ahoy, sire,” a faint voice called down from the crow's nest. “Ship ahoy!”

DomDaniel cursed.

“*Don't interrupt!*” he shrieked above the howl of the wind and **Caused** the sailor to fall with a scream into the seething waters below.

But DomDaniel's concentration had been broken. And, as he tried to regain control of the elements for the final **Strike**, something caught his eye.

A small golden glow was coming out of the dark toward his ship. DomDaniel fumbled for his eyeglass and, raising it to his eye, could hardly believe what he saw.

It was impossible, he told himself, absolutely impossible. The Dragon Boat of Hotep-Ra did not exist. It was nothing more than a legend. DomDaniel blinked the rain out of his eyes and looked again. The wretched

boat was heading straight for him. The green glint of the dragon's eyes shot through the dark and met his one-eyed gaze through the eyeglass. A cold shiver ran through the **Necromancer**. This, he decided, was the doing of Marcia Overstrand. A **Projection** of her fevered brain as she schemed against him, deep within his own ship. Had she learned *nothing*?

DomDaniel turned to his Magogs.

“Dispatch the prisoner,” he snapped. “Now!”

The Magogs flicked their dirty yellow claws open and closed, and a thin sheen of slime appeared over their blind-worm heads, as it always did in moments of excitement. They hissed a question to their Master.

“Anyway you like,” he replied. “I don't care. Do whatever you want, but just *do it. Fast!*”

The ghastly pair slithered off, dripping slime as they went, and disappeared belowdecks. They were pleased to get out of the storm, excited by the fun they had in store.

DomDaniel put away his eyeglass. He no longer needed it, for the Dragon Boat was quite near enough for him to easily see. He tapped his foot impatiently, waiting for what he took to be Marcia's **Projection** to disappear. However, to DomDaniel's dismay, it did not disappear. The Dragon Boat drew ever closer and appeared to be fixing him with a particularly nasty stare.

Edgily, the **Necromancer** started pacing the deck, oblivious to the squall of rain that suddenly poured down on him, and deaf to the noisy flapping of the last few remaining shreds of the sails. There was only one sound that DomDaniel wanted to hear, and that was the sound of Marcia Overstrand's last scream far below in the hold.

He listened intently. If there was one thing DomDaniel enjoyed, it was hearing the last scream of a human being. Any human being was good, but the last scream of the ex-ExtraOrdinary Wizard was particularly good. He rubbed his hands together, closed his eyes and waited.

Down in the depths of the *Vengeance* the Dragon Ring of Hotep-Ra was glowing brightly on Marcia's little finger, and her **Magyk** had returned enough for her to slip out of her chains. She had stolen away from her comatose guards and was climbing up the ladder out of the hold. As she stepped from the ladder and was about to make her way to the next one, she

almost slipped on some yellow slime. Out of the gloom came the Magogs, straight for her, hissing with delight. They edged her into a corner, all the while clattering their excited pointy rows of yellow teeth at her. With a loud snap, they unsheathed their claws and advanced upon Marcia with glee, their little snake's tongues flicking in and out of their mouths.

Now, thought Marcia, was the time to discover if her **Magyk** really was returning.

“Congeal and Dry. Solidify!” Marcia muttered, pointing the finger bearing the Dragon Ring at the Magogs.

Like two slugs covered with salt, the Magogs suddenly collapsed and shrank with a hiss. A very nasty crackling sound followed as their slime solidified and dried to a thick yellow crust. In a few moments all that was left of the **Things** were two withered black and yellow lumps lying at Marcia's feet, stuck fast to the deck. She stepped over them disdainfully, careful of her shoes, and continued her journey up to the top deck.

Marcia wanted her Amulet back, and she was going to get it.

Up on deck DomDaniel had lost patience with his Magogs. He cursed himself for thinking they would get rid of Marcia quickly. He should have realized. Magogs liked to take their time with their victims, and time was something DomDaniel did not have. He had Marcia's wretched **Projection** of the Dragon Boat looming toward him, and it was affecting his **Magyk**.

And so, as Marcia was about to climb the ladder that led up onto the deck, she heard a loud bellow from above, “A hundred crowns!” bawled DomDaniel. “No, a *thousand* crowns. A thousand crowns to the man who rids me of Marcia Overstrand! *Now!*”

Above her Marcia heard the sudden stampede of bare feet as all the sailors on deck made for the hatchway and ladder on which she was standing. Marcia leaped off and hid as best she could in the shadows, as the entire ship's crew pushed and fought their way down in an effort to be the first to reach the prisoner and claim the prize. From the shadows she watched them go, kicking, fighting and shoving one another out of the way. Then, as the melee disappeared down to the lower decks, she gathered her damp robes around her and climbed the ladder onto the open deck.

The cold wind took her breath away, but after the foul mugginess of the ship's hold, the fresh stormy air smelled wonderful. Quickly, Marcia hid

behind a barrel and waited, considering her next move.

Marcia watched DomDaniel closely. He looked, she was pleased to see, sick. His normally gray features now had a bright green tinge to them, and his bulgy black eyes were staring up at something behind her. Marcia swung around to see what could possibly be turning DomDaniel so green.

It was the Dragon Boat of Hotep-Ra.

High above the *Vengeance*, with her green eyes flashing and lighting up DomDaniel's pallid face, the Dragon Boat was flying through the howling wind and the pouring rain. Her huge wings beat slowly and powerfully against the storm, lifting the golden boat and her three petrified crew into the night air, flying them toward Marcia Overstrand, who could not believe what she was seeing.

No one on the Dragon Boat could believe it either. When the Dragon had started to beat her wings against the wind and slowly lift herself out of the water, Nicko had been horrified; if there was one thing Nicko was sure about, it was that boats did not fly. Ever.

"Stoppit!" Nicko yelled in Boy 412's ear above the creaking of the huge wings, which swept slowly past them, sending leathery gusts of air into their faces. But Boy 412 was excited. He hung on tightly to the tiller, trusting the Dragon Boat to do what she did best.

"Stop what?" Boy 412 yelled back, gazing up at the wings, his eyes glowing and a broad grin on his face.

"It's you!" yelled Nicko. "I know it is. *You're* making her fly. *Stop*. Stop it now! She's out of control!"

Boy 412 shook his head. It was nothing to do with *him*. It was the Dragon Boat. *She* had decided to fly.

Jenna was holding on to the dragon's ears with a grip so tight her fingers were white. Far below she could see the waves crashing against the *Vengeance*, and as the Dragon Boat dipped toward the deck of the **Darke** ship, Jenna could also see the ghastly green face of DomDaniel staring up at her. Jenna quickly looked away from the **Necromancer**—his malevolent gaze made her feel chilled to the core and gave her a horrible feeling of despair. She shook her head to get rid of the **Darke** feeling, but a doubt stayed in her mind. How *were* they going to find Marcia? She glanced back at Boy 412. He

had let go of the tiller and was looking over the side of the Dragon Boat, down toward the *Vengeance*. Then, as the Dragon Boat dipped and her shadow fell across the **Necromancer** below, Jenna suddenly knew what Boy 412 was doing. He was getting ready to jump ship. Boy 412 was steeling himself to go aboard the *Vengeance* and get Marcia.

“Don’t!” Jenna yelled. “Don’t jump! I can see Marcia!”

Marcia had stood up. She was still staring at the Dragon Boat in disbelief. Surely it was just a legend? But, as the dragon swooped down toward Marcia, her dragon eyes flashing a brilliant green and her nostrils sending out great jets of orange fire, Marcia could feel the heat of the flames and she knew that this was real.

The flames licked around DomDaniel’s sodden robes and sent a pungent smell of burned wool into the air. Singed by the fire, DomDaniel fell back, and for a brief moment a faint ray of hope crossed the **Necromancer**’s mind—maybe this was all a terrible nightmare. Because on the top of the dragon’s head he could see something that was surely impossible: sitting there was the *Queenling*.

Jenna dared to let go of one of the dragon’s ears and slipped her hand into her jacket pocket. DomDaniel was still staring at her, and she wanted him to stop—in fact, she was going to *make* him stop. Jenna’s hand was shaking as she drew the Shield Bug out of her pocket and raised it up in the air. Suddenly, out of her hand flew what DomDaniel took to be a large green wasp. DomDaniel hated wasps. He staggered back as the insect flew toward him with a high-pitched shriek and landed on his shoulder, where it stung him on the neck. Hard.

DomDaniel screamed, and the Shield Bug stabbed at him again. He clapped his hand over the bug and, confused, it curled itself up into a ball and bounced down onto the deck, rolling off into a dark corner. DomDaniel collapsed onto the deck.

Marcia saw her chance and took it. In the light of the fire coming out of the dragon’s flared nostrils, Marcia steeled herself to touch the prostrate **Necromancer**. With trembling fingers she searched through the folds of his sluglike neck and found what she was looking for. Alther’s shoelace. Feeling extremely sick but even more determined, Marcia pulled at an end of the shoelace, hoping the knot would untie. It didn’t. DomDaniel made a choking sound, and his hands flew up to his neck.

“You’re strangling me,” he gasped, and he too grabbed hold of the shoelace.

Alther’s shoelace had done good service over the years, but it was not up to the task of resisting two powerful Wizards fighting over it. So it did what shoelaces often do. It broke.

The Amulet dropped to the deck, and Marcia swept it up in her grasp. DomDaniel lunged desperately after it, but Marcia was already retying the shoelace around her neck. As the knot was tied, the ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt **Appeared** around her waist, her robes glistened in the rain with **Magyk**, and Marcia stood up straight. She surveyed the scene with a triumphant smile—she had reclaimed her rightful place in the world. She was, once again, the ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

Enraged, DomDaniel staggered to his feet, screaming, “Guards, guards!” There was no response. The entire crew was deep in the bowels of the ship on a wild goose chase.

As Marcia prepared a **Thunderflash** to hurl at the increasingly hysterical DomDaniel, a familiar voice above her said, “Come *on*, Marcia. Hurry *up*. Get on here with me.”

The dragon dipped her head down onto the deck, and, for once, Marcia did as she was told.

45

EBB TIDE



The *Dragon Boat* flew slowly over the flooded marshes, leaving the powerless *Vengeance* behind. As the storm died away the dragon dipped her wings and, a little out of practice, landed back on the water with a bump and a massive splash.

Jenna and Marcia, who were clinging tightly to the dragon's neck, were soaked.

Boy 412 and Nicko were knocked off their feet by the landing and sent sprawling across the deck, where they ended up in a tangled heap. They picked themselves up and Maxie shook himself dry. Nicko breathed a sigh of relief. There was no doubt in his mind—boats were not meant to fly.

Soon the clouds drifted away out to sea, and the moon appeared to light their way back home. The *Dragon Boat* glimmered green and gold in the moonlight, her wings held up to catch the wind as she sailed them home. From a small lighted window far across the water Aunt Zelda watched the scene, a little disheveled from dancing triumphantly around the kitchen and colliding with a pile of saucepans.

The Dragon Boat was reluctant to return to the temple. After her taste of freedom she dreaded the thought of being shut away underground again. She longed to turn around and head out to sea while she still could and sail away across the world with the young Queen, her new Master and the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. But her new Master had other ideas. He was taking her back again, back to her dry, dark prison. The dragon sighed and hung her head. Jenna and Marcia nearly fell off.

“What’s going on up there?” asked Boy 412.

“She’s sad,” said Jenna.

“But you’re free now, Marcia,” said Boy 412.

“Not *Marcia*. The dragon,” Jenna told him.

“How do you know?” asked Boy 412.

“Because I do. She talks to me. In my head.”

“Oh, yes?” Nicko laughed.

“‘Oh, yes’ to you too. She’s sad because she wants to go to sea. She doesn’t want to go back into the temple. Back to prison, she calls it.”

Marcia knew how the dragon felt.

“Tell her, Jenna,” said Marcia, “that she will go to sea again. But not tonight. Tonight we’d all like to go home.”

The Dragon Boat raised her head high, and this time Marcia *did* fall off. She slipped down the dragon’s neck and landed with a bump on the deck. But Marcia didn’t care; she didn’t even complain. She just sat gazing up at the stars while the Dragon Boat sailed serenely across the Marram Marshes.

Nicko, who was keeping a lookout, was surprised to see a small and oddly familiar fishing boat in the distance. It was the chicken boat, floating out with the tide. He pointed it out to Boy 412. “Look, I’ve seen that boat before. Must be someone from the Castle fishing down here.”

Boy 412 grinned. “They chose the wrong night to come out, didn’t they?”

By the time they reached the island, the tide was rapidly ebbing and the water covering the marsh was becoming shallow. Nicko took the tiller and guided the Dragon Boat into the course of the submerged Mott, passing the Roman temple as he did so. It was a striking sight. The marble of the temple glowed a luminous white as the moon shone upon it for the first time since Hotep-Ra had buried the Dragon Boat inside. All the earth banks and the wooden roof that he had built had been washed away, leaving the tall pillars standing clear in the brilliant moonlight.

Marcia was astounded.

“I had *no* idea this was here,” she said. “No idea at *all*. You’d have thought *one* of the books in the Pyramid Library might have mentioned it. And as for the Dragon Boat...well, I always thought that was just a legend.”

“Aunt Zelda knew,” said Jenna.

“*Aunt Zelda?*” asked Marcia. “Why didn’t she say so?”

“It’s her job *not* to say. She’s the Keeper of the island. The Queens, um, my mother, and my grandmother and great-grandmother and all the ones before them, they had to visit the dragon.”

“*Did* they?” asked Marcia, amazed, “Why?”

“I don’t know,” said Jenna.

“Well, they never told *me*, or Alther come to that.”

“Or DomDaniel,” Jenna pointed out.

“No,” said Marcia thoughtfully. “Maybe there are some things it is better for a Wizard not to know.”

They tied the Dragon Boat up to the landing stage, and she settled down into the Mott like a giant swan easing herself onto her nest, slowly lowering her huge wings and folding them neatly along the side of her hull. She dipped her head to allow Jenna to slip down onto the deck, then the dragon gazed around her. It may not be the ocean, she thought, but the wide expanse of the Marram Marshes with its long, low horizon stretching as far as the eye could see was the next best thing. The dragon closed her eyes. The Queen had returned, and she could smell the sea. She was content.

Jenna sat and dangled her legs over the edge of the sleeping Dragon Boat, surveying the scene before her. The cottage looked as peaceful as ever, although maybe it was not quite as neat as when they had left it, due to the fact that the goat had munched its way through much of the roof and was still going strong. Most of the island was now out of the water, although it was covered with a mixture of mud and seaweed. Aunt Zelda, thought Jenna, would not be happy about the state of her garden.

When the water had ebbed from the landing stage, Marcia and the crew climbed out of the Dragon Boat and made their way up to the cottage, which was suspiciously quiet and the front door was slightly open. With a sense of foreboding, they peered inside.

Brownies.

Everywhere. The door to the **Disenchanted** cat tunnel was open and the place was crawling with Brownies. Up the walls, over the floor, stuck on the ceiling, packed tight into the potion cupboard, munching, chewing, tearing, pooing as they went through the cottage like a storm of locusts. At the sight of the humans, ten thousand Brownies started up their high-pitched squeals.

Aunt Zelda was out of the kitchen in a flash.

“*What?*” she gasped, trying to take it all in but seeing only an unusually disheveled Marcia standing in the middle of a heaving sea of Brownies. Why, thought Aunt Zelda, does Marcia always have to make things so *difficult*? Why on *earth* had she brought a load of Brownies back with her?

“Blasted Brownies!” bellowed Aunt Zelda, waving her arms about in an ineffectual way. “Out, out, *get out!*”

“Allow me, Zelda,” Marcia shouted. “I’ll do a quick **Remove** for you.”

“*No!*” yelled Aunt Zelda. “I must do this myself, otherwise they will lose respect for me.”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly call this respect,” muttered Marcia, lifting her ruined shoes out of the sticky slime and inspecting the soles. She definitely had a hole in them somewhere. She could feel the slime seeping in between her toes.

Suddenly the shrieking stopped, and thousands of little red eyes all stared in terror at the thing a Brownie feared the most. A Boggart.

The Boggart.

With his fur clean and brushed, looking thin and small with the white sash of his bandage still tied around his middle, there was not quite as much Boggart as there had been. But he still had Boggart Breath. And, breathing Boggart Breath as he went, he waded through the Brownies, feeling his strength returning.

The Brownies saw him coming, and desperate to escape, they stupidly piled themselves up in the farthest corner away from the Boggart, higher and higher until every Quake Ooze Brownie but one, a young one out for the first time, was on the teetering pile in the far corner by the desk. Suddenly the young Brownie shot out from underneath the hearth rug. Its anxious red eyes shone from its pointy face and its bony fingers and toes clattered on the stone floor as, watched by everyone, it scuttled down the length of the room to join the pile. It threw itself onto the slimy heap and joined the throng of little red eyes staring at the Boggart.

“Dunno why they don’t just *leave*. Blasted Brownies,” said the Boggart. “Still, there’s bin a terrible storm. Don’t suppose they wanter go out of a nice warm cottage. You seen that big ship out there stuck on the marshes sinkin’ down into the mud? They’re lucky all them Brownies is in ’ere an’ not out there, busy draggin’ ’em down inter the Ooze.”

Everyone exchanged glances.

“Yes, aren’t they just?” said Aunt Zelda who knew exactly which ship the Boggart was talking about, having been too engrossed watching everything from the kitchen window with the Boggart to have noticed the invasion of the Brownies.

“Yeah. Well, I’ll be off now,” said the Boggart. “Can’t stand bein’ so clean anymore. Just want ter find a nice bit a mud.”

“Well, there’s no shortage of that outside, Boggart,” said Aunt Zelda.

“Yeah,” said the Boggart. “Er, just wanter say thank you, Zelda, fer... well, fer lookin’ after me, like. Ta. Them Brownies’ll leave when I’ve gone. If you get any more trouble, just yell.”

The Boggart waddled out of the door to spend a few happy hours choosing a patch of mud to spend the rest of the night in. He was spoiled for choice.

As soon as he left, the Brownies became restless, their little red eyes exchanging glances and looking at the open door. When they were quite sure that the Boggart was really gone, a cacophony of excited shrieks started up and the pile suddenly collapsed in a spray of brown goo. Free of Boggart Breath at last, the Brownie pack headed for the door. It rushed down the island, streamed over the Mott bridge and headed out across the Marram Marshes. Straight for the stranded *Vengeance*.

“You know,” said Aunt Zelda as she watched the Brownies disappear into the shadows of the marsh, “I almost feel sorry for them.”

“What, the Brownies or the *Vengeance*?” asked Jenna.

“Both,” said Aunt Zelda.

“Well, I don’t,” said Nicko. “They deserve each other.”

Even so, no one wanted to watch what happened to the *Vengeance* that night. And no one wanted to talk about it either.

Later, after they had cleared as much brown goo out of the cottage as they could, Aunt Zelda surveyed the damage, determined to look on the bright side.

“It’s really not so bad,” she said. “The books are fine—well, at least they will be when they’ve all dried out and I can redo the potions. Most of them were coming up to their drink-by date anyway. And the really important ones are in the **Safe**. The Brownies didn’t eat *all* the chairs like last time, and they didn’t even poo on the table. So, all in all, it could have been worse. Much worse.”

Marcia sat down and took off her wrecked purple python shoes. She put them by the fire to dry while she considered whether to do a **Shoe Renew** or not. Strictly speaking, Marcia knew she shouldn’t. **Magyk** was not meant to be used for her own comfort. It was one thing to sort out her cloak, which was part of the tools of her trade, but she could hardly pretend that the pointy pythons were necessary for the performance of **Magyk**. So they sat steaming by the fire, giving off a faint but disagreeable smell of moldy snake.

“You can have my spare pair of galoshes,” Aunt Zelda offered. “Much more practical for around here.”

“Thank you, Zelda,” said Marcia dismally. She hated galoshes.

“Oh, cheer up, Marcia,” said Aunt Zelda irritatingly. “Worse things happen at sea.”

A VISITOR



The next morning all that Jenna could see of the *Vengeance* was the top of the tallest mast sticking out of the marsh like a lone flagpole, from which fluttered the remnants of the tops'l. The remains of the *Vengeance* was not something Jenna wanted to look at, but like everyone in the cottage who woke up after her, she had to see with her own eyes what had happened to the **Darke** ship. Jenna closed the shutter and turned away. There was another boat that she would much rather see.

The Dragon Boat.

Jenna stepped out of the cottage into the early morning spring sunshine. The Dragon Boat lay majestically in the Mott, floating high in the water, her neck stretched out and her golden head held aloft to catch the warmth of the

first sunlight to fall upon her for hundreds of years. The shimmer of the green scales on the dragon's neck and tail and the glint of the gold on her hull made Jenna screw her eyes up against the glare. The dragon had her eyes half closed too. At first Jenna thought the dragon was still asleep, but then she realized that she was also shielding her eyes against the brightness of the light. Ever since Hotep-Ra had left her entombed under the earth, the only light the Dragon Boat had seen had been a dull glow from a lantern.

Jenna walked down the slope to the landing stage. The boat was big, much bigger than she remembered from the night before, and was wedged tightly into the Mott now that the floodwater had left the marshes. Jenna hoped the dragon did not feel trapped. She reached up on tiptoes to put her hand on the dragon's neck.

Good morning, my lady, the dragon's voice came to her.

"Good morning, Dragon," Jenna whispered. "I hope you're comfortable in the Mott."

There is water beneath me, and the air smells of salt and sunshine. What more could I wish for? asked the dragon.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," agreed Jenna. She sat down on the landing stage and watched the curls of the early morning mist disappear in the warmth of the sun. Then she leaned back contentedly against the Dragon Boat and listened to the dabbings and splashings of the various creatures in the Mott. Jenna had become used to all the underwater inhabitants by now. She no longer shuddered at the eels who made their way out along the Mott on their long journey to the Sargasso Sea. She didn't mind the Water Nixies too much, although she no longer paddled with bare feet in the mud, after one had stuck itself onto her big toe and Aunt Zelda had had to threaten it with the toasting fork to get it to drop off. Jenna even quite liked the Marsh Python, but that was probably because it had not returned since the Big Thaw. She knew the noises and splashes that each creature made, but as she sat in the sun, dreamily listening to the splish of a water rat and the gloop of a mudfish, she heard something she did not recognize.

The creature, whatever it was, moaned and groaned pathetically. Then it puffed, splashed and groaned some more. Jenna had never heard anything like it before. It also sounded rather large. Taking care to keep out of sight, Jenna crept behind the thick green tail of the Dragon Boat, which was curled up and resting on the landing stage; then she peered over to see what creature could possibly be making so much fuss.

It was the Apprentice.

He lay facedown on a tarry plank of wood that looked as though it had come from the *Vengeance* and was paddling it along the Mott using just his hands. He looked exhausted. His grubby green robes clung to him and steamed in the early morning warmth, and his lanky dark hair was straggling over his eyes. He seemed hardly to have the energy to raise his head and look where he was going.

“Oi!” yelled Jenna. “Go away.” She picked up a rock to throw at him.

“No. Please don’t,” pleaded the boy.

Nicko appeared.

“What’s up, Jen?” He followed Jenna’s gaze. “Hey, *shove off*, you!” he yelled.

The Apprentice took no notice. He paddled his plank up to the landing stage and then just lay there, exhausted.

“What do you want?” asked Jenna.

“I...the ship...it’s gone down. I escaped.”

“Scum always floats to the surface,” Nicko observed.

“We were covered in creatures. Brown, slimy...*things*.” The boy shivered. “They pulled us down into the marsh. I couldn’t breathe. Everyone’s gone. Please help me.”

Jenna stared at him, wavering. She had woken up early because she had been having nightmares full of screaming Brownies pulling her down into the marsh. Jenna shuddered. She didn’t want to think about it. If she couldn’t bear to even *think* about it, how much worse must it be for a boy who had actually been there?

The Apprentice could see that Jenna was hesitating. He tried again.

“I—I’m sorry for what I did to that animal of yours.”

“The Boggart is not an *animal*,” said Jenna indignantly. “And he is not *ours*. He is a creature of the marsh. He belongs to no one.”

“Oh.” The Apprentice could see he had made a mistake. He changed back to what had worked before.

“I’m sorry. I—I just...feel so scared.”

Jenna relented.

“We can’t just leave him lying on a plank,” she said to Nicko.

“I don’t see why not,” said Nicko, “except I suppose he’s polluting the Mott.”

“We’d better take him inside,” said Jenna. “Come on, give us a hand.”

They helped the Apprentice off his plank and half carried, half led him up the path and into the cottage.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in” was Aunt Zelda’s comment as Nicko and Jenna dumped the boy down in front of the fire, waking up a bleary-eyed Boy 412.

Boy 412 got up and moved away. He had seen a flicker of **Darke Magyk** as the Apprentice came in.

The Apprentice sat pale and shivering beside the fire. He looked ill.

“Don’t let him out of your sight, Nicko,” said Aunt Zelda. “I’ll go and get him a hot drink.”

Aunt Zelda came back with a mug of chamomile and cabbage tea. The Apprentice pulled a face but drank it down. At least it was hot.

When he had finished, Aunt Zelda said to him, “I think you had better tell us why you have come here. Or rather, you had better tell Madam Marcia. Marcia, we have a visitor.”

Marcia was at the door, having just got back from an early morning walk around the island, partly to see what had happened to the *Vengeance* but mostly just to taste the sweet spring air and the even sweeter taste of freedom. Although Marcia was thin after almost five weeks’ imprisonment and there were still dark shadows under her eyes, she looked much better than she had the night before. Her purple silk robes and tunic were fresh and clean, thanks to a complete **Five-Minute DeepClean Spell**, which she hoped had got rid of

any traces of **Darke Magyk**. **Darke Magyk** was sticky stuff and Marcia had had to be particularly thorough. Her belt shone bright after its **Pristine Polish** and around her neck hung the Akhu Amulet. Marcia felt good. She had her **Magyk** back, once again she was ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and all was right with the world.

Apart from the galoshes.

Marcia kicked the offending articles of footwear off at the door and peered into the cottage, which seemed gloomy after the bright spring sunshine. There was a particular darkness by the fire, and it took a moment for Marcia to register who exactly was sitting there. When she realized who it was, her expression clouded.

“Ah, the rat from the sinking ship,” she snapped.

The Apprentice said nothing. He looked shiftily at Marcia, his pitch-black eyes coming to rest on the Amulet.

“Don’t touch him, anyone,” warned Marcia.

Jenna was surprised at Marcia’s tone, but she moved away from the Apprentice as did Nicko. Boy 412 went over to Marcia.

The Apprentice was left alone by the fire. He turned to face the disapproving circle that surrounded him. It was not meant to go like this. They were meant to feel sorry for him. The Queenling did. He had already won her over. And the mad White Witch. It was just his luck that the interfering ex–ExtraOrdinary Wizard had turned up at the wrong moment. He scowled in frustration.

Jenna looked at the Apprentice. He looked different somehow, but she could not work out what it was. She put it down to his terrible night on a ship. Being dragged into the Quake Ooze by hundreds of screaming Brownies would be enough to give anyone the dark, haunted look in the boy’s eyes.

But Marcia knew why the boy looked different. On her morning walk around the island she had seen the reason why, and it was a sight that had quite put her off her breakfast; although, admittedly, it did not take much to put Marcia off Aunt Zelda’s breakfasts.

So when the Apprentice suddenly leaped to his feet and ran toward Marcia with his hands outstretched, poised to grab at her throat, Marcia was

ready for him. She ripped the clutching fingers from the Amulet and hurled the Apprentice out the door with a resounding *crack* of a **Thunderflash**.

The boy lay sprawled, unconscious, on the path.

Everyone crowded around.

Aunt Zelda was shocked. “Marcia,” she muttered, “I think you might have overdone it. He may be the most unpleasant boy I have ever had the misfortune to come across, but he’s still only a boy.”

“Not necessarily” was Marcia’s grim reply. “And I haven’t finished yet. Stand back, please, everyone.”

“But,” whispered Jenna, “he’s our brother.”

“I think not,” said Marcia crisply.

Aunt Zelda put her hand on Marcia’s arm. “Marcia. I know you’re angry. You have every right to be after your time as a prisoner, but you mustn’t take it out on a child.”

“I’m not taking it out on a child, Zelda. You should know me better than that. This is no child. This is *DomDaniel*.”

“*What?*”

“Anyway, Zelda, I am no **Necromancer**,” Marcia told her. “I will never take a life. All I can do is to return him to where he was when he did this dreadful thing—to make sure that he does not profit from what he has done.”

“No!” yelled the Apprentice-shaped DomDaniel.

He cursed the thin, reedy voice in which he was forced to speak. It had annoyed him enough to hear it when it had belonged to the wretched boy, but now that it belonged to him it was unbearable.

DomDaniel struggled to his feet. He could not believe the failure of his plan to retrieve the Amulet. He had had them all fooled. They had taken him in out of their misguided pity, and they would have looked after him too, until he found the right time to take back the Amulet. And then—ah, how different things would have been then. Desperately he gave it one last try. He threw himself to his knees.

“Please,” he begged. “You’ve got it wrong. It’s only me. I’m not—”

“**Begone!**” Marcia commanded him.

“*No!*” he screamed.

But Marcia continued:

Begone.

Back to where you were,

When you were

What you were!

And he was gone, back to the *Vengeance*, buried deep in the dark recesses of the mud and the Ooze.

Aunt Zelda looked upset. She still could not believe that the Apprentice really was DomDaniel. “That’s a terrible thing to do, Marcia,” she said. “Poor boy.”

“Poor boy, my foot,” snapped Marcia. “There’s something you should see.”

THE APPRENTICE



They set off at a brisk pace, Marcia striding ahead of them as best she could in her galoshes. Aunt Zelda had to break into a trot to keep up. She wore a look of dismay as she took in the destruction wrought by the floodwaters. There was mud, seaweed and slime everywhere. It hadn't looked so bad in the moonlight the previous night, and besides, she had been so relieved to see everyone actually *alive* that a bit of mud and mess hardly seemed to matter. But in the revealing light of the morning it looked miserable. Suddenly she gave a cry of dismay.

“The chicken boat has gone! My chickens, my poor little chickens!”

“There are more important things in life than chickens,” Marcia declared, moving purposefully ahead.

“The rabbits!” wailed Aunt Zelda, suddenly realizing that the burrows must have all been swept away. “My poor bunnies, all gone.”

“Oh, do be quiet, Zelda!” Marcia snapped irritably.

Not for the first time, Aunt Zelda thought that Marcia's return to the Wizard Tower could not come soon enough for her. Marcia led the way like a

purple pied piper in full flight, marching across the mud, leading Jenna, Nicko, Boy 412 and a flustered Aunt Zelda to a spot beside the Mott just below the duck house.

As they neared their destination, Marcia stopped, wheeled around and said, “Now, I just want to tell you, this is not a pretty sight. In fact, maybe only Zelda should see this. I don’t want to go giving you all nightmares.”

“We’ve been having those already,” declared Jenna. “I don’t see what could be worse than *my* nightmares last night.”

Boy 412 and Nicko nodded in agreement. They had both slept very badly the previous night.

“Very well, then,” said Marcia. She stepped carefully across the mud behind the duck house and stopped by the Mott. “*This* is what I found this morning.”

“Eurgh!” Jenna hid her face in her hands.

“Oh, oh, oh,” gasped Aunt Zelda.

Boy 412 and Nicko were silent. They felt sick. Suddenly Nicko disappeared down to the Mott and *was* sick.

Lying on the muddy grass beside the Mott was what at first glance looked like an empty green sack. On second glance it looked like some strange unstuffed scarecrow. But on third glance, which Jenna only managed through her fingers covering her eyes, it was only too apparent what lay before them.

The empty body of the Apprentice.

Like a deflated balloon, the Apprentice lay, drained of all life and substance. His empty skin, still clad in its wet, salt-stained robes, lay strewn across the mud, discarded like an old banana skin.

“This,” said Marcia, “is the *real* Apprentice. I found him this morning on my walk. Which is why I knew for sure that the ‘Apprentice’ you had sitting by the fire was an impostor.”

“What happened to him?” Jenna whispered.

“He has been **Consumed**. It’s an old and particularly nasty trick. One

from the **Cryptic** archives,” said Marcia gravely. “The ancient **Necromancers** used to do it all the time.”

“Is there nothing we can do for the boy?” asked Aunt Zelda.

“It’s too late, I’m afraid,” replied Marcia. “He is nothing more than a shadow now. By midday, he will be gone.”

Aunt Zelda sniffed. “He had a tough life, poor little mite. Snatched from his family and Apprenticed to that awful man. I don’t know what Sarah and Silas are going to say when they hear about this. It’s a terrible thing. Poor Septimus.”

“I know,” agreed Marcia. “But there’s nothing we can do for him now.”

“Well, I shall sit with him—what’s left of him—until he disappears,” murmured Aunt Zelda.

A subdued party minus Aunt Zelda made their way back to the cottage, each occupied with his or her own thoughts. Aunt Zelda came back briefly and disappeared into the Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard before returning to the duck house, but everyone else spent the rest of the morning quietly cleaning up the mud and setting the cottage to rights. Boy 412 was relieved to see that the green rock Jenna had given him had not been touched by the Brownies. It was still where he had put it, folded carefully into his quilt, in a warm corner beside the fireplace.

In the afternoon, after they had coaxed the goat down from the roof—or what was left of it—they decided to take Maxie for a walk on the marsh. As they were leaving, Marcia called out to Boy 412, “Can you help me with something, please?”

Boy 412 was only too happy to stay behind. Although he was used to Maxie by now, he still was not entirely happy in his company. He never could understand why Maxie would suddenly take it into his head to jump up and lick his face, and the sight of Maxie’s glistening black nose and slobbery mouth always sent an unpleasant shiver through him. Try as he might, he just did not get the *point* of dogs. So Boy 412 happily waved Jenna and Nicko off to the marsh and went inside to see Marcia.

Marcia was sitting at Aunt Zelda’s small desk. Having won the battle of the desk before she went away, Marcia was determined to regain control now that she was back again. Boy 412 noticed that all of Aunt Zelda’s pens and

notebooks had been dumped on the floor, apart from a few Marcia was busy **Transforming** into much smarter ones for her own use. She was doing this with a clear conscience as they had a definite **Magykal** purpose—at least Marcia hoped they were going to have—if all went as she planned.

“Ah, there you are,” Marcia said in that businesslike way that always made Boy 412 feel as though he had done something wrong. She dumped a scruffy old book on the desk in front of her.

“What’s your favorite color?” demanded Marcia. “Blue? Or red? I thought it might be red, seeing as you haven’t taken that awful red hat off since you got here.”

Boy 412 was taken aback. No one had ever bothered to ask him what his favorite color was. And, anyway, he wasn’t even sure if he knew. Then he remembered the beautiful blue inside the Dragon Boat.

“Um, blue. Sort of deep blue.”

“Ah, yes. I like that too. With some gold stars, don’t you think?”

“Yes. Um, that’s nice.”

Marcia waved her hands over the book in front of her and muttered something. There was a loud rustling of paper as all the pages sorted themselves out. They got rid of Aunt Zelda’s jottings and doodlings, and also her favorite recipe for cabbage stew, and they turned themselves into a brand-new, smooth, cream-colored paper, perfect for writing on. Then they bound themselves in lapis lazuli-colored leather complete with real gold stars and a purple spine that showed the diary belonged to the Apprentice of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. As a final touch Marcia added a clasp of pure gold and a small silver key.

She opened the book to check that the spell had worked. Marcia was pleased to see that the first and last pages of the book were bright red, exactly the same color as Boy 412’s hat. Written on the first page were the words: APPRENTICE DIARY.

“There,” said Marcia, closing the book with a satisfying thump and turning the silver key in the lock. “It looks good, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Boy 412, bemused. Why was she asking *him*?

Marcia looked Boy 412 in the eye.

“Now,” she said, “I have something to return to you—your ring. Thank you. I will always remember what you did for me.”

Marcia took the ring from a pocket in her belt and placed it carefully on the desk. Just seeing the gold dragon ring curled on the desk with its tail clasped in its mouth and its emerald eyes shining at him made Boy 412 feel very happy. But for some reason he hesitated to pick it up. He could tell there was something else that Marcia was about to say. And there was.

“Where did you get the ring?”

Immediately Boy 412 felt guilty. So he *had* done something wrong. That’s what it was all about.

“I—I found it.”

“Where?”

“I fell down into the tunnel. You know, the one that went to the Dragon Boat. Only I didn’t know that then. It was dark. I couldn’t see. And then I found the ring.”

“Did you put the ring on?”

“Well, yes.”

“And then what happened?”

“It—it lit up. So I could see where I was.”

“And did it fit you?”

“No. Well, not at first. And then it did. It got smaller.”

“Ah. I don’t suppose it sang you a song, did it?”

Boy 412 had been staring intently at his feet up until then. But he glanced up at Marcia and caught a smile in her eyes. Was she making fun of him?

“Yes. As it happens, it did.”

Marcia was thinking. She said nothing for so long that Boy 412 felt he

had to speak.

“Are you cross with me?”

“Why should I be cross with you?” she replied.

“Because I took the ring. It belongs to the dragon, doesn’t it?”

“No, it belongs to the Dragon Master.” Marcia smiled.

Boy 412 was worried now. Who was the Dragon Master? Would he be angry? Was he very *big*? What would he do to him when he found out he had his ring?

“Could you...” he asked hesitantly, “could you give it back to the Dragon Master? And tell him I’m sorry I took it?” He pushed the ring back across the desk toward Marcia.

“Very well,” she said solemnly, picking the ring up. “I’ll give it back to the Dragon Master.”

Boy 412 sighed. He had loved the ring, and just being close to it had made him feel happy, but he wasn’t surprised to hear that it belonged to someone else. It was too beautiful for him.

Marcia looked at the Dragon Ring for a few moments. Then she held it out to Boy 412.

“Here”—she smiled—“is your ring.”

Boy 412 stared at her, uncomprehending.

“*You* are the Dragon Master,” said Marcia. “It is your ring. Oh, yes, and the person who took it says to tell you he’s sorry.”

Boy 412 was speechless. He stared at the ring lying in his hand. It was *his*.

“*You* are the Dragon Master,” repeated Marcia, “because the ring chose you. It doesn’t sing for just anyone, you know. And it was *your* finger it chose to fit, not mine.”

“Why?” breathed Boy 412. “Why me?”

“You have astonishing **Magykal** power. I told you before. Maybe now you’ll believe me.” She smiled.

“I—I thought the power came from the ring.”

“No. It comes from you. Don’t forget, the Dragon Boat recognized you even without the ring. She *knew*. Remember, it was last worn by Hotep-Ra, the first ExtraOrdinary Wizard. It’s been waiting a long time to find someone like him.”

“But that’s because it’s been stuck in a secret tunnel for hundreds of years.”

“Not necessarily,” said Marcia mysteriously. “Things have a habit of working out, you know. Eventually.”

Boy 412 was beginning to think that Marcia was right.

“So is the answer still no?”

“No?” asked Boy 412.

“To being my Apprentice. Has what I’ve told you changed your mind? Will you be my Apprentice? Please?”

Boy 412 fumbled in his sweater pocket and pulled out the **Charm** that Marcia had given him when she had first asked him to be her Apprentice. He looked at the tiny silver wings. They shone as brightly as ever and the words on them still said, FLY FREE WITH ME.

Boy 412 smiled.

“Yes,” he said. “I would like to be your Apprentice. Very much.”

THE APPRENTICE SUPPER



It had not been easy to bring the Apprentice back. But Aunt Zelda had done it. Her own **Drastic Drops** and **Urgent Ungent** had had some effect, but not for long; soon the Apprentice had begun to slip away again. It was then that she had decided there was only one thing for it: **Vigor Volts**.

The **Vigor Volts** were a bit of a gamble, as Aunt Zelda had modified the potion from a **Darke** recipe she had found in the attic when she had moved in. She had no idea how the **Darke** part of it would work, but something told her that maybe this was what was needed. A touch of **Darkenesse**. With some trepidation, Aunt Zelda had unscrewed the lid. A brilliant blue-white light shot out from the tiny brown glass bottle and almost blinded her. Aunt Zelda waited until the spots had disappeared from her eyes, then carefully dropped a tiny amount of the electric blue gel onto the Apprentice's tongue. She crossed her fingers, something a White Witch does not do lightly, and held her breath. For a minute. Suddenly the Apprentice had sat up, looked at her with eyes open so wide that she could see almost nothing but white, taken a huge, sighing intake of breath and then lain down in the straw, curled up and gone to sleep.

The **Vigor Volts** had worked, but Aunt Zelda knew there was something she had to do before he could fully recover. She had to **Release** him from the clutches of his Master. And so she had sat by the duck pond and, as the sun set and the deep orange full moon rose low on the broad horizon of the Marram Marshes, Aunt Zelda did her own bit of scrying. There were one or two things she wanted to know.

Night had fallen and the moon was high in the sky. Aunt Zelda walked home slowly, leaving the Apprentice in a deep sleep. She knew he would need to sleep for many days before he could be moved from the duckhouse. Aunt Zelda also knew he would be with her for a while longer. It was time that she had another stray to look after, now that Boy 412 had recovered so well.

Her blue eyes glittering in the dark, Aunt Zelda picked her way along the Mott path, engrossed by the images she had seen in the duck pond, trying to understand their meaning. So preoccupied was she that she did not look up until she had almost reached the landing stage in front of the cottage. She was not pleased by the sight that met her.

The Mott, thought Aunt Zelda irritably, was a mess. There were just too many boats cluttering up the place. As if the Hunter's rancid canoe and the tatty old *Muriel Two* weren't bad enough, there was now, parked on the other side of the bridge, a decrepit old fishing boat that contained an equally decrepit old ghost.

Aunt Zelda marched over to the ghost and spoke to him very loudly and very slowly, in the voice she always used when addressing ghosts. Particularly old ones. The old ghost was remarkably polite to Aunt Zelda, considering she had just woken him up with a very rude question.

"No, Madam," he said graciously. "I'm sorry to disappoint you. I'm not one of those awful old sailors off that evil ship. I am, or I suppose I should, strictly speaking, say that I was, Alther Mella, ExtraOrdinary Wizard. At your service, Madam."

"Really?" said Aunt Zelda. "You don't look a bit like I expected."

"I'll take that as a compliment," said Alther graciously. "Excuse my rudeness in not alighting from my boat to greet you, but I have to stay in my dear old boat *Molly*, otherwise I will be **Returned**. But it is a pleasure to meet you, Madam. I take it you are Zelda Heap."

“Zelda!” Silas called out from the cottage.

Aunt Zelda looked up at the cottage, puzzled. All the lanterns and candles were blazing, and it seemed to be full of people.

“Silas?” she yelled. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Stay there,” he shouted. “Don’t come in. We’ll be out in a minute!” He disappeared into the cottage, and Aunt Zelda heard him say, “No, Marcia, I’ve told her to stay outside. Anyway, I’m sure Zelda wouldn’t *dream* of interfering. No, I *don’t* know if there are any more cabbages. Why do you want *ten* cabbages anyway?”

Aunt Zelda turned to Alther, who was lounging comfortably in the prow of the fishing boat. “*Why* can’t I go in?” she demanded. “What’s going on? How did Silas get here?”

“It’s a long story, Zelda,” said the ghost.

“You may as well tell me,” said Aunt Zelda, “as I don’t suppose anyone else will bother to. They seem too busy raiding my entire stock of cabbages.”

“Well,” said Alther, “I was in DomDaniel’s rooms one day attending to some, er, business, when the Hunter came and told him he had found out where you all were. I knew you were safe while the Big Freeze lasted, but when the Big Thaw arrived I thought you would be in trouble. I was right. As soon as the thaw came, DomDaniel shot off to Bleak Creek and picked up that ghastly ship of his, ready to bring the Hunter down here. I arranged for my dear friend Alice at the Port to have a ship ready and waiting to take you all somewhere safe. Silas insisted that *all* the Heaps had to go, so I offered him *Molly* to travel in down to the Port. Jannit Maarten had her laid up at the boatyard, but Silas got her in the water. Jannit wasn’t very happy about the state *Molly* was in, but we couldn’t wait around for any repairs. We stopped off at the Forest and picked up Sarah; she was very upset because none of the boys would come. We set off without them, and we were making good time until we had a small technical problem—a large technical problem, actually. Silas put his foot through the bottom of the boat. While we were repairing it we got overtaken by the *Vengeance*. Lucky not to be spotted, really. Sarah was in a terrible state about that—she thought all was lost. And then, to crown it all, we got caught up in the **Storm** and swept onto the marshes. Not one of my most enjoyable trips in *Molly*. But here we are, and while we were just messing about in a boat, you seem to have dealt with everything most satisfactorily yourselves.”

“Apart from the mud,” muttered Aunt Zelda.

“Indeed,” agreed Alther. “But in my experience **Darke Magyk** always leaves some kind of dirt behind. It could be worse.”

Aunt Zelda did not reply. She was somewhat distracted by the din coming from the cottage. Suddenly there was a loud crash followed by raised voices.

“Alther, what *is* going on in there?” demanded Aunt Zelda. “I’m only gone for a few hours, then I come back to find some kind of party going on and I’m not even allowed back into my own home. Marcia has gone too far this time if you ask me.”

“It’s an Apprentice Supper,” said Alther. “For the Young Army lad. He’s just become Marcia’s Apprentice.”

“Really? That’s *wonderful* news,” said Aunt Zelda, brightening. “Perfect news in fact. But you know, I always hoped he would.”

“Did you?” said Alther, beginning to warm to Aunt Zelda. “I always did too.”

“Still,” sighed Aunt Zelda, “I could have done without this supper lark. I had a nice quiet bean and eel stew planned for tonight.”

“Got to have the Apprentice Supper tonight, Zelda,” Alther said. “It must be held on the day the Apprentice accepts a Wizard’s offer. Otherwise the contract between the Wizard and the Apprentice is void. And you can’t make the contract again—you only get one chance. No supper, no contract, no Apprentice.”

“Oh, I know,” said Aunt Zelda airily.

“When Marcia was Apprenticed to me,” said Alther nostalgically, “I remember we had quite a night. We had all the Wizards there, and there were a lot more in those days too. That supper was something we talked about for years afterward. We had it in the Hall of the Wizard Tower—you ever been there, Zelda?”

Aunt Zelda shook her head. The Wizard Tower was somewhere she would have liked to have visited, but when Silas was briefly Alther’s Apprentice she had been too busy taking over as Keeper of the Dragon Boat from the previous White Witch, Betty Crackle, who had let things go somewhat.

“Ah, well, let’s hope you get to see it one day. It is a wonderful place,” he said, remembering the luxury and **Magyk** that had surrounded them all then. A little different, thought Alther, from a makeshift party beside a fishing boat.

“Well, I have every hope that Marcia will be going back very soon,” said Aunt Zelda. “Now that we seem to have got rid of that awful DomDaniel man.”

“I was Apprenticed to that awful DomDaniel man, you know,” Alther continued, “and all I got for my Apprentice Supper was a cheese sandwich. I can tell you, Zelda, I regretted eating that cheese sandwich more than anything else I had ever done in my life. It bound me to that man for years and years.”

“Until you pushed him off the Wizard Tower.” Aunt Zelda chuckled.

“I didn’t push him. He *jumped*,” protested Alther. Yet *again*. And not, he suspected, for the last time.

“Well, good for you, whatever happened,” said Aunt Zelda, distracted by the babble of excited voices coming from the open doors and windows of the cottage. Above the hubbub came Marcia’s unmistakable bossy tones:

“No, let *Sarah* take that one, Silas. You’ll only drop it.”

“Well, put it down, then, if it’s *that* hot.”

“Mind my shoes, will you? And get that dog off for goodness’ sake.”

“Wretched duck. Always under my feet. Eurgh, is that duck poo I’ve just trodden on?”

And finally: “And now I’d like my Apprentice to lead the way, please.”

Boy 412 came out the door, holding a lantern. He was followed by Silas and Simon, who were carrying the table and chairs, then Sarah and Jenna with an assortment of plates, glasses, bottles, and Nicko who had a basket piled high with ten cabbages. He had no idea why he had a basket of cabbages, and he was not going to ask either. He had already trodden on Marcia’s brand-new purple python shoes (there was no way she would be wearing *galoshes* to her Apprentice’s Supper), and was keeping out of her way.

Marcia followed, carefully stepping over the mud, carrying the blue

leather Apprentice Diary she had **Made** for Boy 412.

As the party emerged from the cottage, the last of the clouds cleared away and the moon rode high in the sky, casting a silver light over the procession as it made its way to the landing stage. Silas and Simon set the table down next to Alther's boat, *Molly*, and put a large white cloth over it, then Marcia directed how everything should be set out. Nicko had to put the basket of cabbages in the middle of the table just where Marcia told him to.

Marcia clapped her hands for silence.

"This is," she said, "an important evening for all of us, and I would like to welcome my Apprentice."

Everyone clapped politely.

"I'm not one for long speeches," Marcia continued.

"That's not how I remember it," Alther whispered to Aunt Zelda, who was sitting next to him in the boat so that he did not feel left out of the party. She nudged him companionably, forgetting for a moment that he was a ghost, and her arm went right through him and her elbow hit *Molly's* mast.

"Ouch!" Aunt Zelda yelped. "Oh, sorry, Marcia. Do go on."

"Thank you, Zelda, I will. I just want to say that I have spent ten years looking for an Apprentice, and although I have met many Hopefuls, I have never found what I was looking for, until now."

Marcia turned to Boy 412 and smiled. "So, thank you for agreeing to be my Apprentice for the next seven years and a day. Thank you very much. It's going to be a wonderful time for us both."

Boy 412, who was sitting next to Marcia, blushed bright red as Marcia handed him his Apprentice Diary. He held the diary tightly with his clammy hands, leaving two slightly grubby handprints on the porous blue leather, which would never come off and would always remind him of the evening that changed his life forever.

"Nicko," said Marcia, "hand the cabbages out, will you?"

Nicko looked at Marcia with the same expression he used for Maxie when he had done something particularly silly. But he said nothing. He picked up

the basket of cabbages and walked around the table and started handing them out.

“Er, thank you, Nicko,” said Silas as he took the proffered cabbage and held it awkwardly in his hands, wondering quite what to do with it.

“No!” snapped Marcia. “Don’t *give* it to them. Put the cabbages on the *plates*.”

Nicko gave Marcia another Maxie look (this time it was the I-wish-you-hadn’t-pooed-*there* look), then quickly dumped a cabbage on each plate.

When everyone, including Maxie, had a cabbage, Marcia raised her hands for silence.

“This is a suit-yourself supper. Each cabbage is **Primed** to willingly **Transform** itself into whatever you would most like to eat. Just place your hand on the cabbage and decide what you would like.”

There was an excited buzz as everyone decided what they were going to have and **Transformed** their cabbages.

“It’s a criminal waste of good cabbages,” Aunt Zelda whispered to Alther. “I shall just have cabbage casserole.”

“Now that you have all decided,” said Marcia loudly over the hubbub, “there is one last thing to be said.”

“Get a move on, Marcia!” Silas called out. “My fish pie’s getting cold.”

Marcia gave Silas a withering look.

“It is traditional,” she continued, “that in return for the seven years and a day of his life that the Apprentice offers the Wizard, the Wizard offers something to the Apprentice.” Marcia turned to Boy 412, who was sitting almost hidden behind a huge plate of eel stew and dumplings just like Aunt Zelda always made.

“What would you like from me?” Marcia asked him. “Ask me anything you like. I will do my best to give it to you.”

Boy 412 gazed at his plate. Then he looked at all the people gathered around him and thought how different his life had become since he had met

them. He felt so happy that there was really nothing else he wanted. Except for one thing. One big, impossible thing that he was almost too scared to think about.

“Anything you like,” Marcia said softly. “Anything you want at all.”

Boy 412 gulped.

“I want,” he said quietly, “to know who I am.”

SEPTIMUS HEAP



Unnoticed on the chimney pot of Keeper's Cottage, a storm petrel perched. He had been blown in the night before and had been watching the Apprentice Supper with great interest. And now, he noted with a feeling of fondness, Aunt Zelda was about to do what the petrel had always considered she had a particular gift for.

"It's the perfect night for it," Aunt Zelda was saying as she stood on the bridge over the Mott. "There's a beautiful full moon, and I've never known the Mott to be so still. Can everyone fit on the bridge? Shuffle up a bit, Marcia, and make room for Simon."

Simon didn't look as if he wanted to be made room for.

"Oh, don't bother about me," he mumbled. "Why break the habit of a lifetime?"

"What did you say, Simon?" asked Silas.

"Nothing."

“Let him be, Silas,” said Sarah. “He’s had a tough time recently.”

“We’ve all had a tough time recently, Sarah. But we don’t go around moaning about it.”

Aunt Zelda tapped the handrail of the bridge irritably.

“*If* everybody has quite finished bickering, I would like to remind you that we are about to try to answer an important question. All right, everybody?”

Silence descended on the group. Along with Aunt Zelda, Boy 412, Sarah, Silas, Marcia, Jenna, Nicko and Simon were all squashed onto the small bridge that went over the Mott. Behind them was the Dragon Boat, her head raised high and arched over them, her deep green eyes staring intently at the reflection of the moon swimming in the still waters of the Mott.

In front of them, pushed back a little to allow the reflection of the moon to be seen, was *Molly* with *Alther* sitting in the prow, observing the scene with interest.

Simon hung back on the edge of the bridge. He didn’t see what the fuss was about. Who cared where some Young Army brat came from? Especially a Young Army brat who had stolen his lifelong dream from him. Boy 412’s parentage was the last thing Simon cared about, or was ever likely to as far as he could imagine. So, as Aunt Zelda started to call upon the moon, Simon deliberately turned his back.

“Sister Moon, Sister Moon,” said Aunt Zelda softly, “Show us, if you will, the family of Boy 412 of the Young Army.”

Exactly as before in the duck pond, the reflection of the moon began to grow bigger until a huge round white circle filled the Mott. At first, vague shadows began to appear in the circle; slowly they became more defined until everyone watching saw...their own reflections.

There was a murmur of disappointment from everyone except Marcia, who had noticed something no one else had, and from Boy 412, whose voice seemed to have stopped working. His heart was pounding somewhere high in his throat, and his legs felt as though they might turn into parsnip puree at any moment. He wished he had never asked to see who he was. He didn’t think he really wanted to know. Suppose his family was horrible? Suppose they *were* the Young Army, like he had been told? Suppose it was DomDaniel himself?

Just as he was about to tell Aunt Zelda that he had changed his mind, that he didn't care who he was anymore, thank you, Aunt Zelda spoke.

“Things,” Aunt Zelda reminded everyone on the bridge, “are not always as they seem. Remember, the moon always shows us the truth. How we see the truth is up to us, not the moon.”

She turned to Boy 412, who stood beside her. “Tell me,” she asked him, “what would you *really* like to see?”

The answer Boy 412 gave was not the one he had expected to give.

“I want to see my mother,” he whispered.

“Sister Moon, Sister Moon,” said Aunt Zelda softly, “show us, if you will, the mother of Boy 412 of the Young Army.”

The white disk of the moon filled the Mott. Once more, vague shadows began to appear until they saw...their own reflections, *again*. There was a collective moan of protest, but it was quickly cut short. Something different was happening. One by one, people were disappearing from the reflection.

First Boy 412 himself disappeared. Then Simon, Jenna, Nicko and Silas went. Then Marcia's reflection faded, followed by Aunt Zelda's.

Suddenly Sarah Heap found herself looking at her own reflection in the moon, waiting for it to fade like all the others had done. But it did not fade. It grew stronger and more defined, until Sarah Heap was standing alone in the middle of the white disk of the moon. Everyone could see that it was no longer just a reflection. It was the answer.

Boy 412 gazed at the picture of Sarah, transfixed. How could Sarah Heap be his mother? *How?*

Sarah raised her eyes from the Mott and looked at Boy 412.

“Septimus?” she half whispered.

There was something Aunt Zelda wanted to show Sarah.

“Sister Moon, Sister Moon,” said Aunt Zelda, “show us, if you will, the seventh son of Sarah and Silas Heap. Show us *Septimus Heap*.”

Slowly the image of Sarah Heap faded away and was replaced by—

Boy 412.

There was a gasp, even from Marcia, who had guessed who Boy 412 was a few minutes earlier. Only she had noticed that her image had disappeared from the reflection of Boy 412's family.

"Septimus?" Sarah knelt down beside Boy 412 and looked at him searchingly. Boy 412's eyes stared into hers, and Sarah said, "You know, I do believe your eyes are beginning to turn green, just like your father's. And mine. And your brothers'."

"Are they?" asked Boy 412. "Really?"

Sarah reached out and placed her hand on Septimus's red hat.

"Would you mind if I took this off?" she asked.

Boy 412 shook his head. That's what mothers were for. To fiddle about with your hat.

Gently, Sarah lifted off Boy 412's hat for the first time since Marcia had crammed it onto his head at Sally Mullin's bunkhouse. Straw-colored tufts of curly hair sprang up as Septimus shook his head like a dog shaking off water and a boy shaking off his old life, his old fears and his old name.

He was becoming who he really was.

Septimus Heap.

WHAT AUNT ZELDA SAW IN THE DUCK POND

We are back in the Young Army nursery.

In the semidarkness of the nursery the Matron Midwife puts the baby Septimus in a cot and sits down wearily. She keeps glancing anxiously at the door as if waiting for someone to come in. No one appears.

A minute or two later she heaves herself up from her chair and goes over to the cot where her own baby is crying and picks the child up. At that moment the door is flung open, and the Matron Midwife wheels around, white-faced, frightened.

A tall woman in black stands in the doorway. Over her black, well-pressed robes she wears the starched white apron of a nurse, but around her waist is a bloodred belt showing the three black stars of DomDaniel.

She has come for Septimus Heap.

The Nurse is late. She got lost on her way to the nursery, and now she is flustered and afraid. DomDaniel does not tolerate lateness. She sees the Matron Midwife with a baby, just as she has been told she would. She does not know that the Matron Midwife is holding her own child in her arms and that Septimus Heap is asleep in a cot in the dim shadows of the nursery. The Nurse runs over to the Midwife and seizes the baby from her. The Midwife protests. She tries to wrest her baby back from the Nurse, but her desperation is more than matched by the Nurse's determination to make it back to the boat in time for the tide.

The taller, younger Nurse wins. She bundles up the baby in a long red cloth emblazoned with three black stars and runs out, pursued by the screaming Midwife who now knows exactly how Sarah Heap felt only a few hours ago. The Midwife is forced to give up her chase at the barracks door

where the Nurse, flaunting her three black stars, has the Matron Midwife arrested by the guard, and disappears into the night, triumphantly carrying off the Midwife's own child to DomDaniel.

Back in the nursery the old woman who is meant to be babysitting wakes up. Coughing and wheezing, she gets up and makes up four nighttime bottles for her charges. One each for the triplets—Boys 409, 410 and 411—and one for the newest recruit to the Young Army, twelve-hours-old Septimus Heap, destined to be known for the next ten years as Boy 412.

Aunt Zelda sighed. This was as she had expected. Next she asked the moon to follow the Midwife's child. There was something else she needed to know.

The Nurse just makes it back to the boat in time. A **Thing** stands at the stern of the boat and sculls her across the river using the old fishermen's way with just one oar. On the other side she is met by a **Darke** horseman, riding a huge black horse. He pulls the Nurse and the child up behind him and canters off into the night. They have a long and uncomfortable ride ahead of them.

By the time they reach DomDaniel's lair high up in the old slate quarries of the Badlands, the Midwife's baby is screaming and the Nurse has a terrible headache. DomDaniel is waiting to see his prize, which he takes to be Septimus Heap, the seventh son of a seventh son. The Apprentice that every Wizard and every **Necromancer** dreams of. The Apprentice who will give him the power to return him to the Castle and take back what is rightfully his.

He looks at the screaming baby with distaste. The screams make his head ache and his ears ring. It is a big baby for a newborn, thinks DomDaniel, and an ugly one too. He doesn't like it very much. The **Necromancer** has an air of disappointment about him as he tells the Nurse to take the baby away.

The Nurse puts the baby in the waiting cot and goes to bed. She feels too ill to get up the next day, and no one bothers to feed the Midwife's son until well into the next night. There is no Apprentice Supper for this Apprentice.

Aunt Zelda sat by the duck pond and smiled. The Apprentice is free of his **Darke** Master. Septimus Heap is alive, and has found his family. The Princess is safe. She remembered something Marcia often said: things *do* have a habit of working out. Eventually.

AFTER...

Whatever happened to...

GRINGE, THE GATEKEEPER

Gringe remained the North Gate Gatekeeper throughout all the upheavals at the Castle. Although he would rather have jumped into a vat of boiling oil than admit it, Gringe loved his job, and it gave his family a secure home in the gatehouse after many years of living rough under the Castle walls. The day that Marcia had given him a half crown turned out to be an important day for Gringe. That day, for the first and only time ever, Gringe kept some of the bridge money—Marcia's half crown, to be exact. There was something about the thick, solid silver disk lying warm and heavy in the palm of his hand that made Gringe reluctant to put it into the toll box. So he slipped it into his pocket, telling himself he would add it to the day's takings that night. But Gringe could not bring himself to part with the half crown. And so the half crown sat in his pocket for many months until Gringe began to consider it his own.

And there the half crown would have stayed had it not been for a notice Gringe found nailed up on the North Gate one cold morning almost a year later:

YOUNG ARMY CONSCRIPTION EDICT

ALL BOYS AGED ELEVEN TO SIXTEEN

YEARS WHO ARE NOT APPRENTICED TO

A RECOGNIZED TRADE ARE TO REPORT
TO THE YOUNG ARMY BARRACKS
AT 0600 HOURS TOMORROW

Gringe felt sick. His son, Rupert, had celebrated his eleventh birthday the previous day. Mrs. Gringe was hysterical when she saw the notice. Gringe felt hysterical too, but when he saw Rupert, white-faced, reading the notice, he decided he had to stay calm. He shoved his hands in his pockets and thought. And when, out of habit, his hand closed around Marcia's half crown, Gringe knew he had the answer.

As soon as the boatyard was open that morning, they had a new apprentice: Rupert Gringe, whose father had just secured a seven-year apprenticeship with Jannit Maarten, a herring-boat builder, for the substantial down payment of a half crown.

THE MATRON MIDWIFE

After the Matron Midwife was arrested, she was taken to the Castle Asylum for Deluded and Distressed Persons due to her distraught state of mind and preoccupation with baby-snatching, which was not considered to be a healthy preoccupation for a Midwife to have. After spending a few years there she was allowed to leave because the Asylum was becoming overcrowded. There had been a huge increase in deluded and distressed people since the Supreme Custodian had taken over the Castle, and the Matron Midwife was now neither deluded nor distressed enough to merit a place. And so Agnes Meredith, former Matron Midwife, now unemployed bag lady, packed her many bags and set off to search for her lost son, Merrin.

THE NIGHT SERVANT

The Supreme Custodian's Night Servant was thrown into a dungeon after dropping the Crown and adding another dent to it. He was released a week later by mistake and went to work in the Palace kitchens as an undercook

peeling potatoes, which he was good at, and soon progressed to be chief potato-peeler. He enjoyed his job. No one minded if he dropped a potato.

JUDGE ALICE NETTLES

Alice Nettles first met Alther Mella when she was a trainee advocate at the Castle Court. Alther had yet to become DomDaniel's Apprentice, but Alice could tell that Alther was special. Even after Alther became the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and was much talked about as "that awful Apprentice who pushed his Master from the Tower," Alice kept seeing him. She knew that Alther was incapable of killing anything, even an irritating ant. Shortly after Alther became ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Alice achieved her ambition of becoming a judge. Soon their separate careers began to keep Alther and Alice increasingly busy, and they never saw as much of each other as they would have liked to, something that Alice always regretted.

It was a terrible double blow to Alice when, in the space of a few days, the Custodians not only killed the dearest friend she had ever had but also took away her life's work when they banned women from the Courthouse. Alice left the Castle and went to stay with her brother in the Port. After some time she recovered enough from Alther's death to take a job as legal advisor to the Customs House.

It was after a long day dealing with a tricky problem involving a smuggled camel and a traveling circus that Alice repaired to the Blue Anchor Tavern before she returned to her brother's house. It was there, to her delight, that she finally met the ghost of Alther Mella.

THE ASSASSIN

The Assassin suffered complete memory loss after being hit by Marcia's **Thunderflash**. She was also quite badly burned. When the Hunter had collected the pistol from the Assassin, he had left her lying where he found her, unconscious on Marcia's carpet. DomDaniel had had her thrown out into the snow, but she was found by the night street sweepers and taken to the Nuns' Hospice. She eventually recovered and stayed on at the Hospice, working as a helper. Luckily for her, her memory never returned.

LINDA LANE

Linda Lane was given a new identity and moved into some luxurious rooms overlooking the river to reward her for finding the Princess. However, some months later she was recognized by the family of one of her previous victims, and late one night as she sat on her balcony with a glass of her favorite wine supplied by the Supreme Custodian, Linda Lane was pushed off and fell into the fast-flowing river. She was never found.

THE YOUNGEST KITCHEN MAID

After the youngest Kitchen Maid started having nightmares about wolves, her sleep became so badly disturbed that she often fell asleep at work. One day she dozed off while she was meant to be turning the spit and a whole sheep went up in flames; it was only the prompt action of the chief potato-peeler that saved her from the same fate as the sheep. The youngest Kitchen Maid was demoted to assistant potato-peeler, but three weeks later she ran away with the chief potato-peeler to start a better life in the Port.

THE FIVE NORTHERN TRADERS

After their hurried exit from Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House, the five Northern Traders spent the night on their ship, stowing away their wares and preparing to leave on the early morning high tide. They had been caught up in unpleasant changes of government before and had no wish to stay around and see what happened this time. In the Traders' experience it was always a nasty business. As they sailed past the smoldering remains of Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House the next morning, they knew they were right. But they gave little thought to Sally as they set off down the river, planning their voyage south to escape the Big Freeze and looking forward to the warmer climes of the Far Countries. The Northern Traders had seen it all before, and did not doubt they would see it all again.

THE WASHING-UP BOY

The Washing-up Boy employed by Sally Mullin was convinced that it was his fault the Tea and Ale House burned down. He was sure he must have left the tea towels drying too close to the fire just as he had done before. But he was not one to let these things trouble him for long. The Washing-Up Boy believed that every setback was an opportunity in disguise. And so he built a small hut on wheels and every day he trundled it down to the Custodian Guard barracks and sold meat pies and sausages to the Guards. The contents of his pies and sausages varied and depended on what the Washing-up Boy could get hold of, but he worked hard, making the pies late into the night, and did a brisk trade all day. If people began to notice that their cats and dogs were disappearing at an alarming rate, no one thought to link it with the sudden appearance of the Washing-up Boy's meat pie hut. And, when the ranks of the Custodian Guards were devastated by food poisoning, it was the barracks' Canteen Cook who was blamed. The Washing-up Boy prospered and never, ever, ate one of his own meat pies or sausages.

RUPERT GRINGE

Rupert Gringe was the best apprentice Jannit Maarten had ever had. Jannit built shallow-draught herring boats, which could fish the waters near the shore and trap the shoals of herring by running them up against the sand banks just outside the Port. Any herring fisherman in possession of a Jannit Maarten boat was sure of a good living, and it soon became known that if Rupert Gringe had worked on the boat, you were lucky—the boat would sit well in the water and run fast with the wind. Jannit recognized talent when she saw it, and she soon trusted Rupert to work on his own. The first boat Rupert built entirely by himself was *Muriel*. He painted her a dark green like the depths of the river and gave her deep red sails like the late summer sunsets over the sea.

LUCY GRINGE

Lucy Gringe had met Simon Heap at a dance class for young ladies and gentlemen when they were both fourteen. Mrs. Gringe had sent Lucy along to keep her out of trouble for the summer. (Simon had gone to the class by mistake. Silas, who had some trouble with reading and often got his letters mixed up, had thought it was a **Trance** class and had made the mistake of

mentioning it to Sarah one evening. Simon overheard, and after much pestering, Silas had enrolled him in the class.)

Lucy loved the way Simon was determined to be the best dancer in the class, just as Simon was always determined to be the best at everything. And she liked his green Wizard eyes and his curly blond hair too. Simon had no idea why he liked a *girl* all of a sudden, but for some reason he found he could not stop thinking about Lucy. Lucy and Simon continued to see each other whenever they could, but kept their meetings secret. They knew neither of their families would approve.

The day Lucy ran away to get married to Simon Heap was the best and worst day of her life. It was the best day right up until the Guards burst into the Chapel and took him away. After that Lucy didn't care what happened to her. Gringe came and took her home. He locked her up at the top of the gatehouse tower to stop her running away and begged her to forget about Simon Heap. Lucy refused and would not speak to her father at all. Gringe was heartbroken. He had only done what he thought best for his daughter.

JENNA'S SHIELD BUG

When the ex-millipede fell off DomDaniel it bounced and ended up on top of a barrel. The barrel was washed overboard as the *Vengeance* was pulled down into the Quake Ooze. It floated off to the Port where it fetched up on the town beach. The Shield Bug dried out its wings and flew off to a nearby field where a traveling circus had just arrived. For some reason it took a particular dislike to an inoffensive buffoon, and it caused great amusement to the audience every night as the bug chased the buffoon around the ring.

THE SWIMMERS AND THE CHICKEN BOAT

The two swimmers who were thrown from the *Vengeance* were lucky to survive. Jake and Barry Parfitt, whose mother had insisted on teaching them to swim before they became seafarers, were not particularly strong swimmers, and it was all they could do to keep their heads above water as the storm raged around them. They were beginning to give up hope when Barry saw a fishing boat coming toward them. Although there appeared to be no one on

board the fishing boat, there was an unusual gangplank hanging down from the deck. With their last ounce of strength Jake and Barry pulled themselves up onto the gangplank and collapsed onto the deck, where they found themselves surrounded by chickens. But they didn't care what they were surrounded by as long as it wasn't water.

When the waters eventually ebbed from the Marram Marshes, Jake, Barry and the chickens came to rest on one of the marsh islands. They decided to stay put, out of the way of DomDaniel, and soon there was a thriving chicken farm some miles away from Draggen Island.

THE MESSAGE RAT

Stanley was eventually rescued from his prison under the floorboards of the Ladies' Washroom by one of the old Rat Office rats who had heard what had happened to him. He spent some time recovering at the rat's nest at the top of the East Gate gatehouse tower, where Lucy Gringe took to feeding him biscuits and confiding her troubles to him. In Stanley's opinion, Lucy Gringe had had a lucky escape. If anyone had ever asked Stanley, he would have told them that Wizards in general, and Wizards called Heap in particular, were nothing but trouble. But no one ever did ask.

About the Authors

ANGIE SAGE was born in London and grew up in the Thames Valley, London, and Kent. She currently lives by a creek in Cornwall, England, where she writes while overlooking oyster boats passing to and fro. She also sails a little green boat with red sails called *Muriel*. Angie has created many picture books and chapter books for children. This is her first novel. You can visit her online at www.septimusheap.com.

MARK ZUG has loved fantasy novels since he was a teenager. He has illustrated many collectible card games, including *Magic: The Gathering* and *Dune*, as well as books and magazines. He lives in Pennsylvania.

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.

SEPTIMUS HEAP

Book One: Magyk

Book Two: Flyte

Credits

Cover art © 2005 by Mark Zug

Cover design by Karin Paprocki

Copyright

SEPTIMUS HEAP BOOK ONE: MAGYK. Copyright © 2005 by Angie Sage. Illustrations © 2005 by Mark Zug. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

ePub Edition February 2008 ISBN 9780061757068

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
25 Ryde Road (PO Box 321)
Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com.au>

Canada

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900
Toronto, ON, M5R, 3L2, Canada
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.uk>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com>

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

SEPTIMUS HEAP

⇨ BOOK TWO ⇨

Flyte



ANGIE SAGE

#1 National Bestselling Author of *MAGYK*

Septimus Heap Book Two Flyte

Angie Sage

Illustrations by Mark Zug

 HarperCollins e-books

*For Laurie,
supplier of magogs.*

This one's for you, with love.

Contents

[Map](#)

[The Year Before: On the Night of the Apprentice Supper](#)

- [1 Spiders](#)
- [2 Wizard Way](#)
- [3 A Dark Horse](#)
- [4 Simon Says](#)
- [5 Thunder](#)
- [6 North Gate](#)
- [7 The Greenhouse](#)
- [8 The Laboratory](#)
- [9 Number Thirteen](#)
- [10 Leaving](#)
- [11 Jenna's Journey](#)
- [12 Jannit Maarten's Boatyard](#)
- [13 The Forest](#)
- [14 Lost](#)
- [15 The Tree](#)
- [16 The Badlands](#)
- [17 The Burrow](#)
- [18 The Camera Obscura](#)
- [19 Chocolate](#)
- [20 Land Wurm](#)
- [21 The Sheeplands](#)
- [22 Camp Heap](#)
- [23 Wolf Boy](#)
- [24 The Port](#)
- [25 The Doll House](#)
- [26 Sleuth](#)

[27 The House of the Port Witch Coven](#)

[28 The Causeway](#)

[29 Fight & Flyte](#)

[30 On Marram Marsh](#)

[31 Dragons](#)

[32 Spit Fyre](#)

[33 Takeoff](#)

[34 Airborne](#)

[35 Landing](#)

[36 Return](#)

[37 In Search of *Draxx*](#)

[38 The Hermetic Chamber](#)

[39 In the Ice Tunnels](#)

[40 Beetle in the Tower](#)

[41 The Placement](#)

[42 Identify](#)

[43 FirstFlyte](#)

[44 Last Flyte](#)

[45 The Lookout Tower](#)

[46 The Lock-Up](#)

[47 The Queen's Room](#)

[48 The Young Queen](#)

[49 Flyte](#)

[What Happened Before...](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Other Books by Angie Sage](#)

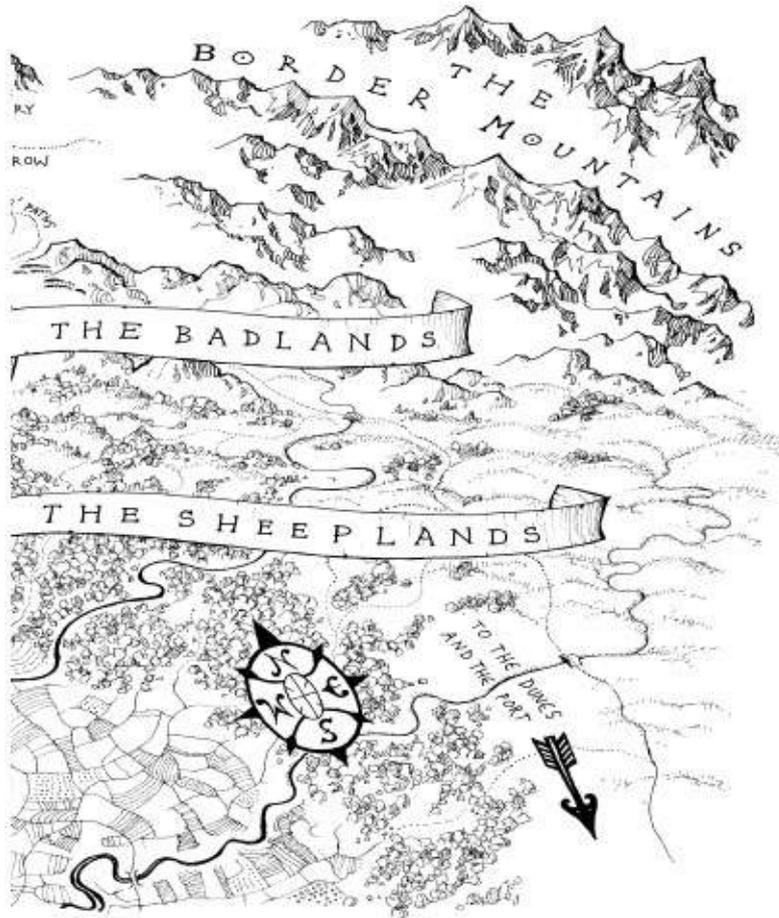
[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Map





THE YEAR BEFORE: ON THE NIGHT OF THE APPRENTICE SUPPER



It is night on the Marram Marshes; a full moon shines down on the black waters and illuminates the nighttime **Things** who are going about their business. Silence hangs in the air, broken occasionally by the glugs and gurgles of the Quake Ooze as the creatures that live beneath it make their way to a feast. A huge ship with a full complement of sailors has sunk into the Ooze and the **Things** are hungry—but they will have to fight the Quake Ooze Brownies for the leftovers. Every now and then a bubble of gas throws something from the ship up to the surface, and great planks and spars covered in a thick black tar float across the top of the Ooze.

Nighttime on the Marram Marshes is no time for a human being to be abroad, but in the distance, paddling steadily toward the ship, is a figure in a small canoe. His fair curly hair hangs limp in the damp marsh air, and his piercing green eyes stare angrily into the night as he mutters furiously to himself, replaying over and over a fierce argument he has had that very evening. But what does *he* care anymore? he asks himself. He is on his way to a new life, one where his talents will be recognized and not passed over in favor of an upstart nobody.

As he nears all that can be seen of the ship—a single mast sticking out of the Ooze topped with a limp and ragged red flag with a line of three black stars—he steers the canoe into a narrow channel that will take him to the very foot of the mast. He shivers, not with the cold, but from the feeling of fear that hangs in the air, and the thought that beneath him lies the ship's carcass,

picked clean by the Quake Ooze Brownies. Now the debris is slowing him down. He propels the canoe forward until he is suddenly forced to a halt—there is something under the water blocking his path. He peers into the brackish sludge and can see nothing at first, but then...then he sees something below him, ice-white in the moonlight. It is moving...moving up through the water, and suddenly a skeleton, picked clean and bright by the Brownies, breaks the surface, sending a plume of black slime over the occupant of the canoe.

Shaking with a mixture of fear and excitement, the canoeist allows the skeleton to climb aboard and settle itself behind him, sticking its sharp kneecaps into his back. For he knows by the rings still on the bony fingers, that this is what he has been hoping to find—the skeleton of DomDaniel himself, **Necromancer**, twice ExtraOrdinary Wizard and, in the canoeist's opinion, a far superior Wizard to any he has met so far. And particularly superior to the one he has just been forced to share an Apprentice Supper with.

The canoeist makes a deal with the skeleton. He will do all that he can to **Restore** him to life and to allow him to reclaim his rightful place in the Wizard Tower, if only the skeleton will accept him as his Apprentice.

With a nod of his bony skull, the skeleton agrees to the deal.

The canoe resumes its journey, directed by the somewhat impatient bony forefinger of the skeleton jabbing the canoeist in the back. At last they reach the edge of the Marsh, whereupon the skeleton climbs out of the canoe and leads the tall, fair-haired young man into the bleakest place he has ever been. As the young man follows the shambling gait of the skeleton through a desolate landscape, the thought of what he has left behind briefly crosses his mind. But only briefly, for this is his new life now and he will show them all—and *then* they'll be sorry.

Especially when *he* becomes the ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

1

SPIDERS



Septimus Heap tipped six spiders into a jar, screwed the lid down tight and put them outside the door. Then he picked up his broom and continued sweeping out the Pyramid Library.

The Library was cramped and dark. It was lit by a few fat candles that spat and spluttered, and it smelled weird—a mixture of incense, musty paper and moldy leather. Septimus loved it. It was a **Magykal** place, perched right at the top of the Wizard Tower and hidden away deep inside the golden Pyramid, which crowned the Tower. Outside, the hammered gold of the Pyramid shimmered brightly in the early-morning sun.

After Septimus had finished sweeping, he made his way slowly along the shelves, humming happily to himself while he sorted out the **Magykal** books, parchments and spells that the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Marcia Overstrand, had, as usual, left in a mess. Most eleven-and-a-half-year-old boys would rather have been out in the bright summer morning, but Septimus was where he wanted to be. He had spent quite enough summer mornings outside—and winter ones, come to that—in the first ten years of his life as Young Army soldier, Boy 412.

It was Septimus's job, as Apprentice to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, to tidy the Library every morning. And every morning Septimus found something new and exciting. Often it was something that Marcia had left out especially for him: maybe a **Conjuration** that she had come across late at night and thought might interest him or a dog-eared old spell book that she had taken from one of the **Hidden** shelves. But today, Septimus reckoned he had found something for himself: it was stuck underneath a heavy brass candlestick and

looked slightly disgusting—not the kind of thing that Marcia Overstrand would want to get her hands messy with. Very carefully he pried the sticky brown square off the bottom of the candlestick and put it in the palm of his hand. Septimus examined his find and felt excited—he was sure it was a **Taste Charm**. The thick, brown, square tablet *looked* like an old piece of chocolate; it smelled like an old piece of chocolate; and he was pretty sure it would taste like an old piece of chocolate too, although he wasn't going to risk it. There was a chance it might be a poison **Charm** that had dropped out of the large box labeled: TOXINS, VENOMS AND BASYK BANES, which teetered unsteadily on the shelf above.

Septimus pulled out a small Enhancing Glass from his Apprentice belt and held it so that he could read the thin white writing that looped across the square. The words said:

Take me, shake me, and I will make thee:

Quetzalcoatl's Tchocolatl.

Septimus grinned. He was right, but then he usually was when it came to **Magyk**. It was a **Taste Charm**—even better, it was a *chocolate Taste Charm*. Septimus knew just the person he wanted to give it to. Smiling to himself, he slipped the **Charm** into his pocket.

Septimus's work in the Library was nearly done. He climbed up the ladder to tidy the last shelf and suddenly found himself eye to eye with the biggest, hairiest spider he had ever seen. Septimus gulped; if it had not been for Marcia insisting on him removing every single spider that he found from the Library, he would happily have left this one alone. He was sure the spider's eight beady eyes were trying to stare him down, and he didn't like its long, hairy legs either. In fact all eight legs looked as though they were planning to run up his sleeve if he didn't grab the spider fast.

In a flash, Septimus had the spider in his hand. The creature scabbled angrily against his dusty fingers, trying to pry them open with its surprisingly powerful legs, but Septimus held on tight. Quickly he made his way down the ladder, passing the small hatch that led out onto the golden roof of the Pyramid. Just as he reached the bottom of the ladder, the spider bit the inside of his thumb.

“Ouch!” Septimus yelped.

He grabbed the spider jar, unscrewed the lid one-handed and dropped the creature in, much to the dismay of the six other spiders already there. Then, with his thumb beginning to throb, Septimus screwed the lid back on as tightly as he could. Careful not to drop the jar, in which six small spiders were now being chased around and around by one large hairy one, Septimus made a quick exit down the winding, narrow, stone stairs which led from the Library into the apartment of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Madam Marcia Overstrand.

Septimus hurried by the closed purple and gold door to Marcia’s bedroom, past his own room, and then ran down some more steps and headed for the small potion room beside Marcia’s study. He put down the jar of spiders and looked at his thumb. It wasn’t a pretty sight; it had become a deep red color and some interesting blue blotches were beginning to appear on his hand. It also *hurt*. Septimus flipped open the Medicine Chest with his good hand and found a tube of **Spider Balm**, the entire contents of which he squeezed over his thumb. It didn’t seem to do much good. In fact it seemed to make it worse. Septimus stared at his thumb, which was swelling up like a small balloon and felt as though it might be about to explode.

Marcia Overstrand, whom Septimus had now been Apprenticed to for almost a year and a half, had found the spiders waiting for her on her triumphant return to the Wizard Tower after ousting the **Necromancer**, DomDaniel, from his brief second time as ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Marcia had thoroughly **Cleaned** the Tower of **Darke Magyk** and restored the **Magyk** to the Wizard Tower, but she could not get rid of the spiders. This had upset Marcia, for she knew that the spiders were a sure sign that **Darke Magyk** still lingered in the Tower.

At first, when Marcia came back to the Tower, she was too busy to notice anything amiss—apart from the spiders. She had, for the first time, an Apprentice to think about; she had the Heaps—who were now living up at the Palace—to deal with and a bunch of Ordinary Wizards to sort out and settle back into the Tower. But as Septimus’s first summer at the Wizard Tower had drawn on, Marcia had begun to notice, out of the corner of her eye, a **Darkenesse** following her. At first she had thought she was imagining it, for every time she glanced back over her shoulder and had a proper look, there was nothing to be seen. It wasn’t until Alther Mella, the ghost of Marcia’s old tutor and ExtraOrdinary Wizard, had told her that he could see something too that Marcia knew she was not imagining things—there *was* a **Darke Shadow**

following her.

And so, for the last year, piece by piece, Marcia had been building a **ShadowSafe**, which was nearly finished. It stood in the corner of the room, a tangle of shiny black rods and bars made from Professor Weasal Van Klampff's special **Amalgam**. A strange black mist played around the bars of the **ShadowSafe**, and occasionally flashes of orange light leaped between them. But at last the **ShadowSafe** was nearly finished, and soon Marcia would be able to walk inside it with the **Shadow** following her and walk out again, leaving the **Shadow** behind. And that, Marcia hoped, would be the end of the **Darkeness** in the Tower.

As Septimus stared at his thumb, which was now twice its normal size and turning a nasty purple, he heard Marcia's study door open.

"I'm off, Septimus," said Marcia purposefully. "I've got to go and pick up another part of the **ShadowSafe**. I told old Weasal I'd be down this morning. It's almost the last piece. We've only got the **Stopper** to collect after this, Septimus, and that will be that. Good-bye **Shadow**."

"Aargh," Septimus groaned.

Marcia peered suspiciously around the door. "And *what* are you doing in the potions room?" she asked irritably, catching sight of Septimus's hand. "My goodness, what *have* you done? Have you burned yourself doing a **Fire Spell** again? I don't want any more singed parrots hanging around here, Septimus. They smell disgusting and it's not fair to the parrots either."

"Aargh. That was a mistake," muttered Septimus. "I meant to do a **Firebird Spell**. It could have happened to anyone. Ouch—I've been bitten."

Marcia came in, and behind her Septimus could see a slight murkiness in the air as the **Shadow** followed her into the potion room. Marcia bent down and looked more closely at Septimus's thumb, almost enveloping him in her purple cloak as she did so. Marcia was a tall woman with long, dark, curly hair and the intense green eyes that always came to **Magykal** people, once they were exposed to **Magyk**. Septimus had the same green eyes too, although before he had met Marcia Overstrand they had been a dull gray. Like all ExtraOrdinary Wizards who had lived in the Wizard Tower before her, Marcia wore the lapis and gold Akhu Amulet around her neck, a deep purple silk tunic fastened with the ExtraOrdinary gold and platinum belt and a **Magykal** purple cloak. She also had on a pair of purple python shoes, carefully chosen that morning from a rack of about a hundred other almost

identical purple python shoes that she had taken to stockpiling since her return to the Wizard Tower. Septimus wore, as usual, his only pair of brown leather boots. Septimus liked his boots, and although Marcia often offered to get some new ones made for him in a nice emerald python skin to match his green Apprentice robes, he always refused. Marcia just couldn't understand it.

"That's a *spider* bite," said Marcia, grabbing hold of his thumb.

"*Ouch!*" Septimus yelled.

"I don't like the look of that at all," Marcia muttered.

Neither did Septimus. His thumb was now dark purple. His fingers looked like five sausages stuck on a football, and he could feel sharp pains shooting up his arm toward his heart. Septimus swayed slightly.

"Sit down, sit down," said Marcia urgently, throwing some papers off a small chair and guiding Septimus down onto it. Quickly she took a small vial out of the Medicine Chest. It had the words SPIDER VENOM scrawled on it and contained a murky green liquid. Marcia took out a long, thin glass dropper from the scary-looking medical instruments that were lined up in the lid of the chest like bizarre cutlery in a picnic basket. Then she sucked up the green venom into the dropper, being extremely careful not to get any in her mouth.

Septimus pulled his thumb out of Marcia's grasp. "That's poison!" he protested.

"There's a **Darkenese** in that bite," said Marcia, putting her thumb on top of the venom-filled dropper and carefully holding it away from her cloak, "and the **Spider Balm** is making it worse. Sometimes you have to fight like with like. Venom with venom. Trust me."

Septimus did trust Marcia; in fact he trusted her more than anyone else. So he gave her back his thumb and closed his eyes while Marcia dropped Spider Venom onto the bite and muttered what sounded to Septimus like an **Anti-Hex Incantation**. As Marcia did so the shooting pains up his arm died away, his light-headedness left him and he began to think that maybe his thumb would not explode after all.

Calmly, Marcia replaced everything back in the Medicine Chest, and then she turned and considered her Apprentice. Not surprisingly, he looked pale. But she had, thought Marcia, been working him too hard. He could do with a day out in the summer sunshine. And, more to the point, she didn't want his

mother, Sarah Heap, coming around again either.

Marcia had still not forgotten the visit Sarah had made not long after Septimus had become her Apprentice. One Sunday morning Marcia had answered a loud banging on the door, only to find Sarah Heap on the other side, accompanied by an audience of Wizards from the floor below, who had all come up to see what the noise was—for no one ever dared bang on the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's door like that.

To the amazement of the assembled audience, Sarah had then proceeded to tell Marcia off.

“My Septimus and I were apart for the first ten years of his life,” Sarah had said heatedly, “and, Madam Marcia, I do not intend to spend the next ten years seeing as little of him as I did for the first ten. So I will thank you to let the boy come home for his father's birthday today.”

Much to Marcia's annoyance, this had been greeted with a small round of applause from the assembled Wizards. Both Marcia and Septimus had been amazed at Sarah's speech. Marcia was amazed because no one ever spoke to her like that. *No one*. And Septimus was amazed because he didn't realize that that was what mothers did, although he rather liked it.

The last thing Marcia wanted was a repeat visit from Sarah. “Off you go then,” she said, half expecting Sarah Heap to appear and demand to know why Septimus looked so pale. “It's time you spent a day with your family. And while you're there, you can remind your mother to make sure that Jenna gets off to Zelda's tomorrow for her MidSummer Visit to the Dragon Boat. If I had my way she would have left days ago, but Sarah will insist on leaving everything to the last minute. I'll see you tonight, Septimus—midnight at the latest. And the chocolate **Charm** is yours, by the way.”

“Oh, thanks.” Septimus smiled. “But I'm fine now, really. I don't need a day off.”

“Yes, you do,” Marcia told him. “Go on, off you go.”

Despite himself, Septimus smiled. Maybe a day off would not be so bad. He could see Jenna before she went and give her the chocolate **Charm**.

“All right then,” he said. “I'll be back by midnight.”

Septimus headed for the heavy purple front door, which recognized

Marcia's Apprentice and flung itself open as he approached.

"Hey!" Marcia shouted after him. "You've forgotten the spiders!"

"Bother," muttered Septimus.

2

WIZARD WAY



S*eptimus stepped onto* the silver spiral stairs at the top of the Tower. “Hall, please,” he said.

As the stairs began to move smoothly down, turning like a giant corkscrew, Septimus held up the spider jar. He squinted at the occupants, which now numbered only five, and wondered if he had seen the hairy spider before.

The hairy spider looked back at Septimus with a baleful stare. It had certainly seen *him* before. Four times to be precise, the spider thought crossly; four times it had been picked up, stuffed into a jar and dumped outside. The boy was lucky it hadn’t bitten him before. Still, at least there was some decent food in the jar this time. The two soft young spiders had gone down very nicely, even though it had had to chase them around the jar for a while. The hairy spider settled down and resigned itself to the journey. Again.

The silver spiral stairs turned slowly, and, as they took Septimus and his catch down through the Wizard Tower, he got some cheery waves from the Ordinary Wizards who lived on the floors below and were beginning to go about their business for the day.

There had been much excitement when Septimus had first arrived at the

Wizard Tower. Not only was Marcia Overstrand returning in triumph after ridding the Wizard Tower, not to mention the entire Castle, of a **Darke Necromancer**, but she was also bringing with her an Apprentice. Marcia had spent ten years as ExtraOrdinary Wizard without taking on an Apprentice. After a while some of the Ordinary Wizards had been known to mutter that she was too fussy for her own good. “What did Madam Marcia expect to find, for goodness’ sake—the seventh son of a seventh son? Ha!” But that was exactly what Madam Marcia Overstrand *had* found. She had found Septimus Heap, seventh son of Silas Heap, who was a poor and untalented Ordinary Wizard and himself the seventh son of Benjamin Heap, an equally poor, but considerably more talented, Shape-Shifter.

As the silver spiral stairs slowed to a smooth halt on the ground floor of the Wizard Tower, Septimus jumped off and made his way across the Great Hall, hopping from side to side to try to catch the fleeting colors that played across the soft sandlike floor. The floor had seen him coming and the words GOOD MORNING, APPRENTICE ran across the shifting patterns and flitted in front of him as he made his way over to the massive solid-silver doors that guarded the entrance to the Tower. Septimus murmured the password, and, noiselessly, the doors swung open before him, sending a brilliant shaft of sunlight into the Hall, which drowned out all the **Magykal** colors.

Septimus stepped out into the warm midsummer morning. Someone was waiting for him.

“Marcia’s let you out early today,” said Jenna Heap. She was sitting on the lowest of the huge marble steps that led up into the Wizard Tower, carelessly swinging her feet against the warm stone. She wore a simple red tunic edged with gold and tied with a gold sash, and a sturdy pair of sandals on her dusty feet. Her long dark hair was held in place by a slim gold circlet that she wore around her head like a crown. Her dark eyes had a teasing glint in them as she regarded her adoptive brother. He looked as scruffy as usual. His curly straw-colored hair was uncombed, and his green Apprentice robes were covered in dust from the Library—but on his right index finger, his gold Dragon Ring shone as brightly as ever.

Jenna was pleased to see him.

“Hello, Jen.” Septimus smiled, his brilliant green eyes blinking in the bright sunlight. He waved his jar of spiders at her.

Jenna leaped up from the step, her eyes fixed on the jar. “Just don’t let those spiders out anywhere near me,” she warned him.

Septimus jumped down the steps, shaking the jar at her as he went past. He went over to the **Well** on the edge of the courtyard, and very carefully, he tipped the spiders out of the jar. They all landed in the bucket. The hairy spider had another quick snack and started climbing back up the rope. The three remaining spiders watched the hairy one leave and decided to stay in the bucket.

“Sometimes, Jen,” said Septimus as he joined Jenna by the steps, “I think those spiders just go straight back up to the Library again. I recognized one of them today.”

“Don’t be silly, Sep. How can you recognize a spider?”

“Well, I was pretty sure it recognized *me*,” said Septimus. “I think that’s why it bit me.”

“It bit you? That’s horrible. Where?”

“In the Library.”

“No, where did it bite you?”

“Oh. Look, here.” Septimus waved his thumb at Jenna.

“Can’t see anything,” she said dismissively.

“That’s because Marcia put some venom on it.”

“*Venom?*”

“Oh, that’s just something we Wizards do,” said Septimus airily.

“Oh—you *Wizards*,” scoffed Jenna, getting up and pulling at Septimus’s green tunic. “You Wizards are all crazy. And, speaking of crazy, how *is* Marcia?”

Septimus kicked at a pebble and sent it skittering over to Jenna.

“She’s not crazy, Jen,” he said loyally, “but that **Shadow** follows her everywhere. And it’s getting worse, because I’m beginning to see it now.”

“Eurgh, creepy.” Jenna kicked the pebble back to Septimus, and the pair played pebble football across the courtyard and into the cool shade of a tall

silver archway lined with deep-blue lapis lazuli. This was the Great Arch that led out of the Wizard Tower courtyard and into the broad avenue known as Wizard Way, which ran straight to the Palace.

Septimus shook off all thoughts of **Shadows** and ran into the Great Arch ahead of Jenna. Then he spun around and said, “Anyway, Marcia says I can have the day off today.”

“A whole *day*?” asked Jenna, amazed.

“A whole day. Till midnight. So I can come back with you and see Mum.”

“And me. You’re going to have to see me all day too; I haven’t seen you for ages. And I’m going off to Aunt Zelda’s tomorrow to see the Dragon Boat. It’s MidSummer Day in a few days’ time, in case you’d forgotten.”

“Of course I haven’t forgotten. Marcia keeps going on about how important it is. Here, I’ve got a present for you.” Septimus fished the chocolate **Charm** out of his tunic pocket and gave it to Jenna.

“Oh, Sep, that’s lovely. Er, what is it exactly?”

“It’s a **Taste Charm**. It’ll turn anything you want into chocolate. I thought it might be useful over at Aunt Zelda’s.”

“Hey—I could turn all that cabbage and pilchard stew into chocolate.”

“Cabbage and pilchard stew...” said Septimus wistfully. “You know, I really miss Aunt Zelda’s cooking.”

“No one else does.” Jenna laughed.

“I know,” said Septimus. “That’s why I thought you’d like the **Charm**. Wish I could come and see Aunt Zelda too.”

“Well you can’t—because I’m the Queen.”

“Since when, Jen?”

“Well, I *will* be. And *you’re* just a lowly Apprentice.” Jenna stuck her tongue out at Septimus, who chased her out of the Great Arch and into the heat of Wizard Way.

As they came out from the shadows of the Arch, Jenna and Septimus

Heap saw Wizard Way spread out before them, bright and empty in the early morning sun. The huge white limestone slabs formed a broad avenue all the way to the Palace Gate, which glinted gold in the distance. Tall silver torch posts lined Wizard Way, holding the torches that were used to light the Way at night. That morning each one carried a blackened torch, which had burned out the previous night, and would be replaced and lit that evening by Maizie Smalls, the TorchLighter. Septimus loved the sight of the torches being lit; from his room at the top of the Wizard Tower he could see right down Wizard Way, and Marcia often found him gazing dreamily out of his window at lighting-up time when he should have been doing his incantation preparation.

Jenna and Septimus moved out of the sun's glare and into the cooler shadows of the squat buildings that were set back and lined the Way. The buildings were among the oldest of the Castle and were built of a pale weatherworn stone, pitted and marked by thousands of years of rain, hail, frost and the occasional battle. They were home to the numerous manuscript makers and printing houses that produced all the books, pamphlets, tracts and treatises that were used by the Castle inhabitants.

Beetle, who was General Dogsboddy and Inspection Clerk at Number Thirteen, was lounging outside sunning himself and he gave Septimus a friendly nod. Number Thirteen stood out from all the other shops. Not only was it the only one to have all its windows stacked so high with papers that it was impossible to see inside, but it had also recently been painted purple, much to the distaste of the Wizard Way Conservation Society. Number Thirteen housed the **Magykal** Manuscriptorium and Spell Checkers Incorporated, which Marcia and most of the Wizards used regularly.

As they neared the end of Wizard Way, Jenna and Septimus heard the clatter of horse's hooves echoing on the empty road behind them. They turned around to see in the distance a dark, dusty figure on a huge black horse gallop up to the Manuscriptorium. The figure dismounted in a hurry, quickly tied his horse up and disappeared inside, closely followed by Beetle, who looked surprised to have a customer so early in the morning.

"I wonder who that is," said Septimus. "I haven't seen him around here before, have you?"

"I'm not sure," said Jenna, thinking. "He looks sort of familiar, but I don't know why."

Septimus did not reply. His spider bite had suddenly sent a stabbing pain up his arm, and he shivered as he remembered the **Shadow** he had seen that

morning.

3

A DARK HORSE



Gudrun the Great was guarding the Palace Gate. She was floating a few feet off the ground and dozing peacefully in the sunshine. Gudrun, an Ancient ghost who was one of the very early ExtraOrdinary Wizards, was dreaming of the old days when the Wizard Tower was new. She was almost invisible in the bright sun, and Jenna and Septimus were so busy discussing the mysterious horseman that they walked straight through her. Gudrun the Great nodded dreamily to them, mistaking them for a pair of her own Apprentices from long ago, who had been twins.

The year before, Alther Mella had taken over the task of running the Palace and the Castle until the Time was Right for Jenna to be Queen. He had decided that, after ten years of the hated Custodian Guards stomping up and down in front of the Palace and terrorizing the population, he never wanted to see soldiers guarding the Palace again. So Alther, a ghost himself, had asked the Ancients to act as guards. The Ancients were elderly ghosts; many of them were at least five hundred years old, and some of them, like Gudrun,

were even older than that. As ghosts become more transparent with age, most of the Ancients were quite hard to see. Jenna was still not used to walking through a doorway and discovering that she had also walked through the dozing Second Keeper of the Queen's Bedpost or some such ancient dignitary. She would only realize her mistake when she heard a quavery voice wishing her, "Good morn to thee, fair maiden," as the trodden-upon Ancient suddenly woke up and tried to remember where he or she was. Luckily the Palace had not changed much since it had been built, so most of the Ancients could still find their way around. Many of them were old ExtraOrdinary Wizards, and the sight of a faded purple cloak flitting through the maze of endless corridors and rooms at the Palace was not unusual.

"I think I just walked through Gudrun again," said Jenna. "I hope she didn't mind."

"Well, I still think it's odd having ghosts guarding the gates," Septimus replied, looking at his thumb, which seemed all right again, much to his relief. "I mean anyone could just walk in, couldn't they?"

"That's the idea," said Jenna. "Anyone *can* walk in. The Palace is here for everyone in the Castle. It doesn't need guards to keep people out anymore."

"Hmm," said Septimus. "But there might be some people you still need to keep out."

"Sometimes, Sep," said Jenna, "you get too serious for your own good. You spend far too much time cooped up in that smelly old Tower, if you ask me. Race you!"

Jenna ran off. Septimus watched her as she raced across the lawns that spread in front of the Palace, dusty and brown in the midsummer heat. The lawns were long and wide and were cut in two by the broad drive, which swept up to the entrance of the Palace itself. The Palace was one of the oldest buildings in the Castle; it was built in the ancient style, with small, fortified windows and battlements running along the top of the walls. In front of it was a shallow ornamental moat that was home to some fearsome snapping turtles left by the previous occupant, the Supreme Custodian, which were almost impossible to get rid of. A broad, low bridge spanned the moat and led to a pair of heavy oak doors, which were thrown open in the early-morning heat.

Septimus liked the Palace now. It was a welcoming building with its yellow stone glowing warmly in the sun. As a boy soldier he had often stood guard outside the gate, but then it had seemed a dark, gloomy place, occupied

by the dreaded Supreme Custodian. Even so, Septimus had never minded standing guard, for although it was often boring and cold, at least it was not frightening like most of the things he had had to do in the Young Army.

In the summer Septimus would watch Billy Pot, the Lawn Cutter, who had invented a Contraption. The Contraption was meant to cut the grass. Sometimes it did and sometimes it didn't, depending on how hungry the occupants of the Contraption—the lawn lizards—were. The lawn lizards were Billy's secret—or at least he thought they were—although most people had figured out how the Contraption worked. And when it worked it was simple: Billy pushed the Contraption along and the lizards ate the grass. When it didn't work, Billy lay down on the grass and yelled at them.

Billy Pot kept hundreds of lawn lizards in lizard lodges down by the river, and every morning he would select the twenty hungriest lizards, put them into the cutting box at the front of the Contraption and wheel them off to the Palace lawns. Billy hoped that one day he would actually finish cutting the lawns before it was time to start all over again; he would have liked to have a day off now and then. But this never happened. By the time he had pushed the Contraption across the huge expanse of grass and the lawn lizards had done their job, it was time to start all over again.

As Septimus set off across the grass, trying to catch up with Jenna, who was far ahead of him, he heard the familiar clanking sound. A moment later Billy Pot appeared in the distance, pushing his Contraption across the broad path that ran in front of the Palace moat, slowly heading for the new day's patch of grass. Septimus speeded up, determined not to let Jenna get too far ahead. But she was bigger and faster than he was, even though they were exactly the same age. She had soon reached the bridge.

Jenna stopped and waited for Septimus to catch up. "Come on, Sep," she said. "Let's go and find Mum."

They walked over the bridge and arrived at the Palace doorway. The Ancient at the doors was awake; he was sitting on a small gold chair, placed carefully to catch the sun, and had been watching Jenna and Septimus's approach with a fond smile. He smoothed down his purple cloak, for he too had been a much-respected ExtraOrdinary Wizard in his time, and smiled at Jenna.

"Good morning, Princess," said the ghost, his thin voice sounding as though it came from a great distance. "How nice to see you. And good morning, Apprentice. How is the **Transforming** going? Have you managed

the **Transubstantiate Triple** yet?”

“Almost.” Septimus grinned.

“Good lad,” said the Ancient approvingly.

“Hello, Godric,” said Jenna. “Do you know where Mum is?”

“As it happens, Princess, I do. Madam Sarah told me that she was going to the kitchen garden to pick some herbs. I told her that the Kitchen Maid would do that for her, but she insisted on going herself. Wonderful woman, your mother,” said the Ancient wistfully.

“Thank you, Godric,” said Jenna. “We’ll go and find her—hey, *what?*” Septimus had grabbed her arm.

“Jen—look,” he said, pointing to a dust cloud approaching the Palace Gate.

The Ancient, still in a sitting position, floated up from his chair and hovered in the doorway, peering out into the sunlight.

“A **Darke** horse. And a **Darke** rider,” his voice echoed thinly.

Septimus pulled Jenna into the shadows behind the ghost.

“What are you doing?” Jenna protested. “It’s only that horse we saw before. Let’s see who the rider is.”

As she stepped out into the light of the doorway, Jenna saw the horse approaching. The rider rode the horse hard, sitting forward on the animal and urging it on, his dark cloak streaming out behind him. The horse did not stop at the gate, but carried straight on through Gudrun the Great and thundered up the driveway. Unfortunately Billy Pot was still on his way to his patch of grass. He had just started to push the Contraption across the drive when he and the Contraption were forced to make a swift change of direction to avoid the oncoming horse. Billy made it but the Contraption was not so lucky. Unused to doing anything quickly, it fell to pieces where it stood. The lawn lizards ran off in all directions, and Billy Pot found himself gazing at a pile of metal in the middle of the Palace drive.

The horseman thundered on, oblivious to Billy Pot’s loss and the lizards’ newfound freedom. The horse’s hooves kicked up the midsummer dust and

beat with rhythmic hollow thuds against the dry ground as it rapidly approached the Palace.

Jenna and Septimus waited for the horseman to take the usual path around to the stables at the back of the Palace, but to their surprise the rider ignored it and spurred the horse on over the bridge. Expertly, without breaking the horse's stride, the horseman galloped over the threshold of the door and rode straight through Godric. Jenna felt the damp heat of the horse as it passed close, letting go a long fleck of horse spittle, which landed on her tunic. She turned to protest to the horseman, but he was gone—cantering across the hall at full speed. With his horse's hooves skidding on the stone flags and sending up sparks, he executed a sharp left turn into the gloom of the Long Walk, the mile-long corridor that ran down the middle of the Palace like a backbone.

Godric picked himself up from the floor and muttered, "A coldness...a coldness went through me." He subsided shakily back into his chair and closed his transparent eyes.

"Are you all right, Godric?" Jenna asked, concerned.

"Yes, indeed," murmured the old ghost faintly. "Thank you, your honor. I mean, thank you, your Princess."

"Are you sure you're all right?" Jenna peered at the ghost but he had fallen asleep.

"Come on, Sep," whispered Jenna. "Let's see what's happening."

The inside of the Palace was dark after the brilliant sunshine. Jenna and Septimus ran across the central hallway to the Long Walk. They stared down the seemingly endless, dimly lit expanse, but there was no sight or sound of the horseman.

"He vanished," whispered Jenna. "Maybe he was a ghost."

"Funny sort of ghost," said Septimus, pointing to some dusty hoofprints on the faded red carpet that was laid on the huge old flagstones. Jenna and Septimus turned down the east wing of the Walk and followed the hoofprints. Once, before the Supreme Custodian had taken over the Palace, the Long Walk had been full of wonderful treasures—priceless statues, rich hangings and colorful tapestries—but now it was a dusty shadow of its former self. During his ten years of occupation, the Supreme Custodian had stripped all the most valuable possessions from the Palace and sold them to fund his

lavish banquets. Now, Jenna and Septimus walked past a few old paintings of previous Queens and Princesses, which had been rescued from the basement, and some empty wooden chests with broken locks and wrenched hinges. After three Queens, all of whom looked somewhat bad-tempered, and a cross-eyed Princess, the hoofprints made a sharp right turn and disappeared through the wide double doors of the Ballroom. The doors were already thrown open, and Jenna and Septimus followed the hoofprints in. There was no sign of the horseman.

Septimus let out a low whistle. “This place is *big*,” he said.

The Ballroom was indeed huge. When the Palace had been built it was said that the entire population of the Castle could have fit inside the Ballroom. Although this was no longer true, it was still the biggest room that anyone in the Castle had ever seen. The ceiling was higher than a house and the massive windows, which were full of small panes of stained glass, stretched from floor to ceiling and threw an array of rainbow colors across the polished wooden floor. The lower panes of the windows were thrown open in the heat of the summer morning. They led out onto the lawns at the back of the Palace, which swept down to the river.

“He’s gone,” said Jenna.

“Or **Disappeared**,” muttered Septimus. “Like the Ancient said, ‘a **Darke** horse and a **Darke** rider.’”

“Don’t be silly, Sep. He didn’t mean it like *that*,” said Jenna. “You’ve spent too long at the top of that Tower with a spooked Wizard and her **Shadow**. Anyway, he’s only just gone out through that window—look.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Septimus objected, stung at being called silly by Jenna.

“Yes, I do,” said Jenna, pointing to the pile of horse dung steaming on the step. Septimus made a face. Carefully they stepped out onto the terrace.

It was then that they heard Sarah Heap scream.

4

SIMON SAYS



Just one *little message rat*,” Sarah Heap was saying tearfully to the dismounted dark horseman, as Jenna and Septimus reached the door to the walled kitchen garden. The man had his back to them. He stood awkwardly, holding on to his horse with one hand and patting Sarah, who had thrown her arms around his neck, with the other.

Sarah Heap looked small and almost frail beside the man. Her wispy fair hair straggled down to her shoulders, and her long blue cotton tunic with the Palace gold edging on the sleeves and hem could not hide how thin Sarah had become since her return to the Castle. But her green eyes were bright with relief as she looked up at the dark horseman.

“Just one message to let me know you were safe,” chided Sarah. “That’s all I needed. All *we* needed. Your father has been worried sick too. We thought we would never see you again...gone for more than a year and not a *word*. You really are a bad boy, Simon.”

“I am not a *boy*, Mother. I am a man now. I am twenty years old, in case you had forgotten.” Simon Heap detached Sarah’s arms from his neck and stepped back, suddenly aware that he was being watched. He swung around and did not look particularly pleased to see his youngest brother and adopted sister hanging back uncertainly by the kitchen garden door. Simon turned back to his mother.

“Anyway, you don’t need *me*,” he said sulkily. “Not now you have your precious long-lost seventh son back. Particularly as he has done so well for himself—taking *my* Apprenticeship.”

“Simon, *don’t*,” Sarah protested. “Please don’t let’s argue over that again. Septimus took nothing from you. You were never *offered* the Apprenticeship.”

“Ah, but I would have been. If that brat hadn’t turned up.”

“Simon! I will not have you talk about Septimus like that. He is your brother.”

“If you believe what the old witch Zelda saw in a pool of dirty water was true. Which I don’t, personally.”

“And don’t talk about your great-aunt like that either, Simon,” Sarah said in a low voice, becoming angry. “Anyway, I know that what I saw—what we all saw—is true. Septimus is my son. And he is your brother. It is time you got used to it, Simon.”

Septimus retreated into the shadows of the doorway; he was upset by what he had heard, but not surprised. He remembered only too well what Simon had said on the night of his Apprentice Supper at Aunt Zelda’s cottage in the Marram Marshes. That night had been the most amazing night of Septimus’s life, for not only had he just become Marcia’s Apprentice, he had also found out who he really was—the seventh son of Sarah and Silas Heap. But, in the early hours of the morning, after the celebrations, Simon Heap had had a terrible argument with his parents. He had stormed off into the darkness, taking a canoe across the Marram Marshes, much to Sarah’s horror (and his brother Nicko’s, who had only just acquired the canoe). After that Simon had vanished—until now.

“Shall we go and say hello, Sep?” whispered Jenna.

Septimus shook his head and hung back.

“You go,” he told Jenna. “I don’t think he wants to see me.”

Septimus stood in the shadows and watched Jenna as she walked into the kitchen garden and threaded her way through the lettuces that Simon’s horse had trampled flat.

“Hello, Simon.” Jenna smiled shyly.

“Aha—I hoped I might find you here, in your *Palace*. Good morning, Your Majesty,” said Simon in a slightly mocking tone as Jenna approached.

“I’m not called that yet, Si,” said Jenna, a little uncertainly. “Not until I’m Queen.”

“Queen, eh—and won’t we be grand then? You won’t be speaking to the likes of us when you’re *Queen*, will you?”

Sarah sighed. “Do stop it, Simon,” she said.

Simon looked at his mother, then at Jenna. His irritable expression changed to something darker as he gazed at the view through the open door of the garden. His greenish-black eyes took in the mellow stonework of the ancient Palace and the tranquillity of the lawns. How different it was from the chaotic room he had grown up in surrounded by his five younger brothers and his little adopted sister, Jenna. In fact, it was so very different that he no longer felt his family had anything to do with him. Particularly Jenna, who, after all, was no blood relation anyway. She was nothing more than a cuckoo in the nest, and, like all cuckoos, she had taken over the nest and destroyed it.

“Very well, Mother,” said Simon harshly. “I *will* stop it.”

Sarah smiled hesitantly. She hardly recognized her eldest son anymore. The man in the black cloak who stood before her felt like someone else. And not someone that Sarah liked very much.

“So,” said Simon, slightly too jovially, “how would my little sister like a ride on Thunder here?” He patted his horse proudly.

“I’m not sure about that, Simon,” Sarah said.

“Why ever not, Mother? Don’t you trust me?”

Sarah was silent for just a second too long. “Of course I do,” she said.

“I’m a good rider you know. Spent the last year riding through the mountains and valleys up in Border Country.”

“What—the *Badlands*? What were you doing out there?” asked Sarah with a note of suspicion in her voice.

“Oh, this and that, Mother,” said Simon vaguely. Suddenly he took a step toward Jenna. Sarah moved forward as if to stop him, but Simon reached Jenna first, and in one easy movement he lifted her up and put her on the horse.

“How do you like that?” he asked Jenna. “Thunder’s a lovely animal, isn’t he?”

“Yes...” Jenna said uneasily, while the horse shifted about beneath her, as if impatient to be gone.

“We’ll just go for a ride down the Way, shall we?” said Simon, sounding almost like his old self, as he put his foot into the stirrup and swung into the saddle behind Jenna. Suddenly Sarah found her eldest son looking down at her from what seemed to be a great height, and about to do something she was unable to stop him from doing.

“No, Simon, I don’t think Jenna should—”

But Simon kicked his horse and pulled on the reins. The beast wheeled around, trampling the thyme that Sarah had been about to pick, and galloped off, through the kitchen garden door and around the side of the Palace. Sarah ran out behind him shouting, “Simon—Simon, come back...”

But he was gone, leaving nothing but small lingering clouds of dust where the horse’s hooves had struck the dusty path.

Sarah didn’t know why she felt frightened; after all, it was only her son taking his sister for a ride on his horse. What was wrong with that? Sarah looked around for Septimus; she was sure she had seen him arrive with Jenna, but Septimus was not there. Sarah sighed. It had been wishful thinking, that was all; she had been imagining things again. But she decided that when Simon and Jenna came back from their ride she would go straight down to the Wizard Tower and get Septimus back for the day. After all, Jenna had to leave for her midsummer visit to the Dragon Boat the next day, and it would be nice for Septimus to see her before she went. She wouldn’t stand for any argument from that Marcia Overstrand either. Septimus needed to spend more time with

his sister, and with her, too. And maybe if Simon got to know Septimus a little better it would put an end to all this unpleasantness.

And so, preoccupied with her thoughts and watched by three escaped lawn lizards, Sarah knelt down to try and rescue the crushed thyme, while she waited for Jenna and Simon to return.

5

THUNDER



Jenna clung to the horse's wiry mane as Simon cantered across the Palace lawns, scattering all the lawn lizards that Billy Pot had only just rounded up.

Jenna loved horses; she had her own horse, which she kept in the stables and rode every day. She was a good horsewoman and a brave one, too. So why did she feel so scared? Was it, she wondered, as Thunder hurtled through the Palace Gate at breakneck speed, because Simon rode the horse so angrily, and roughly, too? Simon wore a pair of sharp spurs on his black boots and they were not just for show. Jenna had already seen him touch the horse's flanks with them twice, and she didn't like the way he pulled so sharply on the reins either.

Simon galloped down the middle of Wizard Way. He looked neither right nor left and paid no attention to anyone who might be crossing the road—as Professor Weasal Van Klampff happened to be doing just at that moment. The Professor, unaware of the fact that Marcia was on her way to see *him*, had something to tell Marcia, something that needed to be said well away from the remarkably acute hearing of his housekeeper, Una Brakket.

As Professor Van Klampff wandered absentmindedly across Wizard Way, rehearsing in his mind how he was going to explain his suspicions that Una Brakket was up to something—although he was not sure what—the last thing

he expected was to be knocked down by a huge black horse thundering by. But, unfortunately for the Professor, that is exactly what did happen. And when he picked himself up, bruised and shaken but otherwise unharmed, Professor Van Klampff could not remember why he was there at all. Did he perhaps need some more parchment...a new pen...a pound of carrots...two pounds of carrots? The tubby little man with the half-moon glasses and straggly gray beard stood for a while in the middle of Wizard Way, being fussed over by the concerned Beetle and other assistants from neighboring shops and offices, shaking his head and trying to remember why he was there. Some niggling feeling at the back of his brain told him it was important, but it was gone. Weasal Van Klampff shook his head and turned back for home, stopping to buy three pounds of carrots on the way.

Thunder, meanwhile, was cantering headlong down Wizard Way, past the shops, printers and private libraries, where the proud owners were pottering about, setting out the special-offer manuscripts and end-of-line parchments. At the sight of the black horse charging by they stopped and stared for a moment, wondering what the Princess was doing with the dark horseman. What was the hurry?

In no time at all, Thunder reached the Great Arch. Jenna expected Simon to slow down and turn the horse around to go back to the Palace, but instead he yanked hard on the reins, and the horse veered abruptly off to the left and hurtled down Cutpurse Cut. The narrow street was dark and chill after the bright sun of Wizard Way, and it smelled rank. An open drain ran down the middle of the cobbles, and a thick brown sludge was flowing slowly along it.

“Where are we going?” Jenna yelled, scarcely able to hear herself above the clattering of the horse’s hooves, which echoed off the ramshackle houses on either side of the alleyway and filled her head with noise. Simon made no reply, so Jenna yelled again, louder this time.

“Where are we going?”

Still Simon said nothing. Suddenly the horse took a left turn, narrowly avoiding an oncoming meat pie and sausage cart, and skidded on the slime that ran beneath its hooves.

“Simon!” protested Jenna. “Where are we going?”

“Shut up!” Jenna thought she heard him say.

“What?”

“You heard. *Shut up.* You’re going where I take you.”

Jenna twisted around to look at Simon, shocked at the sudden sound of hatred in his voice. She hoped she had misunderstood what he said, but, when she saw the coldness in his eyes, Jenna knew she had heard right. A sharp chill of foreboding jumped through her.

Suddenly the horse changed direction again. It was almost as though Simon was trying to shake off anyone who might be following them. He yanked on the reins, pulling the horse violently to the right, and Thunder plunged into Squeeze Guts Slip, a dark passage that ran between two high walls. Simon’s eyes were two slits of concentration as the horse tore down the narrow passageway, its hooves sending up sparks from the flints beneath them. At the end of the dark passage Jenna could see open daylight, and as they hurtled toward it, Jenna made a decision. She was going to jump.

As Thunder burst into the sunlight, Jenna took a deep breath, and suddenly, unbidden by Simon, the horse skidded to a halt. A small figure in green Apprentice robes had stepped out in front of them and was fixing the horse with a piercing stare. Thunder was being **Transfixed**.

“Septimus!” gasped Jenna, more pleased to see him than she had thought possible. “How did you get here?”

Septimus did not answer. He was too busy concentrating on Thunder. He had never **Transfixed** anything as big as a horse, and he wasn’t sure if he could talk and **Transfix** at the same time.

“Get out of my way, brat!” Simon shouted. “Unless you want to get trampled.” Angrily Simon spurred the horse on but Thunder refused to budge. Jenna knew this was her chance. Taking Simon unawares, she made a dive for the ground, but Simon’s reaction was quick. He grabbed Jenna’s hair and yanked her back into the saddle.

“Ow—let go!” yelled Jenna, hitting at Simon.

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Simon hissed in her ear, twisting her hair painfully.

Septimus did not react. He hardly dared move.

“Let...Jenna...go,” he said slowly and carefully, his intense green eyes still fixed steadily on Thunder’s eyes, which were wide open and showing a large expanse of white.

“What’s it to you, brat?” snarled Simon. “It’s none of your business. She’s nothing to do with you.”

Septimus stood his ground and kept staring at Thunder. “She’s my sister,” he said quietly. “Let her go.”

Thunder shifted uneasily. The horse was caught between two masters and he didn’t like it. His old master was still there in the saddle, almost part of Thunder himself, and, as ever, his master’s wish was also Thunder’s wish: his master wished to go forward, therefore Thunder wished to go forward too. But standing in front of him was a new master. And the new master would not allow Thunder to pass, however much his old master jabbed him in the side with his sharp spurs. The horse tried to roll his dark brown eyes away from Septimus’s stare, but he could not move them. Thunder pulled his head back, whinnying haplessly, **Transfixed** by Septimus.

“Let Jenna go. *Now*,” Septimus repeated.

“Or what?” asked Simon with a sneer. “Or you’ll put one of your pathetic little spells on me, will you? Let me tell you this, brat, I have more power in my little finger here than you will ever have in your whole miserable life. And if you don’t get out of my way *now*, I will use it. Got that?” Simon pointed the little finger of his left hand at Septimus and Jenna gasped—on his finger was a large ring with a **Reverse** symbol on it. It looked horribly familiar.

Jenna tugged her head away from Simon’s grasp. “What’s wrong with you, Simon?” she yelled. “You’re my brother. Why are you being so horrible?”

In reply, Simon grabbed hold of Jenna’s gold sash and twisted it hard in his left hand, while he tightened his grip on Thunder’s reins with his right. “Let’s just get this straight, *Princess*,” he snarled. “I am *not* your brother. You are just some unwanted kid my gullible father brought home one night. That’s all. You have caused nothing but trouble for us and you have ruined our family. *Understand?*”

Jenna went white. She felt as though someone had hit her in the stomach. She looked down at Septimus for help, and for a brief moment Septimus glanced up at her, as bewildered as she was. But in that very moment when Septimus met Jenna’s gaze, Thunder knew he was free. The horse’s nostrils flared with excitement, his muscles tensed and suddenly he was away, cantering at full speed into the sunlight and onto the cobbled road that led to the North Gate.

Stunned, Septimus watched the horse disappear. His head spun with the effort of **Transfixing** the horse, which had fought him all the while and had been nothing like the practice rabbit which Septimus was used to **Transfixing**. Septimus knew he had one last chance to get to Jenna, and he shook his head to try and clear the muzziness that the enchantment had left. Then, shakily, he **Transported** himself to the North Gate.

6

NORTH GATE



Down at the North Gate, Silas Heap was playing a game of Counter-Feet with Gringe the Gatekeeper. Silas and Gringe had recently made up a long-standing feud. When Simon Heap, Silas's eldest son, had tried to run off with and marry Gringe's only daughter, Lucy, both Silas and Gringe had been horrified. Gringe had shut Lucy up in the gatehouse attic to stop her from running away again. It was not until Silas came to see him some time later with the news that Simon had gone off into the Marram Marshes in the middle of the night—and had not been seen since—that Gringe had at last let Lucy out of the attic. For Gringe knew as well as anyone that the chances of surviving in the Marram Marshes at night were slim.

Silas and Gringe found they had a lot in common. There was Lucy and Simon for a start—and then there was Counter-Feet. Both Silas and Gringe had fond memories of playing Counter-Feet as boys. Counter-Feet was now a very rare board game, although it had once been commonplace in the Castle, and the Premier Counter-Feet league final used to be the highlight of the year.

At first sight the game appeared to be a simple board game played with Counters. The Counter-Feet board consisted of two castles divided by a river down the center. Each player had a set of Counters of various shapes and sizes in their own team strip, and the aim of the game was to get as many of your own Counters over the river and into the opposing player's castle. But there was a twist in the game: the Counters had minds of their own—and, more importantly, feet of their own.

This was why the game was so popular, but unfortunately this was also the reason for the game's rarity. The **Charms** that created the Counters had been lost in The Great Fire three hundred years ago. And since then, most sets of Counter-Feet had gradually become incomplete as over the years their Counters had up and left in search of adventure or just in search of a more interesting box of Counter-Feet. And while no one ever objected to opening his or her box and finding that a whole new colony of Counters had taken up residence, it was a different matter when you discovered that all your Counters had got bored with you and left. So three hundred years later, most Counters had disappeared: flushed down drains, trodden into the ground or simply having a good time in small, undiscovered Counter colonies under the floorboards.

Most Wizards, including Silas, played the **Magyk** version of Counter-Feet, where the castles and the river on the board were real—although smaller, of course. Ever since he was a boy, Gringe had always wanted to play with a **Magyk** set of Counter-Feet. When Silas had mentioned to Gringe that he actually had a complete and sealed **Magyk** Counter-Feet set somewhere in the attic with all his books, Gringe had miraculously overcome his long-standing dislike of the Heap family and suggested that they might, perhaps, have a game or two together sometime. It had soon become a regular occurrence which both looked forward to.

Earlier that morning, Silas had left the Palace and taken the shortcut to the North Gate, carrying with him his precious box of Counter-Feet. Silas had walked slowly, for beside him loped a large, unkempt wolfhound with creaky joints. Maxie was no longer the young dog he had been, but he still went everywhere with his master. As an Ordinary Wizard, Silas Heap wore a deep-blue tunic fastened with a silver belt. Like all the Heaps he had fair, curly hair, although his was now beginning to acquire a dusting of gray, but his green eyes were still bright. As he walked through the sunny, early-morning streets, he hummed a contented tune to himself, for unlike Sarah Heap, Silas did not worry about anything for very long and reckoned that things eventually turned out for the best.

Silas and Gringe had sat down companionably outside the gatehouse and set up the Counter-Feet board, while casting expert eyes over the Counters and trying to work out what their characters might be that day. Counters were fickle, and you never knew how they might turn out from one game to the next. Some Counters were easily persuaded to go where you wanted them to; others were not. Some would appear to do as you asked and then betray you at the last minute. Some would fall asleep just when you needed them to do

something important, and others would run madly around the board creating havoc. The trick was to quickly understand both your Counters and your opponent's Counters, then use your knowledge to get across the board and into the opposing castle. Every game was different: some contests were chaos, some were aggressive and the best were hilariously funny. Which is why, as Septimus **Appeared** at the North Gate, the first thing he heard was Gringe's loud guffaw.

“Ha, you didn't expect 'im to do a *double duck*, Silas, did you now? He's a right one that little fat one is. I thought 'e'd do summat like that. I think that puts my Spare back on the board, don't you?” Gringe, a stocky, somewhat argumentative man in a leather jerkin, leaned over and took a large round Counter out of a tub by the side of the board. The Counter kicked its short, fat legs with excitement and ran onto the board.

“Hey,” protested Gringe, dismayed, as the Counter jumped straight into the river and disappeared into the depths of the water, “yer not supposed to go in there you little b—well, well, ain't this your little lad, Silas? Where did 'e come from then? I dunno, you 'Eaps get just about everywhere, you do.”

“I'm not falling for that one, Gringe.” Silas chuckled, intent on trying to persuade one of his Counters, the Tunneler, to squeeze into the tunnel that led under Gringe's castle. “I know what you're up to, Gringe. As soon as I take my eyes off the board, your Kicker will have kicked my Tunneler into the river. I wasn't born yesterday, you know.”

“But it's your little Apprentice lad, Silas. I think 'e's up to some **Magyk**.”

Septimus's **Transport** was taking some time to wear off. He still looked a bit misty. Underneath the table, Maxie whined and the hairs on the back of his neck rose.

“Good try, Gringe,” said Silas, trying to get his Pusher to shove the Tunneler under the castle without much success.

“No, 'e *is* 'ere. Hello, lad. Come to see your dad, have you?”

At last Silas took his eyes off the game and looked up.

“Oh, hello, Septimus,” he said, surprised. “Well, well, are you doing **Transports** already? He's a clever one, my youngest. Apprentice to the *ExtraOrdinary Wizard*, you know,” Silas told Gringe, not for the first time.

“Really? You don’t say?” muttered Gringe, who had his arm up to his elbow trying to retrieve his Counter from the river. He had forgotten that Silas’s game was the deluxe version that came with mini crocodiles.

“Ouch!” yelled Gringe.

“Dad, Dad!” yelled Septimus. “It’s Jenna! Simon took Jenna. They’re coming this way. Get Gringe to raise the drawbridge. Quick!”

“What?”

Silas could see Septimus’s lips moving but he could hear nothing. Septimus was not quite there yet.

“Raise the drawbridge, Dad!” Septimus’s voice came back on the last word.

“Yes, what is it? No need to shout, Septimus.”

The clatter of horse’s hooves sounded behind them and Septimus knew it was too late. He jumped out in front of the horse in a last, desperate attempt to stop them, but Silas grabbed hold of him and pulled him back.

“Careful! You’ll get yourself trampled.”

Simon’s horse thundered by. Jenna shouted something to Septimus and Silas, but her words were lost in the thudding of the horse’s hooves and the rush of the wind as the huge black horse sped past.

Septimus, Silas and Gringe watched the horse with its two riders go pounding over the drawbridge. When they reached the dirt track on the other side, Simon pulled the horse sharply to the right, and, with its hooves slipping on the dry dirt as it turned, the horse sped off toward the North Road. The North Road, as Septimus knew from his map studies in the Young Army, led along the river, over the One Way Bridge and after a day’s fast riding would take them into the Border Country, or Badlands, as it was often called in the Castle.

“Disgusting!” exclaimed Silas, staring after the horse. “That was a case of reckless riding if ever I saw one. Showing off to his girlfriend, that’s all it was. Young men should not be allowed fast horses if you ask me. With them it’s always speed, speed, speed, with no thought of anyone else—”

“*Dad!*” shouted Septimus, desperately trying to get a word in. “Dad—that was *Simon!*”

“Simon?” Silas looked confused. “What do you mean? *Our* Simon?”

“It’s Simon and he’s taken Jenna!”

“Taken her where? Why? What is going on? Why doesn’t anybody ever tell me anything?” Silas sat down again, aware that the day was beginning to go wrong and not sure exactly why.

“I’m trying to tell you,” said Septimus, exasperated. “That was Simon and he’s—” But Septimus was interrupted again. Lucy Gringe, a pretty girl with deep-brown eyes and light brown hair tied into two long plaits that hung to her waist, had appeared at the gatehouse door. She wore a simple, long, white summer tunic, which she had embroidered herself with an odd assortment of flowers, and on her feet was a pair of heavy brown boots laced-up with pink ribbon. Lucy was well known for her unusual approach to clothes.

“Simon?” asked Lucy, looking pale under her freckles. “Did you say that was *Simon?*”

“Lucy, I will *not* have you mention that name here,” growled Gringe, staring at the Counter-Foot board and wondering how such an enjoyable morning could suddenly turn into such a nightmare. But, he told himself sternly, he should have known better. Wasn’t that always the way with the Heaps? They were nothing but trouble.

“Yes, it was Simon, and he has taken Jenna away,” said Septimus flatly, the urgency gone from his voice as he realized that it was too late now to do anything about it.

“But,” murmured Silas, “I don’t understand...”

Lucy Gringe understood. She understood only too well.

“*Why?*” she screamed. “Why didn’t he take *me?*”

7

THE GREENHOUSE



He was riding like a madman, Sarah,” puffed Silas, who had found Sarah with her friend, Sally Mullin, potting herbs in the Palace greenhouse at the bottom of the kitchen garden. “He would have trampled Septimus into the ground if I hadn’t pulled the lad clear—and Jenna was screaming her head off. It was awful.”

“No!” Sarah gasped. “I don’t believe it.”

“Jenna wasn’t screaming, Dad,” said Septimus, trying not to upset Sarah any more than she was already. “Jenna wouldn’t scream. She just shouted something, that’s all.”

“What?” asked Sarah. “What did she shout?”

“I don’t know,” said Septimus glumly. “I couldn’t hear. The horse was making so much noise.”

“Maybe she was saying she’d be back soon. Maybe Simon just took her out for a jaunt along the river,” said Sarah, trying hard to convince herself and not doing a very good job of it.

Sally, who was living at the Palace while her Tea and Ale House was being rebuilt, put a consoling hand on Sarah’s arm. “You mustn’t worry yourself, Sarah,” she said. “He’s just a headstrong young man showing off his fast horse to his sister. They all do it. He’ll be back soon.”

Sarah gave Sally a grateful glance, but, deep down, Sarah had a very bad feeling about Simon. Something had happened to him; something had changed him from *her* Simon into—what?

Silas was still trying to catch his breath. He and Septimus had run all the way from the North Gate, leaving Maxie asleep under the Counter-Foot table and Gringe dragging Lucy up to the gatehouse tower to stop her from running off in pursuit of Simon.

Alther Mella floated anxiously above the potting bench. He had spent the previous night down at the Hole in the Wall Tavern, a favorite haunt for ghosts, and had not left as early that morning as he should have. Alther was annoyed with himself. If he'd been there, maybe he could have stopped Simon, although Alther wasn't quite sure how. But at least he could have tried.

Sarah pushed a stray wisp of straw-colored hair back behind her ear as she fiddled distractedly with some parsley seedlings. "I'm sure Simon wouldn't take Jenna away against her will," she insisted, stabbing at the soil with her trowel.

"Of course he wouldn't," said Sally soothingly.

"But that's just what he *has* done," Septimus insisted. "Jenna didn't want to go with him. I **Transfixed** the horse and he wouldn't let her get off. He got really angry."

"Well, he did seem very proud of his horse," said Sarah. "Maybe he was just upset about you **Transfixing** it. I'm sure he will be back soon with Jenna."

"He's *kidnapped* her, Mum," said Septimus, almost angry now. He could not understand why Sarah kept making excuses for Simon. But Septimus was still not entirely used to how mothers behaved.

Alther Mella floated dismally through a discarded pile of flowerpots.

"It's my fault, Sarah," said Alther. "I blame myself. If I had allowed proper guards at the Palace Gate instead of those useless Ancients, this would never have happened."

"You mustn't blame yourself," said Sarah, giving the old ghost a wan smile. "Even a guard would have let Simon in. He is a Heap after all."

“But they wouldn’t have let him *out*, would they?” said Septimus pointedly. “Not if Jenna had told them she didn’t want to go.”

“Septimus, you shouldn’t speak to Alther like that,” scolded Sarah. “You should be more respectful to an ExtraOrdinary Wizard, especially the one whom your tutor was Apprenticed to.”

“Ah, Sarah.” Alther sighed. “The boy is right.”

Alther floated off the potting bench and hovered beside Septimus. Compared with the Ancients in the Palace, Alther looked positively substantial. His purple ExtraOrdinary robes, although a little faded, looked almost real, even down to the bullet hole and dark brown bloodstains just below his heart. The ghost’s long white hair was scraped back into its usual ponytail, and his green eyes had a bright glint in them as he regarded Marcia’s Apprentice.

“So,” said Alther to Septimus, “what do you propose we do now?”

“*Me?* What do *I* think we should do?”

“Yes. As the Apprentice of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, I thought you might like to stand in for Marcia.”

“We go after Jenna. And get her back. That’s what we *have* to do.”

Sarah dropped the trowel she had been poking the seedlings with. It landed with a clang in the middle of Alther’s foot. The ghost stepped back hastily.

“Septimus,” declared Sarah, “you are *not* going anywhere. It’s bad enough with Jo-Jo, Sam, Edd and Erik all running wild in the Forest, getting up to goodness knows what and refusing to even come and see their mother. Then there’s Nicko, who’s gone off with that Rupert Gringe boy testing some boat or other, and not come back yet, even though he promised he’d be home last week to take Jenna down to Aunt Zelda’s—*anything* could have happened to him, I’m just so worried—and now Simon and Jenna are gone...” At this Sarah suddenly broke into loud sobs.

Silas put his arms around Sarah. “There, there, love, you mustn’t worry. Everything will be all right,” he murmured soothingly.

“I’ll go and bring you a nice cup of tea and a big slab of barley cake,” said

Sally, “and everything will feel much better, just you see.” And she bustled off to the Palace kitchens.

But Sarah would not be comforted. “Simon and Jenna, *gone*,” she wailed. “Why? Why would Simon do such a thing? Why would he take Jenna away?”

Alther put a ghostly arm around Septimus’s shoulders.

“Come on, lad,” he said. “Let’s leave your parents alone for a while. You can take me to see Marcia.”

Septimus and Alther made their way out of the Palace and took the Snake Slipway, which led down to the Castle Moat.

The Castle was surrounded by water. Most of the water consisted of the river, as the Castle was built on the inside of a wide river bend, but some of the water was in the form of a moat, which had been dug when the Castle walls were built. The Moat was wide and deep and was full of river water, for both ends of the Moat ran into the river itself. It was a popular place for fishing and, in the summer, for swimming. A large wooden pier had recently been built out into the middle of the Moat for the Castle children to swim from, and the enterprising Rupert Gringe had just started renting out his new invention, the small Rupert paddleboats, to those who fancied messing about on the water for an hour or two. This had been extremely popular with everyone in the Castle, except for two people: Weasal Van Klampff and his housekeeper, Una Brakket, who had the misfortune to live beside the new pier and above the boathouse where the Ruperts were stored.

Septimus knew the way to Professor Van Klampff’s house far too well for his liking. Almost since his first days as Apprentice, Marcia had sent him over every Saturday morning to knock on the Professor’s door and collect one of the many and complex pieces of the **ShadowSafe**. But even if the Professor had a piece ready—which was a rare event—and actually gave it to Septimus, Una Brakket would waylay him at the door and demand it back. She did not, she would tell Septimus, trust a *boy* with such a valuable object. Marcia herself must come and collect it. A long-distance battle had ensued between Marcia and Una, with Septimus batted to and fro like a shuttlecock. Every Saturday morning, Septimus would wait outside Professor Van Klampff’s house for as long as he could stand being laughed at and shouted at by a group of boys from the Young Army Resettlement Home, who always hung around the pier, daring each other to jump into the water.

Eventually, to Septimus's relief, Alther had advised Marcia to give in and collect the components herself. Una Brakket may have a point, Alther advised; the **ShadowSafe** was indeed a complex and highly **Magykal** device, and it was not fair to make Septimus responsible for it. Just to irritate Una, Marcia had taken to occasionally arriving unannounced in the early hours of the morning.

Half an hour ago, the boys on the pier had watched the ExtraOrdinary Wizard stride down the Snake Slipway and give a vicious tug on the bellpull that hung beside Weasal Van Klampff's thick wooden door. Marcia had waited impatiently on the Slipway. She tapped her purple python shoes irritably on the stone cobbles while she heard mutterings and scufflings inside the house, until Una Brakket—who knew by the long, insistent ringing of the bell that it was Marcia—opened the door. Eventually.

And now Septimus was back at the dreaded front door once again. Alther was no protection, as the ghost could choose to whom he would **Appear**, and quite understandably he chose not to **Appear** to a bunch of mocking boys. But Septimus, in his bright green tunic and shiny silver Apprentice belt, had no such choice. Sure enough the chorus of catcalls soon started:

“Too stuck-up to talk to us then, are ya?”

“Greeny-guts, greeny-guts!”

“Hey, caterpillar-boy! Whatcha doin' back here again?”

And so on. Septimus longed to turn the lot of them into caterpillars, but it was against the **Magyk** code—and the boys knew that.

“Here we are,” Septimus told Alther, as he reached up and gave the bellpull a hefty tug. Far, far away, unheard by either Alther or Septimus, a small bell rang—much to the annoyance of the housekeeper. Septimus knew they were in for a wait; he turned to the ghost who was hovering behind him, staring up at the house.

“Do you think you'll be able to come inside?” Septimus asked Alther, hoping that he would be able to.

“Hmm...I'm not sure,” replied Alther. “It looks familiar. I remember going to a party down by the Moat. It was quite a party too—we all ended up in the water. I *think* it was in this house, but...well, I'll soon find out when we go inside.”

Septimus nodded. He knew that, as a ghost, Alther could only go to places that he had been during his life. Alther had pretty much traveled all the roads and alleyways in the Castle, and, as ExtraOrdinary Wizard, he had been in most of the official buildings. But people's houses were another matter—Alther had been a popular young man in his day but even *he* had not managed to be invited to every single house in the Castle.

The door was suddenly thrown open.

“Oh, it's you again,” said Una Brakket, who was a tall, spiky-looking woman with extremely short black hair.

“I need to see the ExtraOrdinary Wizard,” said Septimus. “Please.”

“She's busy,” snapped Una.

“It's very urgent,” Septimus insisted. “It's a matter of life or death.”

The housekeeper shot Septimus a suspicious look. She stood at the door for a moment, weighing the two almost equally unpleasant prospects of having Septimus in the house or having the ExtraOrdinary Wizard angry with her for not letting Septimus in.

“All right then. Come in.” The housekeeper held the door open and Septimus entered, closely followed by Alther. But, as Alther crossed the threshold of the house, there was a sudden violent rush of air, and the ghost was hurled straight out the door and **Returned** to the street.

“Bother,” muttered Alther as he picked himself up off the cobbles. “I remember now. The party was at the house next door.”

“It's very windy out there all of a sudden,” said Una, puzzled. She slammed the door crossly, leaving Alther floating outside; then she turned to Septimus, who was standing in the gloomy hallway, wishing he was still outside in the sun with Alther.

“You had better come down to the Laboratory,” she said.

8

THE LABORATORY



*S*eptimus stepped over a large paper bag full of carrots and followed Una Brakket down the dark hallway. Previously he had only been allowed into the narrow front room that overlooked the street, but, as he followed the housekeeper deep into the gloomy recesses of the hall, Septimus was surprised to find that the house seemed to go on forever.

Una Brakket stopped by a low door and lit a candle. Soon Septimus was following her down some steep wooden steps into a damp and musty-smelling cellar. The cellar was long and narrow with a low vaulted roof, and the sounds of the paddleboats being dragged out of the boathouse echoed eerily through the walls. It was stuffed full of what looked like years of accumulated junk: there were heaps of rusty tripods and Bunsen burners, stacks of wooden boxes stuffed full of ancient yellowing papers, piles of broken scientific instruments and even an old pair of ice skates hanging on the wall.

With Septimus trotting behind, Una strode to the back of the cellar and

went through a small archway. The light of her candle quickly faded as she disappeared around a corner, and Septimus found himself in pitch-blackness, unsure of which way to go—but that didn't worry Septimus, for the Dragon Ring that he wore on his right index finger began to glow, as it always did in the dark, and soon he had enough light to see where he was again.

“Where are you? I haven't got all day,” Una Brakket's sharp voice cut through the gloom as she came back to see where Septimus had gone. “I don't allow boys with candles down here,” she snapped, noticing the light glowing from his hand.

“But—” Septimus protested.

“In fact I don't allow boys down here at all. And if it were up to me I wouldn't even let them in the house. Nothing but trouble, boys.”

“But—”

“Now just put that candle out and follow me.”

Septimus stuffed his right hand into his tunic pocket and followed Una Brakket into a narrow brick-lined tunnel. The tunnel wound its way deep beneath the streets of the Castle, taking them underneath the neighboring houses and gardens. The candle flame flickered and guttered in the cold gusts of air that eddied through the tunnel, bringing with them damp smells of earth and mold. As they progressed onward, an icy chill settled in the air; Septimus shivered and began to wonder where exactly Una was taking him.

Suddenly she stopped—a thick wooden door barred the way. From a bundle of keys that hung from her belt, the housekeeper selected the largest one and pushed it into the keyhole, which was oddly placed in the middle of the door. Septimus was just peering around her to see what she was doing when a loud whirring noise started up from behind the door.

Una Brakket jumped back suddenly, landing heavily on Septimus's foot.

“Ouch!”

“Get back!” She gave Septimus a hefty shove and sent him flying back into the tunnel a split second before the wooden door came crashing down in front of them like a small drawbridge.

“Wait there,” snapped Una. “You are not to come any farther. *I* will tell

Madam Marcia that she is required.” With that Una Brakket strode across the door as if it really was a drawbridge.

Septimus followed her into the Laboratory.

Professor Weasal Van Klampff’s Laboratory was the strangest place that Septimus had ever seen, and he had seen some very odd places since he had become Marcia’s Apprentice.

The Laboratory was bathed in a low blue light. It was a long, thin, vaulted underground room and contained a forest of murmuring, bubbling vials and flasks, flagons and funnels, all connected by a large glass tube which looped and soared down the entire length of the Laboratory. From the end of this apparatus a blue gas, which Professor Van Klampff believed kept **Shadows** at bay, bubbled into the air, giving the whole place a distinctive smell that reminded Septimus of burned pumpkin.

Septimus peered through the blue haze, trying to see where Marcia was. At the far end of the Laboratory he could just about make out the tall figure of Marcia and the stumpy shape of the Professor. Marcia was holding a tall glass tube full of a shiny black liquid; she had been startled by the bang of the door falling open and was staring into the blue vapor to see what was going on.

“What are *you* doing here?” she called out, surprised at Septimus’s sudden appearance behind Una. “It’s meant to be your day off, Septimus. I don’t want your mother complaining again.”

“It’s Jenna!” yelled Septimus, expertly dodging Una Brakket as she reached out to grab him and setting off through the haze toward Marcia.

“What? What’s Jenna?” asked Marcia, confused, her head still spinning from the endless mathematical formulae that Professor Van Klampff had been explaining in an effort to show Marcia why the **ShadowSafe** was taking so long to make. He had been busy showing Marcia the amazingly complex molds that were used to construct each interconnecting part of the **ShadowSafe** when Septimus had rung the door-bell and Una Brakket had very reluctantly gone to answer it. Marcia had been glad to see the housekeeper go, for Una was hanging around like an irritating bluebottle, which Marcia had had great trouble resisting the urge to swat.

“She’s gone!” yelled Septimus, reaching the ExtraOrdinary Wizard just before Una Brakket could grab him. He ducked behind Marcia, leaving her standing between him and the irate housekeeper.

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” said Marcia, confused at the dance Septimus and Una appeared to be doing around her. “I thought Sarah was leaving it a bit late to get her off to the Dragon Boat. It’s only two days to MidSummer Day.”

“No!” said Septimus. “She’s not gone to Aunt Zelda’s. She’s been *kidnapped*.”

“*What?*” Marcia dropped the glass tube she was holding. The Professor and Una Brakket both gasped in dismay—for the tube contained the **Amalgam** for the **ShadowSafe**.

“Is this some kind of joke?” Marcia asked, staring at the glistening black sludge that now covered her purple snakeskin shoes—and at Professor Van Klampff, who had fallen to his knees and was desperately trying to scrape up his precious **Amalgam**.

“No,” said Septimus bleakly. “I wish it was.”

“Oh, it’s bound to be a joke. Or more likely a fib,” Una Brakket said bitterly as she joined the Professor on the floor and took a large metal scraper to Marcia’s shoes.

“Get off my shoes, will you?” said Marcia icily. “I don’t want this stuff rubbed into them.” Marcia fixed Una with a glare. “Anyway,” she declared, “Septimus always tells the truth.”

“Huh,” said Una Brakket, angrily scraping. “Just look what’s happened. You let a boy into the Laboratory and something gets broken. I knew it would.”

“Jenna—*kidnapped?*” said Marcia, trying to move away and finding that her feet were stuck to the floor. “How...*who?*”

“Simon,” said Septimus, anxious to be gone. “Simon took her away on his horse. We have to go after her, we should send some Trackers out and—”

“Don’t *do* that, Una. Simon who?” asked Marcia.

“Simon. My brother. Come on, Marcia, please hurry.”

“Simon *Heap?*”

“Yes. I tried to stop him. I **Transfixed** his horse but—”

“Did you? A whole horse,” said Marcia, pleased with her Apprentice. “Well done. If you can **Transfix** a horse you can **Transfix** anything. But he **Overcame** you?”

“No—well, yes, I suppose so, sort of—but that’s not the point.” Septimus’s voice was rising to a despairing shout. “The point is that Jenna has been kidnapped and we’re not *doing* anything!”

Marcia put her arm around Septimus’s shoulders. “It’s all right, Septimus. Simon is Jenna’s brother; she’s quite safe with him. You really mustn’t worry so much. I’m afraid that spider bite has put you a little on edge. It’s one of the side effects of **Darke** Spider Venom, you know. But I can see it’s time we went.”

Marcia addressed Weasal Van Klampff, who was staring woefully at the black sludge that Una Brakket was painstakingly scooping up and putting into a jar. “I am going now, Weasal. I shall expect the piece tonight.”

“Tonight?” gasped the Professor. “But, Marcia, I thought you understood how complicated it is. How difficult the mold is to configure and—”

“You’ve already done the mold, Weasal. You’ve just showed it to me. All you have to do is make some more of that stuff and pour it in. I don’t see what the fuss is about.”

The Professor looked anxious. “But Una is going out tonight,” he said. “Country dancing.”

“Well, jolly good for Una,” snapped Marcia. “Just stop dithering, Weasal, and get a move on.”

Weasal Van Klampff cast a worried glance at Una Brakket, who was wearing an extremely disgruntled expression. “B-but,” he stuttered, “if we—I mean I, er—make the **Amalgam** too quickly, it’s possible that a **Shadow** might **Appear** here. In the Laboratory...” whispered the Professor.

“Well, I’m sure Una will take care of it,” said Marcia crisply. “I will be down to collect the piece tonight.”

“And what time tonight would that be, Madam Marcia?” Una inquired frostily. “Approximately.”

“*Approximately* when I get around to it,” Marcia replied in glacial tones that would have sent anyone other than Una Brakket into a complete panic. “And now, Mrs. Brakket, if you would care to show my Apprentice and myself out?”

Una Brakket smiled for the first time, or rather, the corners of her mouth moved upward and showed her teeth, which glowed blue in the Laboratory lights.

“With *great* pleasure,” she said.

9

NUMBER THIRTEEN



S*eptimus trailed along behind* Marcia and Alther as they walked and floated down Wizard Way back to the Tower. He was listening intently to their conversation.

“If I were you, Marcia,” Alther was saying, “I’d do a quick **Search** of the Farmlands north of the Castle. Simon can’t have gotten that far yet. He’ll still be riding through them on his way to the Border Country, and I’d bet my life—well, I’d bet my, er, ponytail, that’s where he’s heading. You could **Travel** across the Farmlands in no time. I’d go myself but I wouldn’t be much use. Never did like farms much when I was alive. Too many smells and unpredictable animals with pointy horns for my liking. If I went out there I’d just spend all my time being **Returned**. And frankly, Marcia, being **Returned** takes the stuffing out of me. I still feel quite winded.”

To Septimus’s dismay, Marcia was not convinced.

“Look, Alther,” she said, as she kept up a fast pace along Wizard Way, leaving Septimus breathless, “I have no intention of leaving the Castle if the Princess is no longer within the walls. You know what happened last time we were both gone—DomDaniel just walked in. Who is to say it may not happen again? But no one needs to go after Jenna; she’ll be back soon. I really don’t think there’s anything to worry about; all we know for sure is that Jenna has gone off riding with her brother—”

“Adoptive brother,” interrupted Alther.

“All right, if you want to be picky about it, her adoptive brother, although Jenna is as much a Heap as any of the boys, Alther. She sees them as her brothers and they see her as their sister.”

“Except for Simon,” said Alther.

“You don’t know that,” objected Marcia.

“I do.”

“Oh, don’t be so awkward, Alther. How can you possibly know that? Anyway, as I was saying, Jenna has gone off riding with her *adoptive* brother, and all we know is that he didn’t want her to get off the horse when Septimus asked her to. If you ask me it’s just Simon not doing what his little brother tells him to. It’s hardly surprising, really. He’s jealous of Septimus being my Apprentice. He’s hardly going to do what Septimus tells him to, now is he?”

“Marcia, Septimus believes that Jenna has been kidnapped,” said Alther solemnly.

“Look, Alther, Septimus is not quite himself today. He was bitten by one of those **Darke** spiders this morning and you know how paranoid that can make you. Remember when you got bitten by one when you were **Fumigating** that old **Capnomancer** who was causing a health hazard above the pie shop in The Ramblings?”

“You mean the mad mouse-woman?”

“Yes, her. Well, you spent the rest of the day thinking that I was trying to push you out of the window.”

“Did I really?”

“Yes, you did. You **Locked** yourself in your study and **Barred** the windows. It wore off by the evening, and I’m sure that by this evening Septimus will be fine, Jenna will be back from a nice ride with her brother and we’ll all wonder what the fuss was about.”

Septimus had heard enough and, angrily, he slipped away. He realized that he was going to have to do something himself, without Marcia’s help. There

was someone he wanted to see.

Marcia and Alther continued on their way, unaware that Septimus had gone.

“...and Simon Heap is not to be trusted,” Alther was saying.

“So you tell me, Alther. But there’s no proof of that, is there? He is a Heap after all. I know they’re a strange lot, and some of them are definitely two sandwiches short of a picnic, but they are an honest family. After all, they are an ancient Wizard tribe.”

“Not all Wizards are good Wizards, Marcia, as you know to your cost,” said Alther. “I’d very much like to know what Simon has been doing for the last year or so, and why he’s turned up here all of a sudden, just before MidSummer Day. I still think it was Simon who betrayed you in the Marram Marshes.”

“Nonsense. Why would he do that? It was that irritating Message Rat. You can never trust a rat, Alther, especially one that likes the sound of his own voice. And while we are on the subject of irritating, I really don’t think much of your recommendation. Old Weasal Van Klampff is an old fusspot and his housekeeper gives me the creeps, always hanging around and watching everything. The **ShadowSafe** is taking *ages* and every time I get a piece home it’s an absolute nightmare trying to put it together. I still haven’t managed to get the last bit to fit properly.”

“Those **Safes** are complicated things, Marcia. Anyway, there’s no alternative. Weasal’s family has been making them for generations. They invented the **Amalgam** and no one else knows the formula. His father, Otto, rid me of a particularly nasty **Spectre** and it took him two years to sort it out. It takes time, Marcia—you have to be patient.”

“Perhaps,” snapped Marcia. “Or perhaps I should just get something simple from the Manuscriptorium.”

“No,” said Alther, very definitely. “A **ShadowSafe** is the only thing that will get rid of a **Shadow** permanently, and that is *not* suitable work for the Manuscriptorium. Anyway, there is something about that Chief Hermetic Scribe that bothers me.”

“Really, Alther, you are in a suspicious frame of mind today. Anyone

would think that the spider had bitten *you* as well.”

Alther could see he was going to get nowhere with Marcia; he knew very well how stubborn she could be at times. They had had many battles in the past, when he was the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and she was his Apprentice, and even then he had not always won. Now that he was a ghost he had no chance at all. It was Marcia who was now the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and if she thought she knew best, which of course she always did, then Alther was going to have to put up with it.

“I’ll be off then, Marcia,” said Alther a little sulkily, and then, noticing that Septimus was no longer following, he asked, “Where’s the lad gone?”

“I told you, Alther, it’s his day off. I imagine he’s gone to see his mother,” said Marcia briskly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do. I’ll see you later, Alther.”

“Possibly,” Alther replied grumpily. He watched Marcia stride off into the Great Arch with her purple robes flowing behind her and, just visible as she entered the shade of the Arch, a dimness following her. Alther sighed—the **Shadow** was getting stronger. If he squinted and looked sideways he could almost see an outline of a large shambling figure matching Marcia step for step as she strode through the Arch. The sooner the **ShadowSafe** was finished, the better.

Alther rose up into the air and flew as fast as he could down Wizard Way to try and shake off the feeling of foreboding that had taken hold of him. As he shot past the front of the Magykal Manuscriptorium and Spell Checkers Incorporated he was too preoccupied to notice Septimus Heap’s green-robed figure disappearing through the door.

Inside the Manuscriptorium, Septimus stood still for a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the gloom. He was in the small front office where customers came and placed their orders for new spells, brought old, unstable spells to be checked out and ordered copies of formulas, conjurations, incantations and even the odd poem.

To Septimus’s surprise the office was empty, so he walked through to the small door at the back and peered around. The Manuscriptorium was quietly busy. All Septimus could hear was the scratching of nibs on paper and a few muffled coughs and sneezes as the summer cold that always spread through

the Manuscriptorium lingered on. Hard at work in the gloom were twenty-one scribes, each seated at a high desk lit by its own lamp, which hung from the ceiling and illuminated the scribe's painstaking work.

"Beetle?" said Septimus in a loud whisper. "Beetle, are you there?"

The nearest scribe looked up and gestured with his pen to the far end of the room.

"He's out back. They've got an **Unstable** just come in. He's trying to **Bin** it. Go through if you like, but don't get too close to the Bin."

"Thanks," said Septimus. He tiptoed through the ranks of desks, attracting a few glances from the bored scribes, and slipped out the door into the yard. A scene of utter chaos met him.

"Grab it!" Beetle was yelling. "It's getting away!"

Beetle, a stocky boy with a shock of black hair who was about three years older than Septimus, was struggling violently with something invisible and trying to shove it into a large red bin that stood in the middle of the yard, and had DANGEROUS BIN—DO NOT OPEN written on it. Beetle was yelling at two pale and lanky scribes who looked as though the slightest breeze would knock them to the ground.

"Want a hand, Beetle?" asked Septimus.

Beetle glanced up and looked at Septimus gratefully.

"Would ya, Sep? It's a wild one, mind. An invisible bog-ridder we think. Some idiot dug it out yesterday and **Revived** it. Been sleeping quietly in a cupboard for dunno how long before then. Why people can't leave well enough alone I don't—hey, get off you little—"

The bog-ridder had picked up the Bin and upended it over Beetle's head. Septimus sprang forward and grabbed the Bin off Beetle. Beetle stood bemused for a moment, staring around the small yard that was surrounded on all sides by a high brick wall, trying to work out where the bog-ridder might have gone. The two scribes looked terrified and had squashed themselves into the corner farthest away from the Bin.

"We gotta get it into the Bin, Sep," said Beetle breathlessly. "More than my job's worth to let it escape."

Septimus stood quietly for a moment, watching for any disturbance the bog-ridder would surely make as soon as it moved. Suddenly he saw a ripple pass across the brickwork of the wall. Septimus sprang forward, picked up the Bin and ran to the corner where the two scribes were cowering.

Bang! Septimus slammed the Bin down.

“Ouch!” yelled the taller of the scribes as Septimus caught his toes with the edge of the Bin.

“Got it!” Septimus shouted triumphantly.

“Ouch, ouch, *ouch!*” yelled the scribe hopping around in circles, holding on to his bruised foot.

“Sorry, Foxy,” said Septimus, leaning heavily on the Bin to make sure the bog-ridder stayed safely where it was, while Foxy hobbled away on the arm of the other scribe. Septimus helped Beetle slide the lid under the upended Bin, and then they carefully set the Bin the right way up. Quickly, Beetle wrapped the Bin in a stabilizer net, tied it securely and put it outside the back gate, ready for collection by the Bin Disposal Squad.

“Thanks, Sep, I owe you one,” said a grateful Beetle. “Anything I can do for you, anytime, just let me know.”

“Well, as it happens,” said Septimus, “there is.”

“Ask away then,” said Beetle cheerily, linking his arm through Septimus’s and steering him into the small kitchen at the side of the yard where Beetle always had a kettle on the hob.

“My brother Simon came in earlier,” said Septimus. “I wonder if you could tell me what he wanted?”

Beetle took two mugs off the shelf and dropped a **FizzBom** cube into each one to make up some **FizzFroot**. **FizzFroot** was a favorite drink of both himself and Septimus; it was made from an everlasting **FizzBom** spell that the Manuscriptorium had refurbished for someone who had never collected it. The drink was actually ice-cold but needed boiling water to activate it.

“Here y’are,” said Beetle, giving Septimus his mug and sitting down on the stool next to him.

“Thanks, Beetle.” Septimus took a big mouthful of **FizzFroot** and smiled. He had forgotten how good it tasted. Marcia disapproved of fizzy drinks, particularly those created by spells, and Septimus was not allowed any, which made the occasional forbidden **FizzFroot** with Beetle taste even better.

“I’ve not seen any of your brothers in here, Sep,” said Beetle, puzzled. “I mean, most of them are out in the Forest now, aren’t they? I heard they’d gone a bit wild. Gone off with the Wendron Witches and turned into wolverines or something.”

“It’s not that bad, Beetle,” Septimus told him. “They just love the Forest, that’s all. My grandfather is a tree out there somewhere. It’s in the family.”

“Excuse me? Your granddad’s a *tree*?” Beetle spluttered and inhaled some **FizzFroot** up his nose.

“Eurgh. Not all over me, Beetle. Keep your snot to yourself,” said Septimus with a laugh. “My grandfather was a Shape-Shifter. He became a tree,” he explained, wiping the sleeve of his tunic.

Beetle let out a low whistle, impressed.

“Not many Shape-Shifters about anymore, Sep. Do you know where he is then?”

“No. Dad goes out and looks for him sometimes. Hasn’t found him yet though.”

“How does he know?”

“Know what?”

“That he hasn’t found him? I mean, how do you tell which tree is your father and which tree isn’t?”

“Dunno,” said Septimus, who had often wondered the same thing. “Look, Beetle,” he said, steering Beetle back to the question he had asked him before, “you *must* have seen Simon. He came in first thing this morning. Jenna and I saw him. Jenna would tell you—” Septimus stopped as he suddenly saw a vivid picture of the terrified Jenna thundering by on Simon’s horse, on her way to...where?

“The only person who came in this morning was the Traveler,” said

Beetle.

“Who?”

“The Traveler. That’s what he calls himself. Everyone thinks he’s a loony, but I think he’s scary, Sep. And I reckon that Old Foxy does too, although he’d never let on. The Traveler often comes in with a package for Old Foxy—you know, Foxy’s dad—he’s the Chief Hermetic Scribe. They spend ages in the Hermetic Chamber and then the Traveler goes off again. Never says a word to anyone. Weird. Old Foxy looks white as a sheet after he’s gone.”

“Does the Traveler have green eyes and hair a bit like mine?” asked Septimus. “Was he dressed in a long black cloak? And have a big black horse tied up by the door?”

“Yep. That’s him. Horse ate my bag of apples what I brought for my lunch, though I didn’t dare mention it. But he don’t look much like your brother, Sep. He’s not like a *Heap* if you know what I mean. Heaps ain’t scary. They may be mad, but they ain’t *scary*.”

“But Simon *is* scary,” said Septimus. “Really scary. And he’s taken Jenna. He’s kidnapped her.”

Beetle looked shocked. “The Princess?” he gasped. “The Traveler’s kidnapped the Princess? I don’t believe it.”

“That’s the trouble,” said Septimus. “No one will believe it. Not even Marcia.”

10

LEAVING



Septimus was in his room, packing his bag.

His small, round room at the top of the Wizard Tower was neat and orderly, a result of its occupant's ten years of training in the Young Army. Dreadful and dangerous as those years had been for Septimus, now that the Young Army was disbanded and he was reunited with his family, he had begun to stop despising everything that he had learned as a boy soldier. He was no longer wildly untidy just because he could be; after a brief period when it had resembled the Municipal Rubbish Dump, his room was now neat and ordered. The room bore other traces of his previous life too: its dark-blue curving walls and ceiling were covered with the constellations, accurately painted by Septimus, who had had to memorize them for his Young Army night exercises. And in his cupboard he always kept an emergency backpack, packed strictly in accordance with the Young Army regulations.

Septimus's emergency backpack contained:

compass (1)

eyeglass (1)

water bottle (1)

bedroll (1)

socks (3)

mess tin (1)

tinderbox (1)

spare flints (2)

kindling (moss, dried, bunch of)

ex Young Army regulation pen knife (1)

catapult (1)

wire, length of (1)

rope, length of (1)

To this Septimus was now busy adding a few things that reflected his new life as Apprentice to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. They were:

Unseen Charm (1)

Seeker's Charm (1)

Fast Freeze Charm (1)

Double Action Escape Pack (1)

Plus a few bits and pieces that he thought may come in useful:

The Little Book of Survival and Bushcraft by Ram Seary
(1)

Wiz Bix, everlasting, packet of (1)

Mint Blasts, tubes of (3)

There wasn't room for much else, but there was one last thing that Septimus wanted to take. It broke all the rules because it was both unnecessary and heavy, but Septimus didn't care. Down the side of the backpack Septimus stuffed the smooth iridescent green rock that Jenna had

given him when he had first known her. With some difficulty, Septimus buckled up the backpack and put it on. It was heavier than he had expected.

“Is that you, Septimus?” Marcia called out as he came down the stairs and headed for the front door. He jumped in surprise.

“Yes,” he replied warily.

Marcia was kneeling on the floor beside the **ShadowSafe**. In front of her was a huge piece of paper with an extremely complicated diagram on it, which she was examining closely. For a brief, horrible moment, Septimus caught a glimpse of a large murky figure leaning over her, also peering at the paper—but when Septimus looked more closely the **Shadow** faded from view. But he knew it was still there, hovering behind Marcia, silently staring at the plans for its own demise. Septimus put down his heavy backpack; he felt bad about leaving Marcia alone with her dark companion.

“What’s a flange?” asked Marcia.

“A what?”

“A *flange*. It says here attach piece Y to the long, upright D, taking care to align holes P and Q with the corresponding holes N and O in the left-hand *flange*. I can’t see a wretched flange anywhere.” Marcia rifled irritably through a large box of fixings that Professor Van Klampff had given her for the construction of the **ShadowSafe**.

“It’s not in the box,” said Septimus. “It’s that bit that sticks out. Look, there—” He ran his finger down a curved projecting rim that ran the length of the edge of the **ShadowSafe**. The **Amalgam** felt like glass to the touch—silky smooth and cold.

“Well, why didn’t it say so,” said Marcia grumpily as she slotted piece Y—a long, curved triangular section—onto the **ShadowSafe**, carefully aligning holes P and Q with holes N and O. Marcia dusted down her tunic with an air of satisfaction. “Thank you, Septimus, it’s looking good, isn’t it? Only one more piece to go down the side here, then the final **Stopper** and”—Marcia twisted around, trying to catch sight of her **Shadow**—“*you will be gone, you pathetic creature.*”

Septimus looked at the **ShadowSafe**. Good was not the word he would have used to describe it—weird, maybe, or just plain ugly was more like it. It rose from the floor, dominating the room with its shiny blackness and bizarre

shape, which reminded Septimus of a gnarled hollow tree. The odd assortment of molded panels, which Professor Van Klampff had so carefully constructed, had come together to form a roughly conical enclosed space, open at the top, with a long narrow gap running from top to bottom through which Marcia and her **Shadow**—for a **Shadow** must **Follow** whether it wants to or not—would eventually squeeze. Then someone, probably one of the more senior Wizards (as Marcia felt it was a lot of responsibility for her young Apprentice), would place the last piece, the **Stopper**, in the hole in the top, and Marcia would walk out, free at last, leaving the **Shadow** trapped inside, like a lobster in a lobster pot. After that it was a simple job for the Bin Disposal Squad.

“Hang on, Septimus,” said Marcia, suddenly remembering what she had said to him earlier, “what are you doing back here? I gave you the day off. You should be up at the Palace with your mother.”

“I’m going to find Jenna,” Septimus said, picking up his backpack and heaving it onto his shoulders. “Seeing as no one else will.”

Marcia sighed. “Look, Septimus,” she said patiently, “Jenna will be back soon, mark my words. You’re just a little upset after your spider bite. It’s perfectly normal.”

“I am *not* upset,” he said indignantly.

“Septimus,” said Marcia, “I know you think I don’t believe you—”

“I know you don’t believe me,” said Septimus.

“—but, just to put your mind at rest, I have done a **Remote Search** of the Farmlands across the river and there is a horse with two riders on its way to the North Gate. It is bound to be Jenna and Simon after their morning out. And I have sent Boris—”

“Boris?” asked Septimus.

“Boris Catchpole. Moved in yesterday, he’s a new sub-Wizard—a bit old really to get started as a Wizard but he’s very keen. He’s part of our Second-Chance Scheme. He trained as a Tracker in the Army. Got as far as Deputy Hunter, believe it or not.”

“Old *Catchpole*?”

“Yes, do you know him?”

“He’s horrible!”

“He’s not so bad. Well, apart from his breath, that is. That’s pretty bad. I must have a word with him about it sometime. Anyway the past is the past. We should welcome him in. Well, we *will* be welcoming him next week with the traditional Wizard Warming Supper, and as Apprentice you will of course be there.”

Septimus looked gloomy.

“All part of the job, Septimus,” said Marcia briskly. She looked at her glum Apprentice standing by the door weighed down by his heavy backpack. His green eyes looked sad. His sister had chosen to go away on one of his few days off, and it was hard on the boy. Marcia knew that Septimus was very close to Jenna after their experiences together in the Marram Marshes.

“Look, Septimus, if you want to take your adventure bag or whatever it is you’ve got there and go outside the Castle to wait for Jenna to come back, that’s fine. Off you go. It’s a lovely day and you could walk up to the One Way Bridge and watch out for her.”

“All right,” he said doubtfully.

“I’ll see you later then,” said Marcia with a fond smile. “And don’t forget to take Jenna straight back to the Palace. Why don’t you stay the night? Then you can spend some time with Jenna and your parents—and come to think of it, you can make sure Jenna gets off to the Marram Marshes tomorrow. The boat has been ready for her at the Palace Quay for a week now, and I am really worried that she won’t leave in time. Your mother does tend to leave everything to the last minute.” Marcia sighed. “You know, I am sure when the Queen used to go for her MidSummer Visit she *must* have left earlier than this, although the funny thing is I can’t ever remember her going. I mean, she must have gone on the royal barge, but I don’t remember it and neither does Alther. And how did she get across the Marsh? Sometimes, Septimus, I worry about Jenna. There are so many things her mother would have told her about, and who can do that now? How will she ever know how to be Queen?”

“I suppose we all have to help her,” said Septimus. “Which is what I’m trying to do.”

“Yes, of course you are,” said Marcia soothingly. “Now you go and have a

nice day. Give Jenna my love when you see her, and tell her I hope she has a good MidSummer Visit.”

Marcia made everything sound so normal that Septimus started to allow himself to believe that Jenna really was coming back.

“Yes,” he said, a little more brightly. “All right then. I’ll do that. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Off you go,” said Marcia as the huge purple door to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s rooms threw itself open for the Apprentice.

“Bye,” replied Septimus. He stepped onto the silver spiral stairs and they began to move, quickly taking him out of sight. The purple door closed itself quietly, and Marcia did something she had never done before: she wandered upstairs and went, uninvited, into Septimus’s room. She walked over to his window and waited for him to emerge from the Tower. Then she watched his progress across the Wizard Tower courtyard, a small figure in green carrying his heavy backpack, his unruly, pale, straw-colored hair making it easy to see him even from twenty-one floors up. As Septimus disappeared into the shadows of the Great Arch, Marcia walked away from the window and out of the room, gently closing the door behind her.

Septimus took the shortcut to the North Gate. The shortcut was a high path set into the Wall that surrounded the Castle. It was narrow and unfenced, and was somewhat alarming if you did not have a head for heights, which Septimus did not. On the right-hand side of the path was a sheer drop of about twenty feet onto roofs, into backyards or, in one terrifying stretch, a drop of fifty feet straight onto the Ramblings Road, which led to The Ramblings. The Ramblings was a huge warren of a building that formed the east wall of the Castle and sprawled for three miles along the river. It was a noisy, busy place filled with a maze of passages and rooms where many of the Castle inhabitants lived and worked, and it was where the Heaps had lived before their sudden move into the Palace.

On the left-hand side of the path were the thick stone battlements of the Wall. As he walked along the path, Septimus stared fixedly at the worn yellow stones of the ancient Walls and told himself not to look down.

Once Septimus had made the mistake of glancing to his right just as he was walking above the Ramblings Road. A feeling like an electric shock had

run through him, starting at his feet and ending in his head, making him sway dangerously. He had had to sit down, then close his eyes and crawl to the nearest exit steps. But Septimus believed in conquering his fears—which was what always took him up to the Wall, rather than through the longer, but much less scary, alleyways and sideslips to the North Gate.

Today, as Septimus hurried along the path, he paid little attention to the height—he was too busy thinking about Jenna and planning what to do. Although he had begun to wonder whether Marcia was indeed right and Jenna was on her way back, something deep down told Septimus that Jenna was in trouble.

And if Jenna was in trouble, he was going to help her—whatever it took.

11

JENNA'S JOURNEY



S*eptimus was right. The horse and riders that Marcia had found in her Remote Search* were in fact Jake and Betty Jago, who ran a small market garden in the Farmlands and were on their way to visit Betty's mother in The Ramblings. But far away, trotting through the apple orchards of the lowland hills, was another black horse with two riders: one small and dark-haired, with a gold circlet around her head, the other tall and wild-eyed, with his long straw-colored hair streaming back from his face as he pushed his tiring horse onward.

As he rode, Simon was occupied with his thoughts. He was amazed that it had all been so easy. When he had ridden into the Palace, Simon had expected, at the very least, to be stopped and questioned. But there had been no one there, and so, he thought with a grim smile, the Heaps only had themselves to blame. Because Simon had not really expected to snatch Jenna so easily, he felt a little scared of his own success. He was afraid she might be troublesome; he knew she had a mind of her own and remembered her

throwing some serious tantrums when she was little, although he had always been able to make her laugh and forget about whatever was troubling her.

Simon shook his head crossly to rid himself of any fond memories he might have of his little adopted sister whom he had lived with and loved for the first ten years of her life. That, he told himself sternly, was the past. Marcia Overstrand had marched into their lives on Jenna's tenth birthday and ruined everything, and that had been the end of his family as he knew it. The last straw was when his parents were duped by that boy from the Young Army into thinking he was their precious seventh son and, to top it all, the upstart got the only thing that Simon had ever wanted—the ExtraOrdinary Apprenticeship. Now he cared for no one—except for Lucy Gringe.

If Simon had not been able to snatch Jenna, he had planned to take Lucy away with him that day. But work had to come first. Simon was a conscientious Apprentice, who had been busy doing his Master's bidding for the past year. He had not been looking forward to snatching Jenna, but orders were orders. It had to be done. Lucy would have to wait a little longer—although just at that moment, Simon would have much preferred it be Lucy sitting on his horse, laughing as they cantered through the apple orchards, rather than Princess stony-faced Jenna, who sat like a rock in front of him.

Apart from her few months spent in the Marram Marshes, Jenna had never been out of the Castle before, and she was struck by how green and varied the Farmlands were. If she had been with anyone but Simon it would have been a wonderful journey. The sun was hot but not oppressively so; since the bright blue skies of the early morning, a few clouds had drifted in from the west and taken the edge off the heat. Simon had allowed Thunder to slow down to a brisk trot and occasionally the horse fell into a leisurely walk as they reached a small incline. Jenna could not stop herself from gazing around and being amazed at how beautiful the countryside was.

Jenna was not going to give Simon the satisfaction of seeing how scared she was. She sat stiff and upright, using her riding skills to go with the horse as he made his way along the endless dusty tracks weaving through the Farmlands, which stretched for miles on the other side of the river.

They had stopped once by a stream on the edge of a hay meadow to give the horse a drink and to allow him to graze for a while. Simon had offered Jenna some food, but she had refused; she was not hungry. Like the horse, Jenna drank from the stream, and when Simon had said it was time to move

on she had made a run for it, dashing across the shallow stream and down a narrow track. At the end of the track Jenna could see a small house with an old woman sitting outside, dozing in the shade. But as she hurtled along the dusty path, she heard the sound of Thunder galloping up behind her, and in a moment Simon had grabbed her and lifted her roughly back into the saddle. They did not stop again.

As the day wore on, the lush meadows of the river floodplain gave way to the gently sloping hills of the Lowlands. The soft fruit crops and orchards of the small farms and market gardens changed to hillsides of vines, and still Thunder carried on, climbing upward as the hills became more pronounced and the misty blues and purples of the Border Mountains began to rise before them.

Now Jenna began to realize that Simon was not going to let her go. For much of the morning she had hoped that whatever strange joke he was playing on her would soon come to an end, that he would suddenly turn Thunder around and canter back to the Castle. Jenna had even decided exactly what she was going to say to him when they got back, and once or twice she thought he was about to do just that. But Thunder carried on, now walking more often than trotting, as the hills became steeper and the air clearer and more chill.

It was late afternoon, and they had reached the grim slate quarries in the sheep-filled foothills of the Badlands when Jenna at last broke the heavy silence between them.

“Why are you taking me away, Simon?” Jenna asked. “Where are we going?”

Simon did not reply. But, as Jenna looked ahead to the looming mass of the Border Mountains, she already knew the answer to her second question. And she wasn't sure she really wanted to hear the answer to her first.

12

JANNIT MAARTEN'S BOATYARD

As *Septimus* neared the North Gate he heard the sound of raised voices.

“You can’t stop me, Father!” Lucy Gringe was yelling. “You can’t keep me locked up anymore. I am not a child. If I want to go after Simon, then I will. So there!”

“Over my dead body!” came Gringe’s low growl.

“With pleasure!”

“Stop it both of you. *Please!*” shouted Mrs. Gringe. “I’m sure Lucy isn’t really going to run, are you, dear?”

“Of course I am, Mother. Right now!”

“Oh, no, you’re not!” yelled Gringe.

“Oh, yes, I am!”

“Oh, no, you’re *not.*”



Septimus arrived at the North Gate just in time to see Gringe dart inside the gatehouse. A moment later there was a loud clanking noise as the massive chains of the drawbridge started to move slowly around the huge cogs on the ground floor. Gringe was winding up the drawbridge.

Lucy Gringe knew the sound well; she had heard it every sunset and sunrise of her life. Septimus watched Lucy sidestep Mrs. Gringe—a short but athletic-looking woman who looked remarkably similar to her husband—and make a run for the bridge.

“Stop!” yelled Mrs. Gringe, running after her daughter. “Stop—you’ll get yourself killed.”

“Fat lot you care,” screamed Lucy, her long plaits streaming out behind her, as she went tearing up the slowly increasing incline of the drawbridge, intending to throw herself across the widening gap between the bridge and the opposite bank. Mrs. Gringe raced after her daughter. Suddenly she launched herself into an expert flying tackle and brought Lucy crashing down onto the thick wooden planks of the bridge.

In the gatehouse the deafening clanking of the chains drowned out all the

sounds of the drama outside. With a determined grimace, Gringe carried on winding up the bridge, unaware that Lucy and Mrs. Gringe were now fiercely fighting each other as Lucy struggled to reach the end of the bridge. But with every second, the incline was becoming steeper, and soon it was far too steep for Lucy to make any headway at all. It was all she could do to stay where she was, with her fingers clutched around an iron ring embedded in the wood while Mrs. Gringe clung like a limpet to Lucy's left boot.

Inside the gatehouse the heavily sweating Gringe gave another turn to the chains and the drawbridge reared up yet again. It was now beginning to point toward the sky. Suddenly Lucy could hold on no longer. Her fingers let go of the ring, and she and her mother were sent slithering down the nearly vertical slope. And as they landed in a bruised and squabbling heap on the cobbles of the gate, the drawbridge closed with a loud clang and an earthshaking thump. Gringe, exhausted by his effort, collapsed on the floor and resolved to be nicer to the Bridge Boy, who usually wound up the bridge. He wouldn't like to have to do *that* again in a hurry.

Septimus slipped away. He didn't have time to wait around for the Gringes to patch up their quarrel and let the bridge down again. He decided to go down to Jannit Maarten's boatyard, where Jannit ran a ferry service across the Moat, if she happened to be there. Septimus decided to take a chance that she would be.

Half an hour later Septimus had reached the tunnel under the Castle wall that led to Jannit Maarten's boatyard. The yard was on a quay beside the Moat, just outside the Wall. Septimus walked through the damp, dripping tunnel and soon emerged into the sunlight and a chaotic jumble of boats. As he started picking his way carefully through assorted sails, ropes, anchors and endless contraptions that were essential for building boats, Septimus at first thought that the boatyard was deserted, until the sound of voices drifted to him from the edge of the Moat. Septimus made his way over to them.

"Sep! Hey, Sep! What are *you* doing here?" It was a voice that Septimus knew well. Nicko Heap had noticed the unmistakable green tunic among the boatyard clutter. Nicko was standing in the prow of a long, narrow boat; he was a little taller than his brother Septimus and much more solidly built. And unlike his brother's pale complexion—a result of weeks on end spent inside the Wizard Tower—Nicko's smiling face was a deep wind-burned brown. His long fair hair was caked with salt from the sea; the curls were tangled from the wind and had a number of brightly colored braids woven through them. The braids were a summer craze among the young boatmen at the Port, and

Nicko had taken to the braids with enthusiasm along with a collection of wristbands to match. Like Septimus and all the Heaps, Nicko had the deep green eyes that Wizard children get when they come into contact with **Magyk**. Nicko was not interested in being a Wizard, but he could turn his hand to a few spells if he had to, and, like all the Heap children (except Septimus), he had been taught **Magyk** as a child by his parents.

Next to Nicko was a tall young man with bright, spiky, red hair, wearing a grumpy expression, who Septimus knew to be Rupert Gringe, Lucy's brother. Jannit Maarten, the boatbuilder, was on the boatyard pontoon securing the boat with a rope.

"Nicko—you're back!" yelled Septimus happily, leaping over a pile of planks and some old buckets and running toward his brother. He was surprised at how pleased and relieved he felt to see him. Nicko would understand about Jenna; Septimus was sure of that. Jannit Maarten smiled at Septimus—she was fond of all the Heaps. Nicko had recently started helping her and Rupert at the boatyard and she was impressed with him.

Jannit was a small, strong-looking woman in a grubby blue smock. She had a pleasant nut-brown, deeply lined face, and her hair was plaited into a long, thin, gray ponytail which hung sailor-style down her back. Jannit lived and breathed boats; she slept in the small tumbledown hut at the entrance of the boatyard and rarely ventured out of the yard.

Although there were other boatyards at the Castle, Jannit Maarten's was the best. She had taken on Rupert Gringe as her apprentice when he had just turned eleven and it was—she was fond of telling anyone who would listen—the best thing she had ever done. Rupert was a gifted boatbuilder. He had an eye for the line of the boat and an instinctive sense of how each boat he built was going to sit in the water, and of how she would respond to the wind.

Jannit was almost as pleased with Nicko. Nicko's first project was helping Rupert build a new *Muriel* for Sally Mullin, who had given her much-loved boat to the Heaps for their escape the previous year, and Jannit could see that he had a good eye and was skillful with his hands.

Nicko was also a natural sailor, better, in fact, than Rupert Gringe; and so it was to Nicko, much to Rupert's irritation, that Jannit addressed her question, "How did she sail then?"

"Like a dog in a bucket," growled Rupert, determined not to let Nicko get a word in.

Jannit's face fell. The boat had been her pet project but nothing had gone right with it from the start. She looked at Nicko for his opinion.

"It wasn't good, Jannit," he admitted. "We capsized twice. Then the mast broke. Had to get repairs down at the Port."

"It was *that* bad?" said Jannit. "I must be losing my touch."

"Nah. Of course you're not," said Rupert. "Just teething troubles. We'll figure it out."

"Oh, well." Jannit sighed. "You boys will be wanting to get back and see your families. Off you go—I'll sort things out here."

"All right, Jannit," said Rupert, "I'll be off then. I'm looking forward to a bit of peace and quiet after that creaking, moaning boat we've been stuck on."

"Er, Rupert," Septimus said, feeling that he ought to say something. "It's, um, not exactly...*quiet* at the gatehouse. There's been a bit of trouble."

Rupert looked at Septimus suspiciously. He had inherited his father's mistrust of the Heaps, and although he had to admit that Nicko Heap wasn't too bad, he was none too sure about the fancy Wizard's Apprentice all dressed up in his swanky bright green tunic and dinky Apprentice belt.

"Yeah?" he said warily. "What trouble?"

"Well, Simon—"

"I knew it!" exploded Rupert. "I knew it would be your blasted brother! I'll get him this time. I *will*!"

"He's not—"

Rupert Gringe hurtled off across the boatyard.

"—there now," Septimus finished lamely as Rupert tripped over a bucket and disappeared into the tunnel more quickly than he had expected to.

"What's up, Sep?" asked Nicko, who could see his younger brother was upset.

"Simon kidnapped Jenna and no one will believe me, not even Marcia," Septimus gabbled in a rush.

“What?”

“Simon’s kidnapped Jenna and—”

“S all right, Sep, I heard what you said. Come and sit down and tell me about it.” Nicko climbed ashore and put his arm around Septimus’s shoulder. They sat together with their feet dangling in the Moat while Septimus told Nicko the whole story. As the story progressed Nicko’s expression became increasingly worried.

Finally Septimus came to the end and said, “...but I bet *you* don’t believe me either.”

“Course I believe you.”

“Do you?” Septimus looked at Nicko questioningly.

“Yeah. I know people are after Jenna. I was going to tell Mum to be more careful. Seems like I’m too late...”

“What do you mean—*people*?” asked Septimus. “You mean, not just Simon?”

“Well, maybe Simon has something to do with them. I wouldn’t be surprised. But when me an’ Rupert were down at the Port getting a new mast—which reminds me I must tell Jannit that the new one is rubbish and won’t last five minutes—well, we spent a lot of time in the Blue Anchor Tavern by the docks. You get all sorts in there. We met Alther’s old girlfriend Alice Nettles. She works for the Customs House now—”

“Yes—and?” said Septimus impatiently, wondering where Nicko’s ramblings were leading him.

“And Alice told us that there was someone in Port looking for Jenna.”

“Who?”

“Dunno who. A dark stranger, Alice called him. Just come in from the Far Countries. His ship was still anchored offshore, waiting for a berth on Customs Quay, but he’d got himself rowed in and he’d been asking all sorts of questions about the Princess.”

“What kind of questions?” asked Septimus.

“Oh, you know the kind of thing. Was she really alive? Where could he find her? Stuff like that. Alice just stonewalled him. She’s good at that, is Alice.”

Septimus stared at the murky water of the Moat. “That’s it then. I bet Simon is taking Jenna to the dark stranger,” he said gloomily.

“He probably paid Simon well enough,” said Nicko, who did not have a good opinion of his eldest brother.

“And I can guess who the dark stranger is...”

“Can you?” asked Nicko, surprised.

“DomDaniel,” whispered Septimus.

“But he’s dead.”

“He *disappeared*. Sucked down into the Marsh. But that doesn’t mean he’s dead, does it? From what I know of him, he *likes* being under the ground.”

“I don’t know, Sep,” said Nicko. “Even Simon wouldn’t do a thing like that—would he?”

Septimus looked Nicko in the eye. “Look, Nik, no one else believes me about Jen being in danger so I don’t expect you to either. But I don’t care what anyone says. I’m going to go and get her back.” Septimus stood and heaved his backpack over his shoulders.

“I’ll be off then,” he said. “Tell Marcia where I’ve gone. And Mum and Dad. See you.” Septimus turned to go.

“Hang on, you dillop,” protested Nicko. “I *do* believe you. And you are *not* going off on your own either, Sep. How are you going to find her?”

“I’ll find her somehow,” said Septimus.

“Yeah, one day maybe. If you’re lucky. Now I know someone who is the best tracker I have ever met. He’ll lead us straight to her. I’ll get a boat from Jannit and we’ll go find him. You sit right down there again and take that bag of boulders off.”

Septimus didn’t move.

“Go on, Sep. Do as you’re told. I’m your big brother and I’m telling you. Right?”

“You’re not *that* much bigger,” muttered Septimus, but he sat down all the same.

13

THE FOREST



N*icko and Septimus* pulled their boat up onto a shingle beach in a small inlet on the edge of the Forest. Nicko knew it well; this was where he always moored his boat when he came to visit his brothers.

They had sailed about five miles down river from the Castle on the outgoing tide. Jannit had insisted on Nicko taking a small lugger—a good riverboat which had a cabin in case they had to spend the night in it, but Nicko had hopes of getting straight into the Forest and finding the boys' camp before the sun set. He had no intention of walking through the Forest at night, for it was a dangerous place after dark. Wild packs of wolverines roamed through the trees and many unquiet spirits and malevolent beings hovered in the air. Some trees were carnivorous and would turn into traps at night: they would swoop their branches down and enfold their victims, taking the life blood from them, so that by morning there would be nothing left but a dried-out skeleton hanging among the leaves.

It was late afternoon when they arrived at the beach, and Nicko knew they had five hours of daylight left which was, he reckoned, easily long enough to reach the boys' camp safely.

Septimus had not been in the Forest since he was a Young Army Expendable. He had spent many terrifying nights there as part of the Do-or-Die night exercises that the boy soldiers had to endure. They would be woken

in the middle of the night and taken off to somewhere dangerous—very often it was the Forest.

There were two nights in the Forest that Septimus would never forget. One was the time that his very best friend, Boy 409, had rescued him. A pack of wolverines had trapped him and were about to pounce. Boy 409 had rushed to his side, yelling so loudly that the lead wolverine had, for a brief moment, become confused, and in that moment Boy 409 had hauled Septimus to safety. The other terrible night had been when Septimus wouldn't have cared very much if a pack of wolverines *had* pounced on him. That was when Boy 409 had fallen overboard on their way down the river to the Forest. The river was rough and flowing fast and a freak wave had hit the Young Army boat. The boat was overloaded and Boy 409 had lost his footing and fallen overboard. He was never seen again. Septimus had begged the Leader Cadet to go back for Boy 409 but he had refused. Boy 409 was just another Expendable, and the whole point of a Do-or-Die exercise had been to weed out “the weak, the scared and the stupid,” as the Leader Cadet had put it. But usually the Do-or-Dies, as they were known, simply weeded out the unlucky.

When Nicko was satisfied that the boat was properly tied up to allow for the rise and fall of the tides, and everything onboard was neatly stowed away, he pulled a tattered piece of paper from his pocket.

“Here’s the map,” he said, showing it to Septimus. “Sam drew it.”

Septimus looked at the wiggling lines that wandered across the scrap of paper like slug trails over a pane of glass. “Oh,” he said. He didn’t think much of the map, but Nicko seemed confident.

“’S all right,” said Nicko reassuringly. “I know the way. Follow me.”

Septimus had no trouble following Nicko as they started their journey into the Forest. The outskirts of the Forest were fairly easy to walk through; the trees were widely spaced, and dappled sunlight shone through the branches high above their heads. Nicko confidently took a narrow track and walked briskly along, weaving in and out of the trees along the winding, snakelike track.

As Nicko led them steadily deeper into the Forest, the trees became larger and grew closer together, the sunlight faded into dark green shadows and a heavy silence began to enclose them. Septimus kept close behind Nicko as the track grew narrower and more overgrown. Neither of them spoke; Nicko was trying to remember the way, and Septimus was occupied with his own

thoughts. He was wondering what he was doing, walking deep into the Forest when he had set off to go to the Farmlands. Jenna must be miles away by now, on the other side of the river—and here he was going in the opposite direction, just because Nicko had persuaded him to. After a while Septimus broke the silence and said, “Are you sure they’ll want to help?”

“Of course they will,” replied Nicko. “They’re our brothers, aren’t they? Brothers stick together. Except for Simon, of course.”

Septimus was anxious about meeting his brothers. He had been reunited with most of his family for a year and a half, but in all that time Sam, Edd, Erik and Jo-Jo had been living wild in the Forest. Silas had promised to take Septimus to visit them but somehow it had never happened. Marcia was either too busy to let him go or Silas got the date confused and turned up on the wrong day.

“What are they like?” Septimus asked Nicko.

“Well, Sam is an amazing fisherman. Can catch anything he wants. I did wonder if we might see him on the beach, as it’s one of his fishing places. Edd and Erik are just a laugh. Always playing jokes on everyone and switching places. They still look so alike that I can’t always tell the difference. And Jo-Jo is quiet but really clever. He likes herbs an’ stuff—a bit like Mum, I suppose.”

“Oh,” said Septimus, trying to picture them but without much success. He still could not get used to being part of such a large family, after spending the first ten years of his life with no family at all.

“But,” said Nicko, “like I said, the one we’ve really come to see is the tracker, Wolf Boy.”

“The one they found in the Forest?”

“Yeah. He lives with them now. They think he’d been living with the wolverines for a while, but the wolverines probably chucked him out when he got too big and stopped smelling like a cub. He was wild when the boys first came across him. He bit Sam on the leg and scratched Erik quite badly. His fingernails were horrible—all yellow and long and they were curved like claws. But he got tamer in the last Big Freeze when Edd and Erik gave him food and now he’s not too bad. Still a bit smelly though, but then they all are. You get used to it after a bit. But Wolf Boy is the best tracker ever. He’ll lead us straight to Jenna, that’s for sure.”

“Does he have big teeth and fur?” asked Septimus warily.

“Yeah, huge yellow fangs and hairy hands.”

“Really?”

Nicko turned around and gave Septimus a big grin. “Gotcha!”

After a while they reached a small clearing in the Forest, and Nicko suggested they stop for a few minutes to look at the map. Septimus took off his backpack and immediately felt so light that he thought he might float up through the trees.

“Want a mint?” he asked, offering the purple tube of **Mint Blasts** to Nicko.

Nicko looked at the tube suspiciously.

“What do they do?” he asked warily. Nicko knew all about Septimus’s weird taste in sweets and had never quite gotten over eating a self-renewing banana chew that had kept **Reappearing** in his mouth no matter how many times he had spat it out.

“Nothing,” said Septimus. “They’re just mints.”

“All right then.”

“Hold out your hand.” Septimus put a few tiny green balls into Nicko’s hand. Nicko tipped his head back and shoved the **Mint Blasts** into his mouth as if he were taking a gulp of medicine.

“Not—” warned Septimus.

“*Mm-rrrr-aaah!*”

“—all at once.”

“Aargh. They went up my nose.” Nicko spluttered. Three small **Mint Blasts** shot out of his nose.

“Oh, they sometimes do that. The trick is to just hold them in your mouth and let them explode. They really wake you up, don’t they?”

“I think my eyes are going to pop out.”

“Well *I* like them.” Septimus took a few for himself and put the tube in his backpack. “Want some **Wiz Bix** then?” he asked.

“You must be joking,” said Nicko, his eyes streaming.

Nicko wiped his eyes, unfolded Sam’s map and peered at it. Then he looked around the clearing.

“Can you see a standing stone anywhere?” he asked Septimus. “There should be one over there.” Nicko pointed vaguely to a cluster of trees. “It looks a bit like a bird.”

“No,” said Septimus, who had had his doubts about Sam’s map since he’d seen it. “Nicko, are we lost?”

“No, ’course not,” said Nicko.

“Well, where are we then?”

“Not quite sure,” mumbled Nicko. “Better go on until we find somewhere I recognize.”

As Septimus followed Nicko deeper into the Forest he felt more and more uneasy. The trees were getting even closer together; some of them had huge trunks and felt very ancient. Septimus sensed the atmosphere around them change—the trees became strange. Each one seemed different to him; some were benevolent presences and others were not. Once or twice Septimus thought he felt a tree shift slightly as they passed by, and he imagined it turning and staring at them as they walked on. The sunlight had completely disappeared and had been replaced by a dim green light, which filtered through the tightly knit branches above their heads. It was easier to walk now that the undergrowth had grown less tangled and wild in the dimmer light, and for much of the time they were walking over a thick bed of fallen leaves. Every now and then Septimus heard a scuffling or rustling sound as a small creature ran away. Septimus didn’t mind those sounds; he knew they were just tree rats or Forest weasels, but once or twice he heard the snapping of branches as something quite large crashed away from them—or was it toward them?

Septimus began to feel very uneasy. They had been in the Forest for what seemed like hours, and he was sure that the daylight—such as it was—was

fading into twilight. As he followed Nicko he could see no sign of a track, and he began to wonder if they were lost. But still Nicko doggedly pushed on through the ferns and bracken and Septimus dutifully followed him, until they reached a small clearing.

Septimus stopped—now he *knew* they were lost. “Nicko,” he said, “we’ve been here before. An hour ago. Look, I recognize that hollow tree with the puffballs all around it.”

Nicko stopped and looked at Sam’s map. “We can’t be lost,” he said. “Look, here we are.” Septimus looked where Nicko’s stubby finger was pointing.

“On that squashed ant, you mean?”

“What squashed ant?” Nicko squinted at the map, which was hard to see now in the fading light. After a few seconds of staring at the scruffy piece of paper, Nicko said, “Oh, *that* squashed ant.”

“We’re lost, aren’t we?” said Septimus.

“Oh, no, I don’t think so. Look, I agree that may be an ant but we’re still on that track here. And if we follow it along...there...see, we come to the camp. Honestly, Sep, we’re almost there.”

They set off again with Septimus reluctantly following. After a while he said, “We’ve been here before too, Nik. We’re just going around in circles.”

Nicko stopped and wearily leaned against a tree. “I know, Sep. I’m sorry. We’re lost.”

14

LOST



Night fell fast in the Forest once the sun had set.

Septimus and Nicko were sitting gloomily on a fallen tree. Septimus was holding his compass in the palm of his hand, trying to see which way the quivering needle was pointing. The light was nearly gone, and the Dragon ring was beginning to glow, but it didn't help that Septimus's hand was shaking. A familiar sense of dread was stealing over him, which always came with the approach of night in the Forest.

“It's the Forest twilight now, Nik,” whispered Septimus. “We ought to keep still for a while. It's not a good time to be moving—not while things are shifting.”

Far away in the Castle, Silas and Sarah watched the sun set from the Palace roof and realized at last that Simon was not going to bring Jenna home. In a state of panic, they set off for the Wizard Tower to see Marcia. They met her on Wizard Way as she was heading to see Weasal Van Klampff.

Deep in the Forest, at its very center, Septimus and Nicko sat silently together. Septimus felt the sun drop behind the hills, the air grow chill and the shift between day and night begin. The Forest was changing into a nighttime

creature as the darkness closed in, and, with a sense of foreboding, Septimus recognized the strange feeling of thickness in the atmosphere that the Forest night brought with it.

“I’m really sorry, Sep,” Nicko mumbled desolately.

“Shh,” Septimus whispered. “Don’t speak unless you have to.”

Nicko sat quietly, trying to keep calm. He didn’t like the Forest much even in the daylight. He hated the feeling it gave him of not being able to escape quickly, of being trapped in the middle of the endless tangle of tree trunks and branches—although as long as he kept moving and could see where he was going, Nicko could just about stand it. But not now. Now that a thick blanket of blackness was beginning to surround them, he felt a panic rising inside him, which made him want to scream out loud. Nicko had only felt like that once before in his life, when he had been trapped in the Castle rubbish chute, but that time he had been with Marcia and she had quickly freed them. This time he was on his own.

“When you were here on a night exercise, what did they teach you? I mean, what did you have to do?” whispered Nicko.

“Well, er, once in the unarmed animal-combat exercise we had to dig a wolverine pit and spend the night waiting for a wolverine to drop in. It didn’t though—not into our pit anyway. But we lost three boys in the pit near us. They put up a good fight but the wolverine won. It was an awful noise. Then sometimes on compass-reading exercises they tied a boy to a tree and we had to try and find him before he got eaten. Didn’t always get there in time—”

“Ah,” said Nicko with a shudder. “Shouldn’t have asked. Thought they might have taught you some survival skills.”

“They did,” said Septimus. “Keep out of the way of anything that runs faster than you and has more teeth than you. Watch out for the carnivorous trees ’cause you can never tell which ones they are until it’s too late. Oh, yes—and the most important thing of all—”

“Yes?”

“Don’t stay out in the Forest after dark.”

“Very funny,” mumbled Nicko.

“I think,” Septimus whispered, “that we should try and find somewhere safe to spend the night. Up a tree would be best—”

“Up a carnivorous tree, you mean?”

“Nicko, just be quiet, will you?”

“Sorry, Sep.”

“Like I said, we should climb up a tree—and it’s just luck whether it’s carnivorous or not.”

“What, you can’t tell?”

“Not at night. You just take your chance. That’s what the Night Forest is all about, Nik. Anyway, like I said, if we can get up a tree we should be safe from wolverines, though of course we’ll have to keep watch for bloodsucking tree rats.”

“Great.”

“And some of the older trees are infested with leaf leeches. I spent a night in a tree once with the Leader Cadet, and when I woke up in the morning I thought he’d hidden himself with camouflage. But he was covered from head to foot with leaf leeches.” Septimus gave a chuckle. “Served him right.”

“Stop!” hissed Nicko. “Just *stop*. I don’t want to hear any more—okay? Let’s just find a tree and cross our fingers.”

Septimus hauled his heavy bag onto his shoulders and they set off; this time Nicko followed Septimus. Septimus’s Dragon Ring was shining brightly in the dark, and he pushed his hand into his pocket to douse the glow. He knew that a light would draw every creature to them for miles around and would particularly attract **Forest Wraiths**. Septimus trod slowly and silently through the trees, and Nicko followed him as carefully and quietly as he could. But Nicko was less agile than Septimus, and, try as he might, every now and then his foot snapped a twig or rustled a leaf. Septimus knew that sooner or later a creature or a **Thing** would hear them. They needed to get up into the safety of a tree fast. Desperately he scanned every tree they passed to see if there were any low branches that might give them a handhold. But there were none. They were in the middle of the ancient part of the Forest, where all the trees grew tall and kept their branches high above the ground.

Suddenly Septimus felt a pincerlike grip on his arm.

“Ouch!”

“Shh!”

Septimus spun around to see Nicko still clutching his arm and staring wide-eyed into the darkness.

“Sep, what’s that—over there—I saw something yellow and shining.”

Septimus scanned the darkness using the Army trick of glancing sideways to see in the dark. It was the sight he had been dreading—they were surrounded by a sea of yellow eyes.

“Rats,” muttered Septimus.

“Rats?” whispered Nicko. “Oh, that’s a relief. For a moment I thought it was wolverines.”

“It *is* wolverines. Loads of them.”

“But you said it was *rats*.” Nicko sounded aggrieved.

“Shut up, Nicko. I’m trying to think. Can you get my **Fast Freeze Charm** out of my bag?” Septimus gulped. “Quickly...”

“Can’t you do a **Fast Freeze** without a **Charm** yet?”

“No. Hurry up!”

Nicko tried to open Septimus’s backpack but his hands were shaking so much he couldn’t even find the buckle in the dark. Septimus was annoyed with himself. He knew he should have taken the **Charm** out of the bag so it would be ready when he needed it. But he hated the Night Forest as much as Nicko did, and somehow his brain seemed to have stopped working.

“I can’t undo your stupid bag,” hissed Nicko with panic rising in his voice. “Can’t you **Transfix** them like you did that horse?”

“What—get them to form an orderly line so that I can do them one at a time you mean?”

“Can’t you do ’em all at once?”

“No.”

Septimus scanned the waiting pairs of yellow eyes. They were getting nearer and spreading out. He knew the wolverines were beginning their practiced routine of encircling their prey. If he and Nicko waited any longer they would be trapped in the middle of the circle.

“Run!” hissed Septimus. “*Now!*”

Nicko did not need telling twice. Septimus took off through the trees and Nicko was right behind him, ducking and diving around the massive tree trunks, leaping over fallen branches and skidding on the slippery leaves whenever Septimus took a tight zigzag turn. But every time Nicko glanced back he saw the yellow eyes easily keeping pace, as the wolverine pack got into its nightly routine of chasing its prey and working up a good appetite for supper.

Suddenly Septimus caught his foot in a rat hole and crashed to the ground.

“Get up, Sep,” gasped Nicko, dragging him to his feet.

“Aah! My ankle...” Septimus moaned.

Nicko was unsympathetic. “Come on, Sep. Get going. There’s a pack of wolverines behind us in case you’d forgotten.”

Septimus hobbled on but, try as he might, he could no longer run; his ankle kept giving way beneath him. He stopped beside a tree and took off his backpack.

“What are you doing?” gasped Nicko, horrified.

“It’s no good, Nik,” said Septimus. “I can’t run. You make a break for it. I’ll try and find the **Fast Freeze Charm** before they close in on me.”

“Don’t be stupid,” snapped Nicko. “I’m not leaving you here.”

“Yes, you are. I’ll see you later.”

“No, you won’t. They’ll eat you, you idiot.”

“Just go, Nicko.”

“*No!*”

As Nicko spoke, the last wolverine in the pack closed the circle. They were surrounded. Trapped. Nicko and Septimus backed up against the thick rough trunk of a tree as, slowly and stealthily, the ghastly ring of yellow lights tightened around them. They stared at the sight, unable to believe that it was really happening. Like everyone else in the Castle, they had had nightmares about this very moment, but the reality was much stranger than it ever had been in their dreams. It was almost beautiful, in a hypnotizing kind of way. An expectant silence fell as though all the night creatures had stopped what they were doing and were watching the performance, which tonight, for one night only, had come to their part of the Forest.

Nicko broke the spell. He kicked the backpack over. The buckle came undone and the contents tumbled out onto the Forest floor. Both he and Septimus fell to the ground, scrabbling through the contents, frantically looking for the **Fast Freeze Charm**.

“There’s so much rubbish in here!” hissed Nicko. “What’s it look like?”

“Not rubbish. Glass icicle.”

“But where? Where, where, *where*?”

“Uh-oh. I can smell them.”

The foul smell of wolverine breath—a mixture of rotting meat and gum disease, for the Forest wolverines had chronic teeth problems—filled the air. With a feeling of dread, Nicko and Septimus slowly looked up and found themselves staring straight into the eyes of the lead wolverine. The lead wolverine who would give the signal for the pack to pounce.

A long, low snarl began somewhere deep in the stomach of the lead wolverine. The signal had begun. The surrounding yellow eyes brightened, muscles tensed and saliva began to flow. Toothaches forgotten for the moment, the wolverine pack flicked their tongues over their muzzles and bared their long yellow and black teeth.

The snarl grew louder and louder until suddenly, the lead wolverine threw his head back and gave a bone-chilling howl.

The pack pounced.

The tree pounced.

The tree got there first.

15

THE TREE



Septimus and Nicko shot into the air. Two long, sinuous branches, which had been hovering above their heads waiting for the right moment, had seized them. At the end of each branch were five smaller, more dextrous branches, like the fingers on a hand. Each hand was wrapped tightly around the boys like a well-fitting wooden cage and held them in what felt like a grip of iron. After grabbing Septimus and Nicko with surprising speed, the tree slowed down as it took them higher and higher, pulling them up through its leaves and branches, taking them into the very center of the tree.

Septimus closed his eyes tightly as they were lifted through the cold night air, but Nicko kept his eyes wide-open in shock as they traveled up, up through the massive tree, until they were high above the baying pack of wolverines. Nicko glanced below to the ring of yellow eyes that surrounded the tree and were staring, unblinking, at the sight of the night's supper—and a good supper too—whisked from their jaws.

The tree, like all trees, moved slowly and deliberately. Why rush when you had hundreds of years in which to live your life? Why rush when you were more than three hundred feet tall and a king of the Forest? After what felt like a lifetime, Septimus and Nicko were set down in a fork near the top of the tree. The branches that had been caging them slowly unwound from their captives and hovered above them, as though planning their next move.

“Is it going to eat us now, Sep?” whispered Nicko, his voice shaking.

“Dunno,” mumbled Septimus, who still had his eyes closed tightly. He could feel how high they were above the ground, but he did not dare look.

“But it’s let go of us, Sep. Maybe we could escape while we’ve got the chance...”

Septimus shook his head miserably. He was paralyzed by the height; he could no more move than fly to the moon. Nicko stole another glance downward. Through a gap in the leaves he could see the circle of wolverines, eyes glittering hungrily, waiting in the hope that their prey might still turn up—or drop down—for supper. Suddenly it crossed Nicko’s mind that this must have happened to the wolverine pack before. Sometime in the past, some poor victim must have been swept from the pack by a carnivorous tree, and then escaped the clutches of the strangling branches, only to find himself back in the middle of the wolverine ring. Nicko imagined what a terrible fate that was for someone—until it suddenly struck him that that was happening to *them*. Nicko let out a loud groan.

“What’s the matter, Nik?” mumbled Septimus.

“Oh, nothing. We’re about to be eaten either by a carnivorous tree or a pack of wolverines, and I can’t quite make up my mind just now which one I fancy most.”

Septimus forced himself to open his eyes. It wasn’t quite as bad as he had feared. He couldn’t see much at all—the moonless night was dark and the tree’s dense summer foliage obscured any view of the long drop to the ground. “Well, no one’s eaten us yet,” he said.

“Yet,” muttered Nicko.

But as Nicko spoke, the two branches that hovered above began to move down toward them again. Nicko grabbed hold of Septimus’s sleeve. “C’mon, Sep,” he whispered urgently. “It’s now or never. We’ve got to get out of here. I reckon we can make a break for it—this tree is *slow*. It only got us because we were too busy with the wolverines to notice it coming for us. If we climb down fast, it won’t be able to catch us.”

“But then the wolverines will get us,” whispered Septimus, who was convinced the tree could hear what they were saying.

“They might give up. You never know. Come on, it’s our only chance.” Nicko began to crawl along the branch.

The last thing Septimus wanted to do was to move anywhere—he was, after all, at least three hundred feet above the ground. But, knowing he had no real choice, Septimus half-closed his eyes so that there was no chance of catching sight of the huge drop to the ground and slowly began to inch his way along the branch behind Nicko. Nicko had already reached the fork in the branch where he was planning to start his climb down. He turned and held out his hand to Septimus.

“Come on, Sep. You’re even slower than this tree. Come on, it’s easy.”

Septimus did not reply. His hands were clammy with fear and he felt sick.

“Don’t look down,” Nicko encouraged. “Just look at me. Come on, you’re nearly there...”

Septimus looked up at Nicko and suddenly his head swam, a strange faraway buzzing started inside his ears, and his clammy hands lost their grip on the smooth branch.

Septimus fell.

He fell too fast for Nicko to do anything. One moment Nicko was sitting on the branch watching his brother crawl toward him, the next moment he was sitting watching an empty space. And all he could hear was the sound of Septimus crashing through the tree far below him, followed by a howl from one of the waiting wolverines.

And then silence. Nicko heard nothing more, except the rustling of leaves and branches and the stillness of the Forest. Nicko sat numbly on the branch, unable to move. He should start his climb down; he should try and get to Septimus but he dreaded what he was going to find. And so, slowly, reluctantly, Nicko began the long climb to the Forest floor, but, as he clambered down through the tree, a long thin branch suddenly looped itself around his waist and held him fast. Nicko struggled and tried to unwind the branch, but it was as tight as a band of iron. Angrily Nicko kicked out at the tree.

“Let me go!” he shouted. “I’ve got to get my brother!” In a fury Nicko tore the leaves around him to pieces, snapping as many twigs as he could find.

“Ouch,” said a low, slow voice, but Nicko heard nothing.

“I hate you, you *pig* tree!” he yelled, punching and flailing at it. “You’re *not* going to eat me. Or Sep. Just you try.” Nicko gave way to a frenzy of kicking, shouting and insulting the tree, remembering all the bad language that he had recently picked up at the Port and from Rupert Gringe. In fact Nicko was surprised at how much he knew. So was the tree, who had never heard anything like it before.

The tree impassively ignored Nicko’s outburst. It just held him tight while far below it carried on doing what it had been doing ever since Septimus had fallen. Nicko was still shouting at the tree when the branches beside him parted and Septimus appeared back at his side, wrapped up tightly in a cocoon of leaves and twigs. Nicko fell silent. He went white. This, he thought, is what spiders do to their prey. Only the week before he had sat on the boat and watched a spider wrap a struggling fly into a cocoon of silk, and then suck it dry while the fly still lived.

“Sep!” Nicko gasped. “Are you all right?” Septimus did not answer. His eyes were closed and he looked deathly white. A terrible thought crossed Nicko’s mind. “Sep,” he whispered. “Sep, has it started to eat you?” He struggled to reach Septimus but the branch held him tight.

“Nicko,” came a low voice.

“Sep?” asked Nicko, wondering why his brother sounded so strange.

“Nicko, please stop struggling. You might fall. It is a long way down and the wolverines are still waiting for you. Please keep still.”

Nicko stared at Septimus, wondering how he was managing to talk without moving his lips.

“Sep, stop being silly, will you?”

“Nicko, listen to me, this is not Septimus speaking. Septimus has hit his head. He needs to rest.”

A chill ran through Nicko, and for the first time in the Forest he felt really scared. He had known where he was with the wolverines and he had known where he was with the carnivorous tree—they had wanted to eat him. It wasn’t nice and it wasn’t friendly but at least it was understandable. But this low, ghostly voice was different. He had no idea what it was; it seemed to be

all around him, and the spookiest thing of all was that it knew his name.

“Who are you?” whispered Nicko.

“Do you not know? I thought you had come to see me specially.” The voice sounded disappointed. “I never see anyone anymore. No one ever comes to see me. I would have thought my son might have made the effort, but oh, no, can’t be bothered as usual I suppose. So when I saw my two youngest grandsons I naturally thought...”

“*Grandsons?*” asked Nicko, taken aback.

“Yes, you and Septimus,” said the voice. “I would have known you anywhere, you look so much like Silas did when he was a lad.”

Suddenly a huge feeling of relief flooded through Nicko. He hardly dared believe their luck.

“You’re not—you’re not Grandpa Benji, are you?” he asked the tree.

“Of course I am. Who did you think I was?” said the voice.

“A carnivorous tree,” said Nicko.

“*Me?* A carnivorous tree? Do I look like a carnivorous tree?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen one.”

“Well, let me tell you, they don’t look anything like me. Mangy things they are, don’t even bother to keep themselves clean. Smell of rotting meat. Nasty black leaves and covered in fungus. Give the Forest a bad name.”

“Oh...oh, fantastic! I don’t believe it. Grandpa Benji...” Nicko sank back in relief and his grandfather unwound the branch that had been stopping his grandson from moving.

“You’re not going to start climbing down now, are you?” asked the tree. “Those wolverines will wait a while yet. Just stay still a moment and I’ll make you up a bed. Don’t move.”

“No. All right, Grandpa. I won’t,” said Nicko rather faintly. He sat on the branch feeling like a small lump of jelly. And, for the first time since he had set foot in the Forest, he began to relax.

The tree busied itself weaving its branches into a platform and covering them with a soft bed of leaves.

“There,” the tree said proudly when it had finished, “you see, it’s no trouble at all to make up a bed. Any of you boys can always come and stay. Your father too. And your dear mother. Any time.”

The tree carefully lifted Septimus onto the platform and laid him down, still wrapped in the cocoon that held him safely.

“I only just caught him in time, you know,” the tree told Nicko. “A second later and the wolverines would have had him. As it was one of them jumped up and snapped at the lad. It was close.”

Nicko crawled onto the platform beside Septimus and started to unwind the cocoon. As he did so, Nicko saw that a large bruise was appearing on Septimus’s head where he had hit a branch on his way down.

“Ouch...” mumbled Septimus. “Gerroff, Nik.”

Nicko was so happy to hear Septimus’s voice. “Hey, Sep—you’re all right. What a relief.”

Blearily, Septimus sat up and looked at Nicko. The bruise above his eye throbbed, but he didn’t care; he knew they were safe. As he had fallen through the tree Septimus had hit his head and been briefly knocked out, but, while he was being gently lifted back up through the leaves, the sound of the tree’s deep voice all around him had pulled him back to consciousness, and Septimus had heard his grandfather’s conversation with Nicko. At first he had thought he was dreaming, but when he opened his eyes and saw Nicko’s relieved expression, he knew it must be true.

“Mrrer...” Septimus mumbled, grinning faintly.

“It’s Grandpa Benji, Sep. We’re safe!” Nicko told him excitedly. “But you gotta go to sleep now,” he said, noticing how pale his brother looked. “You’ll be fine in the morning.” Nicko lay down on the platform beside Septimus and held on to him tightly, just to make sure he didn’t fall off again.

The moonlight shone down through the leaves, and Grandpa Benji swayed to and fro in the nighttime breeze, lulling the boys into a peaceful doze. They had just dropped off to sleep when a terrible howling echoed through the tree.

“Arooooooooooooh!”

This was followed by an awful coughing, spluttering noise.

“Ach ach ach!”

Nicko knew it was the wolverines. “They can’t climb trees, can they Sep?” he asked.

Septimus shook his head and wished he hadn’t.

With some trepidation, Nicko and Septimus looked down through the platform to the wolverines. The whole pack seemed to have gone mad. They were running around and around the tree, yelping and yowling and desperately pawing at their noses.

“What are they doing?” muttered Nicko.

Suddenly Septimus snorted with laughter. “Look,” he said, “they’ve eaten my backpack—”

“Well, I wouldn’t have thought it tasted *that* bad,” said Nicko.

“—and they’ve found the **Mint Blasts!**” Septimus laughed.

16

THE BADLANDS



While *Septimus and Nicko* were getting lost far away in the Forest, Simon Heap was taking Jenna deep into the Badlands.

Thunder stumbled slowly up a narrow track, which wound through endless slate quarries, some old and abandoned, others with signs of recent work, although eerily deserted. The disturbed earth and the shattered rocks gave off a malevolent atmosphere, and Jenna felt her spirits sink. Far above her, a mournful moan drifted from the desolate tops of the hills—the east wind was blowing in and thick gray clouds were piling up in the sky. The sunlight grew dim and the air became chill. Simon wrapped his long black cloak around him, but Jenna was shivering; all she had to keep her warm was her light summer tunic.

“Stop shivering, will you?” growled Simon.

“I don’t have a cloak like you do,” snapped Jenna.

“You wouldn’t want a cloak like mine.” Simon sneered. “Too much **Darke Magyk** for Little Miss Perfect here.”

“You shouldn’t joke about that stuff, Simon,” protested Jenna.

“Who said I was joking?” asked Simon.

Jenna fell silent, still shivering.

“Oh, have this then and stop fussing,” said Simon, exasperated. He fished out a cloak from his saddlebag and grumpily handed it to Jenna. Jenna took the cloak, expecting to find a rough horse blanket, and was amazed at what Simon had given her. It was the most beautiful cloak that she had ever seen—a rich, deep blue, finely woven from the softest wool combed from the belly of a mountain goat, and lined in golden silk. Simon had intended it as a present for Lucy Gringe. He had planned to leave it outside the gatehouse, with a note tucked inside the lining that only Lucy would find. But when Simon had arrived at the North Gate early that morning, with his dark cloak pulled high around his face to avoid Gringe recognizing him, he had seen Silas jauntily walking down the street carrying the box of Counter-Feet. The last person Simon wanted to see was his father, and he had quickly changed direction and taken a shortcut to Wizard Way. Silas had not even noticed him—he had been too busy going over his strategy for that morning’s game. So now, to Simon’s irritation, the beautiful and extremely expensive cloak he had chosen for Lucy was wrapped around Little Miss Princess Perfect.

Jenna pulled Lucy’s cloak tightly around herself. She was warm now, but very tired, in front of Simon on the weary horse. The dark slate quarries went endlessly on, and Thunder was plodding up a steady incline. The track had narrowed; it was bound on one side by steep slate cliffs that rose into the overcast sky, and on the other side by a deep ravine, at the bottom of which was a dark swirling river full of jagged rocks and treacherous whirlpools. Jenna wondered if Simon was ever going to stop; he seemed to have no concern for her or his horse. Thunder was tiring fast, and once or twice the horse had lost his footing on the loose scree, which covered the sides of the gray slate hills, and had nearly sent them all plunging into the river below.

Suddenly Simon spoke. “Whoa, Thunder, whoa there, boy.” Thunder slowed to a halt and shook his head, snorting wearily. Jenna glanced about, suddenly anxious now that they had stopped.

Quickly, Simon dismounted from Thunder and took the reins. “You can get off,” he told Jenna. “We’re here.”

With a sinking feeling, Jenna slipped off the horse and stood, undecided whether to make a run for it or not. The trouble was, there didn’t seem to be anywhere to run to. Simon read her thoughts.

“Don’t be stupid and run off,” he told her sharply. “There’s nowhere for

you to go, unless you want to find yourself in a Land Wurm's Burrow."

"Don't try and frighten me, Simon," said Jenna. "You know as well as I do they only come out at night."

"Oh, do they now? Of course I forgot—Little Miss *Princess* knows everything there is to know, doesn't she? Well, I can leave you out here tonight, if you like. There's a nice selection of Wurm Burrows up there if you want to go and have a look."

Jenna was not tempted to take up Simon's challenge. She had been told too many stories about the huge gray Land Wurms that lived in the slate hills and preyed on passing travelers at night. Some Castle people thought they were nothing more than old miners' tales, told in order to keep people out of the slate workings, where the purest gold was sometimes found, but Jenna knew better. So she stood beside Thunder in Lucy's cloak and stared fixedly at the ground, determined not to give Simon the pleasure of seeing her look frightened.

Simon took hold of Thunder's bridle.

"Follow me," he told Jenna, and he led the horse up a steep winding path while Jenna followed, glancing behind to check that she was not being trailed by a Land Wurm. She had a feeling that Simon would not rush to her rescue if she was.

Suddenly the path came to an unexpected end at a sheer rock face.

"Home sweet home," said Simon with a wry grimace. Jenna stared at him, wondering if Simon had perhaps lost his mind. It would explain a lot.

"**Open to you commands, Master your, Nomis,**" muttered Simon. Jenna listened carefully to what he said and shivered—it was, she knew with a feeling of horror, a **Reverse Incantation**. She took a step back, unwilling to be close to any **Darke Magyk**.

Silently, part of the rock face **Transformed** into a massive round iron plug, which swung outward and upward to open for its Master. Jenna glanced behind her; it briefly crossed her mind to turn and run, but the sight of the dark and lonely valley and the sound of the wind whining across the hilltops was not appealing. Then, as she glanced up, Jenna saw something that made her heart jump into her mouth—from a dark, perfectly round hole halfway up a nearby overhang, she thought she caught sight of a pair of pale red Land

Wurm eyes staring out at her.

“Well, are you coming in or not?” asked Simon, jangling Thunder’s bridle impatiently.

It was a choice between the Land Wurm and Simon—Simon won, but only just. Jenna took a deep breath and followed him and Thunder into the rock face.

THE BURROW



The iron door clanged shut behind them and they were plunged into total darkness. Jenna tried to keep calm and told herself what Silas had always said to her when she was afraid of the dark—*remember, though you can see nothing, no **Thing** can see you.*

As Jenna was reciting this to herself under her breath, Simon drew something from his pocket and cupped it in his hands. Then he breathed on it, muttering a few words that Jenna could not make out, and his hands began to glow with an eerie green light.

“Home, Sleuth,” said Simon, throwing the object to the ground. A glowing ball of green light bounced away in front of them, illuminating the smooth round tunnel just enough for them to find their way.

“Follow me,” Simon said sharply to Jenna, his voice echoing in the dark. “Don’t bother to waste your time looking for a way out. There isn’t one. And in case you’re wondering where we are, we’re in an old Burrow.” Simon chuckled to himself. “But don’t worry, little sister dear, the Land Wurm that lived here has gone.”

“Land Wurm?” gasped Jenna.

“Yes. If you don’t believe me just reach out and touch the sides of the

Burrow. Silky smooth from all that lovely Wurm acid, and still beautifully slimy too. Nice, huh?”

Jenna could not help herself—she had to know if Simon was telling the truth—so she gingerly ran a finger along the rock. It was disgusting—icy smooth and covered with a glutinous slime that stuck to her finger. She fought down the urge to be sick and wiped her slime-covered finger on Lucy’s cloak. It was almost impossible to get the slime off, it seemed to have an affinity with human skin.

Holding her finger away from her, Jenna followed Thunder’s clattering, slipping hooves as Simon led him through the dark tube of the Land Wurm’s Burrow. The Burrow felt, thought Jenna as she followed the serpentine bends, horribly like walking through the inside of the Wurm itself.

The Wurm had been a long one, but eventually they reached the end of the slime-lined tube, and Thunder stumbled into a huge round cavern.

“This is the Wurm Chamber, where the Wurm slept in the day and hibernated in the winter,” said Simon, catching sight of Jenna’s horrified look in the green light of the ball. He continued, enjoying Jenna’s expression too much to stop. “If you look at the walls you can see the different-sized coils of the Wurm etched into them. All perfectly smooth from the acid of course.” Simon lovingly stroked the side of the cavern, and Jenna noticed that he didn’t seem to mind the Wurm slime at all.

“You see, the Wurm needs somewhere to turn around so that she can go out of the Burrow facing the right way. Just so that she doesn’t miss a tasty morsel like you walking past. She sleeps here until nightfall and then goes out hunting. Just think of all those lovely Wurms who were curled up in their Burrows while we were riding through the quarries this afternoon.”

Jenna shuddered, despite trying not to.

“And over here we have Thunder’s stable, don’t we, boy?” Simon patted his horse affectionately and led him across the Wurm Chamber to an area covered in straw, with a manger attached to the wall and a drinking trough hewn from the rock, which was fed by a dripping spring just above it.

Simon picked up the green ball and placed it on a ledge in the wall so that the light shone down on the horse and turned him an eerie greenish-black. “Make yourself at home, Sis,” he said, “while I settle Thunder down for the night.” He threw Jenna a small rug from one of the saddlebags.

“Is—is this where you *live*?” asked Jenna. She put the rug down on the cavern floor as far away from Simon as she could get and sat down, trying her best to avoid touching any Wurm slime.

“You think I live *here*, in this dump? What do you take me for—some kind of loser, living like a tramp?” snapped Simon, his suddenly angry voice echoing through the Wurm Chamber.

“N-no,” stammered Jenna.

Simon glared at her coldly and then, to Jenna’s relief, went back to tending his horse, which seemed to calm him down. Jenna watched him take the bridle and the heavy saddle off Thunder and hang them up, and then he rubbed the horse down and covered him with a blanket. Once Thunder was settled, Simon turned his attention back to Jenna and strode over to her.

“This, let me tell you,” he said, staring down at her, “is just the *beginning* of my domain. You have no idea just how much I control. *No idea at all.*” Jenna stared at Simon and saw the same mad glint in his eye that he had had when she had turned to look at him in Cutpurse Cut.

“Get up,” Simon said roughly. “It’s time you saw just how powerful your dear brother really is.”

Jenna hung back. “No. No, thank you, Simon. I’m really tired.”

“You don’t think I would let my honored guest sleep in the stable, do you?” Simon grabbed her arm and pulled her up from the rug.

“**Come!**” he yelled to the green ball. Sleuth jumped off its ledge and bounced around Simon’s feet like an eager puppy. Simon kicked it and sent it flying down the narrow passage that led out of the Wurm Chamber. Then Simon propelled Jenna along in front of him, pushing her roughly down the tunnel.

Jenna stumbled along, slipping on the loose shale that covered the ground, until they reached the foot of some steep steps cut into the slate.

“**Up!**” Simon snapped. Sleuth bounced onto the first step and started its climb. Simon gave Jenna a shove. “You too. Go on.”

Jenna started up the steps. A thick rope was fixed to the wall and she clung to it as she wearily climbed up, and up, and up, following the never-

tiring ball. Simon was close behind her and she could hear his breath coming faster as they climbed higher. Soon the air became fresher and Jenna's spirits lifted a little as she realized that they were going up toward the outside world again. At last Sleuth reached the top step. Simon grabbed Jenna's shoulder.

"Wait here," he told her. He kicked the ball away and strode through a tall archway, disappearing into the darkness. Jenna stood at the top of the steps, trembling with cold and tiredness, and drew the cloak around her. She stared into the gloom but could make out nothing at all, though she could feel a few stray raindrops hitting her face. Jenna stuck out her tongue to catch them and taste the fresh air.

Simon was back a few minutes later with a Glo Lamp—a long glass tube stuffed full of writhing Glo Grubs that he had hastily scooped out of the grub barrel and poured into the tube. Fresh out of the barrel, the Glo Grubs glowed brightly.

Simon beckoned Jenna through the archway but she hung back. "You can stay out there all night if you want," he told her, "but I wouldn't advise it. There's a Magog Chamber at the bottom of the steps. Didn't you notice?"

Jenna remembered Magogs from the time she had met them on board DomDaniel's ship. Reluctantly she decided that, yet again, Simon was the better of two evils.

Jenna followed Simon through the archway.

THE CAMERA OBSCURA

Welcome to the Observatory—my place,” Simon said, for a moment letting himself slip into the role of the older brother showing off to his sister. “Come inside and take a look.”

Jenna stepped through the archway and a terrible feeling of dread came over her. She stared into the gloom; the place felt chill and eerie. Jenna knew that there was something **Darke** in the air. Despite the best efforts of the Glo Grubs, Jenna could make out very little apart from a huge white circle, which glowed like the moon and seemed to float above the floor. Simon pushed her toward the circle, but Jenna resisted.

“Oh, come on,” said Simon, propelling Jenna forward and confusing her by sounding like his old self for a moment. “You’ll like this, all kids do.”

“I’m not a kid,” said Jenna. “I’m—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. You’re Miss Princess high and mighty. Well, you’ll like it anyway. Whatever you are. I’ll uncover the lens and then you’ll see it

—my Camera Obscura.”

A chill shot through Jenna. Where had she heard those words before? Surely that horrible boy—DomDaniel’s Apprentice—had boasted about having a Camera Obscura? A strange noise came from far above Jenna’s head; she glanced up and could just about make out a tall domed roof with a long wooden pole hanging down from something in the middle. What was it?

Suddenly Simon snapped, “Stop daydreaming and look at the dish.”

Jenna looked down at the huge white circle before her, and to her amazement she could see a finely detailed picture of the ravine she had just traveled through.

“Good, huh?” Simon smirked. “Better than all that witchy rubbish old Zelda did. This, little sister, is the *real* world.”

Jenna knew he was talking about the night the Heaps had all stood on a rickety bridge and seen themselves reflected in the light of a full moon, while Aunt Zelda, a White Witch, had asked the moon to show them the family of a small boy soldier, Boy 412. Jenna decided it was wiser to say nothing.

Simon took hold of the pole, and he began to walk slowly around the white dish. The pole moved with him, and far above their heads a thin creaking noise began as the lens that focused the scene onto the white dish of the Camera Obscura began to turn through a full circle. As it turned, the scene before them changed, and despite herself, Jenna was entranced. She had never seen anything like it before; the picture was bright and intricately detailed—but strangely silent.

“So you see,” Simon said, moving very slowly to allow Jenna to take in the changing scene before her, “you can have no secrets from me. I can see *everything*. I can see the Castle, I can see your precious Palace and I can even see mad Marcia in the Wizard Tower with that upstart Apprentice who thinks he’s my brother. I see it all.”

Jenna stared at the scene. It was beautiful, but everything was very small and far away. She didn’t really understand how Simon *could* see everything.

In the distance, beyond the Badlands and the Farmlands, she saw the Castle outlined against the setting sun. As she stared at the image, she saw seagulls flying silently across the sky and boats moving slowly up the river. Jenna could just about pick out the Palace by its wide green lawns stretching

to the river—and all at once she felt a terrible longing to be home.

“Want to have a closer look?” asked Simon with a sneer. “Want to see how much they’re missing you?”

Jenna did not answer, but Simon opened a drawer in the platform under the dish and took out a large brass magnifying glass. He held it above the dish, clicked his fingers and muttered, “**Magnify do descry we that all...**”

Suddenly everything on the white dish jumped in size.

“You see,” said Simon, “I see everything clearly now. The Chief Hermetic Scribe at the Manuscriptorium had it. He collects **Reverse** memorabilia. Reckons that this **Enlarging Glass** was owned by the first **Darke** Wizard. D’you know who that was, little sister? Have they taught you that in your Princess history lessons yet?”

Jenna did not respond. She had recently developed Septimus’s dislike of even hearing the **Reverse side** mentioned. Septimus had a theory that even by talking about it you could invite it in.

“Well, I’ll tell you anyway,” said Simon. “It was none other than Hotep-Ra. The very first ExtraOrdinary Wizard. The one who brought your precious Dragon Boat here. Don’t look so surprised. So you see, we—the **Reverse side**—are the true inheritors of the Castle. And don’t go thinking you’ll be seeing your precious Dragon Boat again, either. Because you *won’t*.”

Simon chuckled, pleased with the effect he was having on Jenna, who looked white. She refused to meet Simon’s eyes and was resolutely staring at the scene on the dish.

Simon followed her gaze and turned his attention back to the Camera Obscura. Then, as though he had thrown a switch, he suddenly became the older brother again.

“Good, isn’t it?” he said, waving the **Enlarging Glass** over the dish, seeking out scenes and making them leap in fine detail. “Now, here we have the Forest...ah, there’s a boat tied up on the beach where Sam fishes. I miss Sam...not much else to see in the Forest. Too dense. Although at night I can sometimes see the wolverines’ eyes...Now let’s go up the river to the Castle...here’s old Jannit’s boatyard...now where’s my little brother Nicko? He came back today with Rupert. Did you know that, Jenna? No, I didn’t think so. But I did. I saw them coming up the river before I left. And...ah,

yes, there's the North Gate and that idiot Gringe arguing with that imbecile son of his...now where's my Lucy? There she is, sitting by the Moat. Waiting. But she'll wait for me a little longer. Now there's the Wizard Tower. Look at that window there—there's Marcia in her study and her **Shadow** keeping her company as all good **Shadows** should. See how he watches her every move? Now let's go somewhere you know well, shall we? Here we are...the Palace. Home sweet home, eh? If I am not mistaken, there are my dear misguided parents up on the roof. Are they looking at the sunset do you suppose, or are they wondering when their son and heir is going to bring back their little cuckoo?"

"Shut up, Simon!" yelled Jenna. "I hate you, I *hate* you!"

She hurled herself away from the images of Silas and Sarah and raced toward the steps. But Simon was faster. In a moment he had grabbed her and held her prisoner again. But not before Jenna had seen something hidden in the shadows that she really wished she hadn't—a bleached white skull grinning at her from the seat of an ornate wooden throne.

"I think you have met before," Simon said with a smile. "Let me introduce you to the head of my Master, DomDaniel."

19

CHOCOLATE



J*enna couldn't sleep. Not because of the icy chill of the cell air, or because of the hard little bed, the thin scratchy blanket or because her clothes felt cold and damp. She could not sleep because of the thought of the skull staring empty-eyed at her door. Whenever she closed her eyes an image of the grinning white skull drifted by and woke her with a start.*

Jenna gave up trying to sleep. She wrapped herself in Lucy's cloak, her mind racing as she went over the events of the day. Until she had seen the skull, Jenna had found it hard to believe that Simon meant her any harm. In her mind he was still her eldest brother, the reliable one who always helped her out when she was in trouble and showed her how to do her homework. But that was before Simon had picked up the skull, cradled it in his arms and told her how he had rescued DomDaniel's skeleton from the Marram Marshes on the night of the Apprentice Supper and that he was now DomDaniel's Apprentice. "How about *that*, little Miss Princess? And unlike his last useless Apprentice, I am carrying out his every wish to the letter. And his very particular wish was to have the Castle free of any interfering royalty, such as yourself. He considers the power of the Queen an intolerable imposition on any ExtraOrdinary Wizard. As do I. So, if we want some proper **Magyk** back in the Castle—not just Marcia's dinky little spells—then *someone* has to go." Simon had looked at her with a horrible coldness in his eyes, which stayed with her still.

Jenna sat on the edge of the bed, thinking. She wondered why Simon

hadn't already got rid of her. He could have easily pushed her off the ravine into the river or just left her out for the Land Wurms. But Jenna already knew the answer. Whatever Simon might have said, he had still wanted to show off to his little sister. But he had done that now, and tomorrow it would be a different story. Maybe tomorrow he *would* leave her out for the Land Wurms—or the Magogs.

Jenna shivered. She heard a low noise drifting through the wall and her heart leaped into her mouth. It was a strange, regular, snorting noise, and she knew what it was—it was the *skull*. The noise got louder and louder; Jenna pressed her hands over her ears to blot out the awful sound, and then suddenly she realized what it really was: Simon was snoring. Which meant that Simon was asleep and she was awake. She could try and escape—she *must* try and escape.

Jenna tried the iron door. It was bolted but there was a small gap between the door and the wall, and Jenna wondered if she could push something through the gap and somehow undo the bolts. She looked around the cell but Simon had not been so considerate as to leave her a hacksaw. Jenna put her hands in her pockets, wondering if she had anything on her that could help. Septimus would have the very thing, she thought. He always carried his Young Army knife, which had about a hundred and one different uses, mostly involving horses' hooves. She missed him.

The thought of Septimus made Jenna remember the chocolate **Charm** he had given her that morning. Where had she put it? There it was, damp and sticky, stuck at the bottom of her tunic pocket. She pulled out the **Charm**, held it in her palm and squinted at the inscription:

**Take me, shake me,
and I will make thee:**

Quetzalcoatl's Tchocolatl.

Well, she thought, it was worth a try.

Jenna tried to remember what Septimus had said when he had told her how to use the **Charm**. She cupped both of her hands together and shook the **Charm** up and down as hard as she could to **Activate** it. As she did so, she whispered the words written in the small brown square and concentrated all

her thoughts on what she wanted. Sure enough, the **Charm** began to work. It grew warm and smooth in her cupped hands, as though it were a real piece of chocolate. Then, just as Septimus had said it would, it began to buzz like a small fly trapped in her grasp. Jenna waited until the **Charm** was almost too hot to hold, and then quickly placed it on the object she wanted to turn into chocolate—the door of the cell.

Jenna did not really believe that Septimus's **Charm** could turn a thick iron door into chocolate. But, as she pushed the **Charm** against the door, to her amazement she felt the hard pitted metal change into a smooth surface that was cool, rather than icy cold, to the touch. Something else had changed too. Jenna sniffed the air—the cell was filled with the faint smell of cocoa. Hesitantly, Jenna took the **Charm** off the cell door. The **Charm** was cool now; she slipped it back into her pocket and gazed at the door. At first Jenna thought it seemed much the same as it had before, except now, as she looked more closely, she could see that the rusty hinges and even the flap over the keyhole were beautifully molded in chocolate. Never in her life had Jenna seen so much chocolate and, unfortunately, never had she felt less like eating it.

Jenna soon discovered that a massive slab of three-inch-thick chocolate, chilled hard on a cold night, is not easy to shift. She pushed as hard as she could against it but the slab stayed as firm as if it were still iron. She decided to start scraping some shavings off the door to make it thinner, but it was hard work and she thought it would take all night.

Jenna sat down disconsolately on the edge of the bed and ate some of the shavings—it was extremely good chocolate, even better than the Choc Chunks from the sweetshop at the end of Wizard Way—while she wondered what to do. After a few minutes the chocolate began to help her think more clearly, and Jenna realized that she needed to find something sharp to help cut a hole in the door. Simon had made sure that there was nothing sharp in the cell, but, as Jenna hunted around, she soon discovered that even Simon did not think of everything. He had forgotten about the bedsprings.

Jenna threw the thin mattress off the bed and quickly unwound one of the looser bedsprings until she held a sharp, pointed piece of metal in her hand. Then she set to work, scraping away a hole in the door big enough to squeeze through, while, to her relief, Simon's snores carried on reverberating through the walls.

An hour later, Jenna's bedspring had cut a large rectangle at the bottom of the door. All she had to do was give it a push and hope that it did not fall over with too loud a thud. Carefully, Jenna pushed against one edge of the rectangle and to her delight, it moved easily. Very quietly, Jenna laid the thick slab of chocolate on the floor, and, in case she got hungry later, she broke off the keyhole cover and stuffed it into her pocket. Then she squeezed through the opening, stood up and wiped her chocolaty palms on her tunic.

Simon was still snoring loudly; the snores echoed around the circular chamber and were strangely comforting, for at least they were human. Jenna tiptoed past the huge white dish of the Camera Obscura, glancing down for a last look at the strangely compelling scene outside, and noticed that Simon had left the **Enlarging Glass** lying on the dish. Jenna picked up the **Glass** and stuffed it into her tunic pocket. Now Simon would not find it so easy to see where she had gone.

Next, Jenna found the Glo Grub Tub; Simon had not replaced the barrel lid properly and a bright yellow light shone from the gap. The Glo Grub Tub was a large wooden barrel, full almost to the brim with hundreds of thousands of tiny Glo Grubs wriggling around. Jenna took a Glo Lamp from a neat line of empty lamps placed next to the barrel, picked up the scoop and filled the glass tube with squirming Glo Grubs. Jenna did not like using Glo Lamps, but she had no choice. Sarah Heap refused to use them because once the grubs were put in a lamp they did not live longer than a few hours. It was, Sarah said, a terrible thing to kill so many creatures just for a person's own convenience. Sarah used good old-fashioned candles.

"I'm sorry, grubs," Jenna whispered as she scooped them up.

Jenna filled the lamp and left the lid of the Glo Grub Tub open to give the grubs a chance to escape. She raised the lamp and, for the first time, she really saw the place that Simon Heap had made his own.

The Observatory was a huge round chamber. The walls, roughly hewn out of the solid slate mountain, sloped upward and inward until they met at the lens for the Camera Obscura. A thick milky slab of glass set into the roof let in the moonlight, and Jenna realized that most of the Observatory was below ground. Silently, she crept past the metal **Thunderflash Chamber** and past neatly ordered shelves containing piles of **Darke** books, **Reverse Conjurations**, **Hexes** and **Curses**. She averted her eyes from a sinister-looking collection of flasks in which she could see misshapen creatures dimly floating in a yellow liquid. Every so often a bubble of gas rose from the

bottles and filled the air with a foul smell. In a distant corner a small glass-fronted cupboard glowed with a dull blue light. It was fastened with an impressive array of bolts. Inside, coiled up, lay a small black snake.

Simon Heap's snores reverberated through a large wooden door, which he had painted purple and covered with **Darke** symbols. Jenna passed the door and as she did so she trod on Sleuth. Somehow Jenna managed to change her scream into a strangled squeak, but Simon's snores stopped. Jenna froze, holding her breath. Was he awake? Should she run while she had the chance? Would he hear her footsteps? What should she do? And then, to her horror, Sleuth began bouncing on the spot. With each bounce a soft thud echoed around the Observatory. In a flash, Jenna scooped up the ball and a few seconds later Sleuth had been pushed deep into the contents of the Glo Grub Tub. Jenna closed the lid, snapped the lock shut and apologized to the grubs for the second time that night.

Muttering the **Protection Spell** that Marcia had taught her some time ago, Jenna crept past the ever-watchful skull, wondering what Simon had done with the other bones. As she went by she was sure that deep inside the skull a pair of eyes was watching her. She dared not look.

Once past the skull, Jenna ran. She tore through the archway and raced down the steep steps as fast as she could, as though DomDaniel himself were chasing her. Every now and then she glanced behind just to make sure that he wasn't.

When she reached the foot of the steps, Jenna stopped and listened for footsteps. There were none. Her spirits lifting a little, she took a step forward. Her feet shot out from underneath her and she came crashing to the ground. The Glo Lamp leaped out of her hand, scattering Glo Grubs across the ground. Jenna scrambled back to her feet and brushed off her tunic. Magog slime. A shudder of nausea passed through her, followed by a feeling of panic. Quickly she gathered up as many Glo Grubs as she could find, and, holding them in her cupped hand, she moved fast and silently along the tunnel toward Thunder's stable.

Jenna reached the Wurm Chamber safely, with no telltale swish of a Magog behind her. Thunder was standing quietly at his manger, chewing on the hay that Simon had left for him. He looked up as Jenna emerged from the tunnel.

"Hello, Thunder," she whispered. Thunder glanced at Jenna for a moment and then turned his attention back to the hay.

Good, thought Jenna, he remembers me. She walked slowly to the horse and patted his mane. It seemed cruel to take him out again into the cold night air, but she had no choice. She took the bridle off its hook and very gently approached Thunder. The horse didn't seem keen; he shook his head and snorted noisily.

"Shh," whispered Jenna. "Shh, Thunder. It's all right. It is." She patted his nose gently and then reached into her tunic pocket for the chocolate keyhole cover and offered it to him in her outstretched palm. Thunder nibbled at it delicately and looked at Jenna with a faintly surprised air. Jenna was quite sure that Simon never gave his horse chocolate. And quite right too; she never gave her horse chocolate either, but sometimes bribery was the only option.

With the hope of more chocolate, Thunder allowed Jenna to put his bridle on and saddle him up again. Jenna was just about to lead the horse out when she thought of something. She scooped up a handful of pebbles from the ground and, using the **Charm** again, she turned them into chocolate. Then Jenna stuffed most of the chocolate pebbles into her pocket, keeping one to wave under Thunder's twitching nose.

"Come on, Thunder," she coaxed softly, "come on, boy, let's go."

LAND WURM

Open to you commands, Master your, Nomis.” Jenna forced the words from her mouth. She had never uttered a **Reverse Incantation** before and hoped she never would have to again, but now she had no choice. The Wurm Burrow was sealed with a massive plug of immovable iron, and Jenna knew that if she turned *that* into chocolate there was no way she would be free by morning. She held her breath, hoping that she had remembered the **Incantation** correctly.

She had. To her relief, the thick iron plug swung silently outward, and the dim moonlight of an old moon filtered into the Wurm Burrow, along with a gust of wind and a few drops of rain.

“Come on, Thunder, come on, boy,” whispered Jenna, encouraging the reluctant horse out into the night with a chocolate pebble. The dark quarry was not a pleasant prospect; a mournful wind was howling and sweeping down the ravine, bringing with it the beginnings of a cold rain. Jenna pulled Lucy’s cloak around her, shivering as the chill night air hit them. Then she led Thunder down the steep path from the Burrow onto the track that ran along the side of the ravine.

“Hold still, hold still, Thunder,” she whispered, as the horse looked about nervously and flicked his ears, listening to the night sounds. Jenna swung

herself up into the saddle, wondering how Thunder would take to a new rider. The horse did not object, maybe because he had already become used to Jenna during the long day's ride. When Jenna said, "Walk on, Thunder, walk on," and gently pressed her heels against the horse's flanks, Thunder moved off at a leisurely pace, heading back down the track that he had struggled up only a few hours before.

Jenna felt quite at ease with the huge horse. Although he belonged to Simon, Thunder seemed a good-natured animal, and he walked surefooted along the track while Jenna sat bolt upright, scanning the sheer rock face for any signs of movement. The sooner they were through the ravine, she thought—encouraging Thunder into a brisk trot—the better.

As they rounded the first bend, Thunder came to a sudden halt. A landslide blocked their path. "Oh, no," gasped Jenna.

There was no way through. A huge pile of jagged boulders and massive slabs of slate had fallen across their path. To their right was a sheer rock face and to their left, at the bottom of the ravine, was the river—flowing fast and dangerous.

They would have to go back.

Jenna tried to coax Thunder to turn around but the horse refused to move. He shook his head and his bridle jingled noisily.

"Shh, Thunder," soothed Jenna. "Come on, around you go." But Thunder would not budge. Heart in her mouth, Jenna slipped off the horse and led him round with the help of another chocolate pebble. Then she was straight back in the saddle again and, with a heavy heart, retracing their steps back up the track, back toward the Burrow.

It was tough going. Thunder was now walking into the teeth of the wind, but he was happy that he was heading for home. When they reached the small path that led to the Burrow, Thunder stopped, expecting Jenna to get off and lead him back to his warm stable.

"No, Thunder, you're *not* going home. Walk on." Thunder shook his head, jingling his bridle again.

"Shh. *Please*, Thunder. Walk on," Jenna whispered as loudly as she dared, terrified that somehow Simon would hear her. She gave the horse a determined kick and Thunder very reluctantly moved off. Jenna glanced

behind them, half expecting to see Simon emerge from the Burrow, but the iron plug still gaped open and showed nothing but a dark, empty space.

After they had passed the Burrow the track leveled out, which made the going easier for Thunder, but the wind began to strengthen and, with it, the rain became heavier. Dark clouds blew in and a sheet of lightning silently lit the jagged tops of the ravine. A few moments later the rumble of thunder reached them.

Jenna and Thunder pressed on. The moonlight dimmed and the quarry became dark, lit only by the lightning playing across the sky. The wind howled down the ravine, blowing stinging rain into their faces. Both Jenna and Thunder half closed their eyes and kept their gaze fixed firmly on the track—until a movement high in the rocks ahead caught Jenna’s eye. She looked up, hoping that it was just a scudding cloud that had caught her attention. But it was something much more substantial than a cloud.

It was the blunt gray head of a Land Wurm.

A Land Wurm takes a long time to come out of its Burrow, and Jenna had caught sight of the Wurm as it first poked its head into the night air. She knew, from travelers’ tales that Silas used to tell, that it was not the Wurm’s head that was the dangerous part; it was its tail. The tail of a Land Wurm was fast and deadly; when a Land Wurm had you in its sights it would flick its tail like a lasso and drop it over your head. Then it would coil the tail around and crush you. Very, very slowly. Although sometimes, Silas had told her, if the Land Wurm was not particularly hungry, it would carry you back into the Wurm Chamber and store you for a while, still alive, in order to keep you fresh. A Land Wurm preferred fresh meat, still warm.

Jenna remembered an occasional visitor to the Heap rooms who, among the younger Heaps, was known as Dribbly Dan. Dribbly Dan had a wild look in his eyes and had scared the younger ones, but Silas had told them to be nice to him. Dan had, according to Silas, been a completely dribble-free quarry worker until he was taken by a Land Wurm and kept in the Wurm Chamber for three weeks. He had survived by licking Wurm slime and eating rats. He had finally managed to escape one night when the Wurm had been tempted out by a large flock of sheep—and an inexperienced shepherd—that had wandered into the quarry. But Dan had never been the same after his three weeks in the Wurm Chamber.

There was no way that Jenna wanted to end up like Dribbly Dan—or worse. She looked up at the Wurm, trying to judge whether to speed up and

go past it or whether to stop and turn back yet again. But Jenna knew that if she turned back she would be caught between the Land Wurm and the landslide, and between *them* would be Simon's Burrow with Simon quite probably awake by now and searching for her. She had no choice—she had to get past the Wurm before its tail was free of the Burrow.

“Gee up, Thunder,” Jenna said in a low, urgent voice, giving the horse a nudge with her heels, but Thunder just kept up his slow trudge through the wind and the rain. Jenna glanced at the Wurm again. Its Burrow was high above them, and still quite distant, almost at the top of the old quarry workings that rose from the track. The Wurm's head was now well out of the Burrow, and Jenna saw that its dim red eyes had locked onto her and Thunder.

“Get *on*, Thunder,” Jenna yelled in the horse's ear, giving him a hard kick at the same time. “Or do you want to be eaten by a Land Wurm?” She flicked Thunder with the reins, and suddenly Thunder put his ears back and took off like a rocket, galloping along the track as if to show Jenna that if she wanted fast, then *fast* was exactly what she was going to get.

As they galloped toward the Land Wurm, Jenna could tell that the creature had seen them coming; it was pouring out of its Burrow at full speed, like a thick, never-ending stream of gray sludge.

“Go, Thunder, *go!*” Jenna screamed urgently above the howl of the wind and the rain as the horse pounded along the track, taking them ever closer to the Wurm. Still the Wurm came streaming out, slipping down the rock face so fast that Jenna suddenly realized she could not be sure that Thunder would get past the Wurm before it reached the track. She crouched down on the horse like a jockey, keeping the wind resistance low and talking in his ear, encouraging him on. “*Go, Thunder, go, boy...go!*”

And Thunder went, galloping at full tilt now, as if he too knew that both their lives depended on him. As the Wurm reached the bottom of the cliff, and Thunder was closing the gap, Jenna looked up to see if the tail was free of the Burrow. There was no sign of it yet, but she knew that any moment it could come shooting out. She turned her attention to the path just in time to see the Wurm's head reach the track.

“Go, Thunder,” she yelled, and then, as the Wurm slipped across the track and barred their way, Jenna screamed, “*Jump, Thunder!*”

Thunder jumped. The powerful horse sailed into the air and took them high above the great gray monstrosity that slithered below them. And as

Thunder landed on the other side of the Wurm and galloped onward, the Wurm's tail whipped out of the Burrow and shot through the air with a *crack*.

Jenna felt the wind whistle and heard a bang as the tip of the tail sliced the top off the rock behind them. She could not stop herself from looking back—the tail had missed them by no more than a few feet.

The weak red eyes of the Land Wurm followed its prey along the track and the tail gathered for another strike, whirling itself high into the air like a huge lasso. But, as it smashed down onto the track for the second time, Thunder cantered around a tall rocky outcrop, and the Wurm lost sight of them.

Thump! Something landed behind Jenna.

Jenna wheeled around in the saddle, ready to fight the tail with all the strength she possessed—but there was nothing there. All she could see was the steep slate outcrop rapidly disappearing into the night as Thunder galloped on.

“Phew,” said a small, slightly querulous voice behind her. “You cut that... a bit fine. Nearly gave me...a heart attack...that did.”

“Wh-who's that?” asked Jenna, almost more scared of the strange little voice than she had been of the Land Wurm.

“It's me—*Stanley*. Don't you remember me?” The voice sounded somewhat aggrieved. Jenna peered into the darkness again—there was something there. It was a rat. A small brown rat lay sprawled across the horse's back, desperately clinging to the saddle.

“Could you just...stop for a mo while I...sort myself out?” the rat asked, bouncing around on Thunder's back as the horse galloped into the night. “I think I've...landed on my sandwiches.”

Jenna stared at the rat.

“Just slow...down...a bit,” he pleaded.

“Whoa, Thunder,” said Jenna, reining the horse in. “Slow down, boy.” Thunder slowed to a trot.

“Ta. That's better.” Still clinging tightly to the saddle, the rat hauled

himself to a sitting position. “I’m not a natural horse rat,” he said, “though I suppose they’re better than donkeys. Don’t like donkeys. Or their owners. Mad as snakes the lot of them. Don’t get me wrong—I don’t mean that about horses. Or their owners. Perfectly sane. Most of ’em at any rate, although I must say I have known some that—”

Suddenly Jenna remembered who the rat was. “Message Rat!” she gasped. “You’re the Message Rat. The one we rescued from Mad Jack and his donkey.”

“Got it in one,” grinned the rat. “Spot on. But yours truly is no longer a Message Rat—had a bit of an argy-bargy with the Rat Office in the bad old days. Ended up in a cage under the floor for weeks. Not nice. Not fun. Got rescued and retrained with the”—the rat stopped and looked around as if to check whether anyone else might be listening—“Secret Rat Service,” he whispered.

“The what?” asked Jenna.

The rat tapped the side of his nose knowingly. “Very hush-hush—know what I mean? Least said, soonest mended and all that.”

“Oh,” said Jenna, who did not have the faintest idea what the rat meant but did not want to get into a conversation about it just then. “Yes, of course.”

“Best thing I ever did,” said the rat. “Just finished my training last week in fact. And then, blow me down, my first mission is for the ExtraOrdinary. Quite a coup, I can tell you. It impressed the lads on the course.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” said Jenna. “So what’s this mission, then?”

“Find and return. Priority number one.”

“Ah. So who do you have to find and return?”

“You,” said Stanley with a grin.

THE SHEEPLANDS

Dawn was breaking when *Thunder*'s hooves slipped and slid around the last bend of a shale-covered footpath, and Jenna saw to her delight that at long last they had reached the end of the Badlands. Stanley saw nothing. The rat was clinging to the edge of the saddle with his eyes tightly closed, convinced that any minute now all three of them would be plunging over the edge of the path to the rocks below.

Jenna stopped for a moment and gazed out across the wide flat fields of the Sheeplands, which were spread out before them. It was beautiful, and it reminded her of the first morning she had woken up at Aunt Zelda's and sat on the doorstep watching and listening to the Marsh. Far away on the horizon a brilliant band of pink clouds showed where the sun was rising, while the fields themselves were still shrouded with the soft gray light of early dawn. Pockets of mist lay over the water channels and the marshy parts of the fields, and a peaceful silence filled the air.

"We've done it, *Thunder*," Jenna said with a laugh, patting the horse's neck. "We've done it, boy."

The horse shook his head and snorted as he breathed in the salty air that was blowing in from the sea on the other side of the Sheeplands. Jenna led *Thunder* down onto a wide grassy track and then let the horse loose to graze

on the springy grass, while Stanley lay sprawled across the saddle, snoring loudly, having at last fallen into an exhausted sleep.

Jenna sat on the edge of the track and leaned back against the foot of the slate cliff. She felt ravenous. She rummaged through Simon's saddlebag and found a stale loaf, a small box of dried fruits and a rather battered and bruised apple. Jenna ate the lot and washed it down with a drink from an ice-cold spring that bubbled at the base of the cliff. Then she sat and gazed at the mist, which was slowly disappearing to reveal the round woolly shapes of grazing sheep dotted across the pastures.

The peaceful silence, broken only by the steady munching of the horse and the occasional cry of a lone marsh bird, made Jenna feel very drowsy. She tried to fight the urge to fall asleep, but it was impossible. A few moments later, she was curled up in Lucy's cloak, deep in a dreamless sleep.

At the very moment Jenna fell asleep, Simon awoke. He sat up in his bed, aching all over and feeling irritable. He was not sure why. And then he remembered. Jenna. He had snatched Jenna. He had *done* it—done what had been asked of him. His Master, Simon thought as he got out of bed, would be pleased. But Simon had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach that would not go away. For now he had the second part of his task to fulfill. He had to take Jenna down to the Magog lair. He wandered into the Observatory and noticed that Sleuth was not at its post guarding his bedroom door.

“Sleuth!” Simon yelled angrily, expecting the ball to come bouncing over to him. “*Sleuth!*” There was no response. Feeling even more irritable, Simon padded across the cold and clammy slate in his bare feet to fix a glass of **Nekawa** to settle his nerves. Carefully, he poured a muddy brown liquid with tendrils of floating mold into a tall glass, cracked a raw egg into it and gulped it down. It tasted foul.

Feeling more awake, Simon looked around the slate chamber to see where Sleuth had gone. Sleuth would regret leaving its post when Simon found it, he'd make sure of that—

“What the—*what's going on?*” Simon raced over to the cell door. The Jenna-sized slab of chocolate lay flat on the floor, and Simon did not need to open the cell to know that he would not find Jenna inside. But he opened it anyway, angrily throwing the door back so that it hit the wall with a violent bang and promptly shattered into thousands of pieces of the very best

chocolate.

Simon swore. All his hopes vanished at the sight of the empty cell. He threw himself to the floor and had a few minutes of what Sarah Heap used to call “tantrum time” before he finally got up from the floor and began to think again. Jenna couldn’t have got far. He would send Sleuth after her with a **Tag**.

“Sleuth!” Simon yelled furiously at the top of his voice. “Sleuth! If you don’t come out right now you will be sorry. *Extremely* sorry!”

There was no response. Simon stood in the silent Observatory and smiled to himself. Now he knew what had happened: Jenna had taken Sleuth with her. The silly kid had thought that Sleuth was just a handy light. He’d find them both down in the Burrow. Simon’s musings were interrupted by a strange sound coming from the Glo Grub Tub. He went over and found the lid was locked. That was odd—he couldn’t remember locking the Tub; in fact he never bothered to lock the Glo Grubs—they were all too scared to even try to escape. So what had he done with the key? And what was that noise? Simon put his ear to the Tub and heard the unmistakable sound of bouncing. *Bouncing?* Sleuth!

After giving up the search for the key, Simon took a crowbar to the lid and levered it off. Sleuth shot out like a cork from a bottle, showering Simon with hundreds of sticky Glo Grubs.

“Right!” yelled Simon. “That’s it! She’s in for it now. **Tag** on Jenna, Sleuth. Go!” Simon hurled the sticky green ball across the Observatory and followed it as it bounced past the skull, through the archway and shot off on the long descent down the steps. Sleuth and Simon reached the bottom of the steps, skidded on the Magog slime and raced along the passage that led to the old Wurm Chamber.

“She’ll be down here, Sleuth,” Simon puffed as they neared the Wurm Chamber. “Down here, scared out of her wits. Or maybe she’s done me a favor and found herself a nice Magog. Save me a lot of trouble that would, Sleuth. Hey—*careful*, you stupid ball.” Simon ducked to avoid Sleuth as the ball suddenly bounced back at him. “Just get in there, will you?” he shouted. “This is no time to be playing games.” The ball tried again but bounced back and hit Simon on the nose. Furious, Simon snatched up the ball and strode into the Wurm Chamber—straight into the thick slimy hide of a Land Wurm.

Simon recoiled in shock. What had happened? How on earth had the Land Wurm got in? And then a terrible thought struck Simon.

“My horse!” he screamed. “It’s eaten my horse!”

Jenna woke with a start from a bad dream. She sat up awkwardly, feeling cold and damp, to find she was surrounded by a circle of curious sheep, lazily chewing the grass around her. Jenna stood and stretched. She had wasted enough time asleep; she and Thunder had to get moving and somehow Jenna had to get to Aunt Zelda’s. She climbed into the saddle while Stanley snored on.

“Stanley,” said Jenna, shaking the rat awake.

“Wherrr...?” mumbled the rat, half opening his eyes and gazing blearily at Jenna.

“Stanley, I want you to take a message to Aunt Zelda. You know where she lives and—”

Stanley raised a paw in protest. “Let me stop you right there,” he said. “Just so that we understand each other, I do not take messages anymore. Absolutely, no way, do I perform the duties of a Message Rat. My license was revoked after that nasty business with the ExtraOrdinary, and I have positively no wish to venture into the Message Rat area of operations again. Ever. No, *sir*. I mean *Madam*.”

“But it’s MidSummer Day tomorrow, Stanley, and I—” protested Jenna.

“And, if you think I am going out onto those wretched Marshes again you are sadly mistaken. It was a miracle I survived the last journey what with the Marsh Python eyeing me up for supper and those vicious Brownies with their little teeth snap, snap, snapping at my feet, not to mention that moaning-minnie of a Marsh Moaner following me, wailing in my ear and driving me *crazy*. Ghastly place. Why a cultured young person like yourself wants to set foot in that pestilential pit again is beyond me. If you take my advice I’d—”

“So that’s a ‘no’ then, is it?” Jenna sighed.

“Yes. I mean no. I mean *yes* it’s a ‘*no*.’” The rat sat up in the saddle and looked around him. “It’s nice here, isn’t it?” he said. “Came here on holiday with my ma when I was a little lad. We had some relations who lived in the ditches that run out of the Marshes to the sea. Lovely sand dunes down on the beach and convenient for the Port if you hitched a ride on a donkey cart”—

Stanley shivered—“or preferably a fast horse. We had some good times hanging out down at the Port when I was a teenager. Lots of rats there. You wouldn’t believe the things that went on. I remember—”

“Stanley,” said Jenna, an idea forming in her mind. “Does that mean you know the way to the Port?”

“Of course,” said Stanley indignantly. “As a member of the Secret Rat Service, you can rely on me to get you anywhere. I am as good as a map. Better than a map, in fact. I have it all in my head, see”—the rat tapped the side of his head—“I can go anywhere, I can.”

“Apart from the Marram Marshes,” observed Jenna.

“Yes. Well. The Special Marsh Rats do that. More fool, them. Like I said, I am not setting foot in that noxious swamp ever again.”

“Ah, well. Walk on,” said Jenna, giving Thunder a gentle nudge with her heels.

“Very well then,” said Stanley, “if you feel like that about it.” The rat jumped from the saddle and landed a little awkwardly on the grass.

Jenna stopped the horse.

“Stanley, what *are* you doing?” she asked.

“What you told me to do,” said Stanley grumpily. “I’m walking.”

Jenna laughed. “I was talking to the *horse*, silly. Get back up here.”

“Oh. Thought you were cross I wouldn’t take you through the Marshes.”

“Don’t be daft, Stanley. Just get back on the horse and show me the way to the Port. I can remember the way to Aunt Zelda’s from there.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. *Please*, Stanley.”

Stanley took a running jump, leaped into the air and landed lightly behind Jenna.

It was a beautiful summer’s morning. The Sheeplands stretched before

them, and on the horizon in the far distance Jenna could see the thin, brilliant white line of the sea glinting as the early-morning sunlight glanced off the water.

A firm, gravelly track took Thunder, Jenna and Stanley across the pastures, leading them along invisible boundaries, past lambing pens and the occasional reed bed and over wide plank bridges that crossed the water channels running from the Marshes on their way to the sea. Jenna let the horse amble slowly along and stop whenever he wanted to snatch at a tasty-looking tuft of grass and munch on it as he went. As the heat of the sun began to burn off the last of the mist, which still hung over the water channels, Jenna felt the dampness in her clothes evaporate, and at last she began to feel warm.

But as the chill from the Badlands left her, Jenna started to think more clearly. And the first thing she thought about was Simon. What was he doing now? Anxiously, Jenna glanced behind her. The steep black rock of the slate quarries rose from the flat Sheeplands like a cliff from the sea; above it lay the low gray cloud, casting a deep shadow. The Badlands were still too close for Jenna's liking; she needed to put some distance between them.

"Gee up, Thunder," said Jenna, urging the horse into a brisk walk and resisting taking him into a trot. She knew Thunder must be tired and they still had a long day's ride to the Port ahead of them. Behind her the rat sat up perkily on the horse's back, hanging on to the saddle with one paw with the air of a seasoned rider. Jenna turned around again and checked the Badlands. Suddenly she had an uncomfortable feeling that her escape had been discovered.

22

CAMP HEAP



The next morning in the Forest found Nicko and Septimus standing at Grandpa Benji’s feet. Or foot. The bright summer sun shone through their grandfather’s leaves and cast a pale green light on the Forest floor. And on the chewed remains of Septimus’s backpack.

“My whole kit—gone,” Septimus complained. “They’ve eaten everything.”

“Everything except for us,” Nicko pointed out, “which is probably the most important thing.”

Septimus was not listening. He was on his hands and knees examining the ground at the foot of the tree.

“I wouldn’t run my hands through those leaves like that,” said Nicko with a grimace.

“Why not? I’m looking for something.”

“Use your head, Sep. Loads of wolverines. Hanging around waiting for supper. Getting excited. Eating **Mint Blasts**. So what do you *think* they do?”

“It must be here. They can’t have eaten *that*...I dunno, Nik, what do they

do?”

“Poo.”

“Eurgh!” Septimus jumped to his feet.

“And then they hide it under the leaves.”

“Eurgh, no!” Septimus wiped his hands on his tunic, stepped back and trod on what he was looking for. “Found it! It’s here. Oh, *fantastic*.”

“What?” asked Nicko, curious. “What’s so important?”

Septimus held up the iridescent green rock that he had so carefully packed in his backpack.

“Oh,” said Nicko, suddenly reminded of why they were in the middle of the Forest. “I see.”

“Jenna gave it to me.”

“I know. I remember.”

They were both silent for a moment and Septimus stared intently at the rock. Then suddenly he burst out, “Oh, I hate wolverines! Look what they’ve done. They cracked it.” Septimus cradled the rock in his hands and showed it to Nicko. “Look,” he said, “there.” A small jagged crack ran across the widest part of the rock.

“Well, it could be worse, Sep,” said Nicko. “It’s not broken. I suppose one of the wolverines must have crunched it or something. I bet it didn’t do its teeth much good.”

“I hope not. I hope they all fell out,” said Septimus as he put the rock into the pouch that hung from his Apprentice belt.

It took Septimus and Nicko a while to say good-bye to their grandfather, and many promises to bring the rest of the family to visit him, but at last they set off through the Forest in search of the boys’ camp.

Sometime later, just as Septimus’s ankle was beginning to throb painfully and he was wondering if they were lost again, they came across a wide path.

“I know where we are!” said Nicko triumphantly.

“Really?” There was some doubt in Septimus’s tone.

“Really. Just follow me, Sep.”

“Now when did I hear that before?” said Septimus.

“Don’t be mean,” said Nicko sheepishly. “Look—down there—can you see the camp?”

Nicko and Septimus were standing at the top of a small incline. The path dropped away in front of them, winding between the trees and leading to a small clearing. A thin line of smoke rose slowly into the still, early-morning air, and, as Septimus watched, the gangly figure of one of his brothers stepped out from what looked like a large pile of leaves and stretched and yawned in the warm sun.

“Erik!” yelled Nicko. “Hey, Erik!”

The figure looked up, bleary eyed.

“C’mon, Sep,” said Nicko, “time to meet the rest of us.”

Ten minutes later, Septimus found himself sitting alone by the campfire pit. Almost as soon as Nicko had introduced him to Sam, Jo-Jo, Edd and Erik with the air of a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat, they had all disappeared, taking Nicko with them. They had told Septimus they were going to inspect the nets that Sam had laid out in the river to catch the fish coming in on the morning tide. And Septimus may as well make himself useful and stay and keep watch over the fire, which was kept burning night and day.

Septimus stared at the fire and wondered if all family reunions were like this. Although he had been very nervous about meeting the rest of his brothers, he had thought that they might have been pleased to see him; but the boys had just stared at him as though he were a frog in a jar. And then he had realized that they were not even staring at him but at his smart green cloak and tunic, and at his silver ExtraOrdinary Apprentice belt, which had glinted embarrassingly in the sun and made him feel as though he was showing off. He had quickly pulled his cloak around him to hide it, but then, Septimus

thought glumly, that had made him look stupid—like he was bothered about how he looked. Or else it had made him look like a wimp who felt cold...or scared, or.... And then, as he had stood there wrapped in his cloak his brothers had, one by one, managed a grunt that Septimus had taken as a “hello,” although it could just as easily have been “dillop.” In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he was sure that was what they had said. Septimus put his head in his hands, thinking what a complete idiot his brothers must have thought he was.

As Septimus sat staring into the fire, wondering why he had let Nicko bring him here when he should be looking for Jenna, he was aware of someone joining him. He turned to see one of his brothers—but which one? Septimus had been too busy feeling embarrassed to be sure who was who.

“Hi,” said the boy, poking at the fire with a stick.

“Hi,” said Septimus, wishing he had a stick too.

“You the one that was dead then?” asked the brother.

“What?”

“Yeah. Dead. I remember Mum talking about you sometimes to Dad when she thought we weren’t listening. You were dead. But you weren’t. Weird.” The brother poked the fire some more.

“Weird,” agreed Septimus. He stole a sideways glance at the boy. It wasn’t Sam, that was for sure. Sam, who was not much younger than Simon, was a man now, with a pale fuzz on his face and a deep voice. And Edd and Erik, he remembered noticing, both wore their hair in long matted strands, twisted like rope. Septimus reckoned it had to be Jo-Jo. A little older than Nicko and a little taller too, but much thinner, with matted wild Heap hair, all straw-colored curls, which was kept in place by an intricately plaited band of different-colored strips of leather worn around his head. The boy caught Septimus’s glance.

“Jo-Jo,” he said with a grin. “That’s me.”

“Hello,” said Septimus, picking up a nearby stick and poking it at the fire.

Jo-Jo stood and stretched. “You watch the fire and I’ll go sort the fish. Sam got a good catch last night. And Marissa brought some bread over this morning.”

“Marissa?” asked Septimus.

“Oh, she’s one of the Wendrons. You know, Wendron Witches. She made me this.” Jo-Jo proudly touched the leather band that he wore around his head.

Sometime later Septimus was sitting by the fire holding a fish on a stick over the low flames. The flames spit and crackled as the fish cooked. Each cooked fish was divided into six pieces by Sam, then put on a chunk of Marissa’s bread and passed around the boys. It was the best thing that Septimus had ever tasted. As they sat eating in companionable silence, Septimus at last began to relax and enjoy being with his brothers. No one except for Jo-Jo had said anything to him, but they had given him a job to do—he was, it seemed, the cook for the day. As each fish was eaten, Sam passed him the next one to hold over the fire, and soon Septimus felt as though he had spent all his life cooking fish around a campfire with his brothers. In fact, if it hadn’t been for the nagging worry about Jenna in the back of his mind, everything would have been perfect.

It was after they had finished the fish that Nicko at last told his brothers about Jenna and Simon.

“Si—kidnap Jenna?” Sam had said. “I don’t think so. I mean, just because he and Dad had a disagreement at Aunt Zelda’s about not being the Apprentice...well, I don’t see why you think he’s suddenly gone bad.”

“Yeah,” agreed Edd and Erik.

“Though he did really want to be a proper Apprentice, didn’t he?” said Edd after a few minutes’ thought.

“Yeah,” said Erik. “He used to go on about it all the time. It got really boring.”

“He told me once that the reason Marcia Overstrand didn’t have an Apprentice was because she was waiting for him,” Jo-Jo said. “I told him he was crazy. Then he kicked me.”

“But he used to help Jenna with her homework an’ everything,” said Sam. “He was much nicer to her than he was to any of us. So why would he suddenly kidnap her? Doesn’t make sense.”

Nicko felt as frustrated as Septimus had that no one would believe that Simon had snatched Jenna.

There was a grumpy silence around the fire as all six brothers stared at the flames and the remains of fish bones scattered in the ashes. Soon Septimus could stand it no longer. “Where’s Wolf Boy?” he asked.

“Asleep,” said Jo-Jo. “Doesn’t wake up till it’s nearly dark. Like the wolverines.”

“I need to talk to him,” Septimus persisted.

Jo-Jo snorted. “Well, he won’t talk back. Doesn’t say anything. What do you want to talk to him for?”

“We need his help,” said Nicko. “I told Sep he would be able to track down Jenna.”

“Well, that’s his bender over there.” Jo-Jo pointed to what looked like a large pile of leaves.

“C’mon, Sep. Let’s go and wake him up,” said Nicko, getting up from the fire. “The thing is, Sep,” said Nicko in a low voice, as they walked over to Wolf Boy’s bender, “Sam and the lads have kind of slowed down since they’ve been living here. They don’t say much, which is the Forest way, and they don’t do anything in a hurry. They don’t really bother about the outside world; they’re almost like Forest creatures now. So if you want anything done—like getting hold of Wolf Boy—you have to do it yourself.”

Septimus nodded. Like Nicko he was used to Castle living, used to having a job to do and people around him who expected him to do it. Forest living, he thought, would drive him crazy.

Septimus and Nicko made their way across the camp while their brothers lay around the fire, idly throwing sticks and leaves into it and watching the flames flare briefly. Camp Heap was not very big; it consisted of four rough shelters in a small clearing, set around the central fire pit. The shelters, which the boys called benders, were made from long thin branches of willow cut down by the river and then bent to form hoops and stuck into the ground. Once they were in the ground, the willow hoops continued growing, and, as it was summer, they had a full crop of leaves of their own. The boys had also woven in more branches, long grasses and anything else they could find. Inside the benders they slept on thick piles of leaves, which were covered

with rough woven blankets that Galen, the Physik Woman and Sarah Heap's old teacher who lived in a nearby tree house, had given them when they first set up the camp. These had now been supplemented with furs and brightly colored soft blankets made for them by the local young Wendron Witches.

Sam's bender was the biggest and the most solidly built. Edd and Erik shared a large, ramshackle heap and Jo-Jo had a neat tepee-like structure covered with beautifully plaited grasses that Marissa had helped him build.

Wolf Boy's bender looked like a pile of leaves; it was right on the edge of the camp, facing into the Forest. Nicko and Septimus had already walked around it twice, looking for an entrance, when suddenly Septimus noticed a bright pair of brown eyes staring at him from the leaves.

"Oh!" he gasped, and an odd shiver ran through him.

"Hey, Sep, you look like you've seen a ghost." Nicko laughed. "It's only Wolf Boy. He does that all the time. Never lets you see him first. Probably been watching us ever since we arrived."

Septimus looked pale. His heart was pounding; Wolf Boy's eyes staring at him had spooked him almost as much as the wolverines had the night before.

"Yeah," he mumbled, lapsing into Forest talk.

Suddenly the pile of leaves gave a lurch and a small wiry figure emerged, covered in dirt and bits of twig. Wolf Boy stood tensed like a runner waiting to start a race, glancing about. Nicko and Septimus instinctively stepped out of his territory.

"Don't look straight at him. Not to begin with. He gets scared," Nicko muttered under his breath.

Septimus could not help but steal a brief glance, and to his relief, Wolf Boy looked much more like a boy than a wolf. And he didn't even smell too bad either, more like damp earth than a wolverine. Wolf Boy was definitely human. He wore a short tunic of indeterminate color, which was tied around his waist with an old leather belt, and he had long, brown, matted hair, Forest style. His bright brown eyes, once they had finished checking out his surroundings, turned their attention to Nicko and Septimus—particularly to Septimus, who he looked up and down with a faintly puzzled air. Septimus felt the old embarrassment about his fancy clothes returning and, not for the first time, wished he had taken the time to roll in mud before coming to Camp

Heap.

“Hi,” said Nicko after a while. “You okay?”

Wolf Boy nodded, still staring at Septimus.

“We’ve come to ask you to help us,” said Nicko in a slow, calm voice.

Wolf Boy at last took his gaze off Septimus and regarded Nicko with a solemn stare.

“We need you to help us find someone. Someone who has been taken away.”

Wolf Boy showed no reaction.

“You understand?” asked Nicko. “It’s really important. She’s our sister. She’s been kidnapped.”

Wolf Boy’s eyes widened briefly in surprise. Now it was Nicko and Septimus who were doing the staring, waiting for a response.

At last it came. Slowly, very slowly, Wolf Boy nodded.

WOLF BOY



Y*ou ought* to talk to Morwenna before you go,” Jo-Jo told Septimus and Nicko. They were back at the campfire saying good-bye to Sam, Jo-Jo, Edd and Erik. Wolf Boy stood behind them, staring at Septimus, who shifted uncomfortably. He always knew when someone was watching him.

“Morwenna’s scary,” said Nicko. “What do we want to talk to her for, anyway?”

Jo-Jo heaved himself to his feet while the others lay on their backs, idly staring up at the small patch of brilliant blue sky, which shone through the leaves.

“She’s the Witch Mother,” said Jo-Jo. “She knows everything. I’ll bet you she’ll know where Jenna has gone.”

“Perhaps we ought to see her,” said Septimus. “Dad says that Morwenna has the gift of second sight.”

“She’s still scary,” said Nicko, “and she always hugs you like she’s going to squash you flat.”

“C’mon,” said Jo-Jo, “I’ll take you there. It’s on your way anyway.”

A mocking chorus started up from the three boys lying around the fire.

“He’s going to see Mar-iiii-ssa, he’s going to see Mar-iiiissa, he’s going to see—”

“Oh, shut up,” growled Jo-Jo. He stormed out of the clearing and headed into the trees.

“Bye then,” said Nicko to the remaining Heaps.

“Bye.”

“Yeah.”

“See ya.”

“Um. ’Bye,” said Septimus.

“Yeah.”

“Bye.”

“See ya.”

Nicko and Septimus caught up with Jo-Jo, who was waiting for them behind a tree, out of sight of his brothers. They set off together, with Wolf Boy following noiselessly as they made their way through the trees. Jo-Jo knew the way well; he took them along a narrow but well-worn path that, after about half an hour’s walking, brought them to the Wendron Witches’ Summer Circle.

The Summer Circle consisted of a circle of tepees, constructed just like Jo-Jo’s. They were perched on the top of the only hill in the entire Forest. It was a small hill and did not even reach above the canopy of the Forest itself, but it was light and airy and gave the witches a good view of all that went on around them.

As the four boys followed the footpath that spiraled around the hill, taking them up toward the tepees, a steady hum of purposeful chatter drifted down to them. Suddenly a voice called out, “Joby-Jo! Hello!”

“Marissa!” Jo-Jo called back, smiling broadly.

“*Joby-Jo*—is that what she calls you?” snorted Nicko, as a tall girl with long brown hair appeared at the top of the hill, waving and laughing.

“So?” asked Jo-Jo. “So what if she does?”

“So *nothing*. Just asked.” Nicko smirked.

Marissa came running down the hill to meet them.

“Marissa,” said Jo-Jo, “these are my brothers Nicko and Septimus.”

“What—*more* brothers, Joby?” Marissa laughed. “How many brothers do you need?”

“Don’t need any more, that’s for sure. I’ve brought them to see Morwenna.”

“Good. She’s expecting you. I’ll take you to her. She’s up in the Circle.”

Morwenna Mould, Witch Mother of the Wendron Witch Forest Coven, was sitting on a rug at the entrance of the smartest tepee in the Circle. She was a large, impressive woman and she wore a capacious green summer tunic, which was tied around the middle with a white sash. Her long graying hair was held back with a green leather headband, and her piercing witch-blue eyes watched Wolf Boy, Jo-Jo, Nicko and Septimus—particularly Septimus—make their way across the Circle to her tepee.

“Thank you, Marissa dear,” said Morwenna, then turned and smiled at the boys. “Welcome to the Forest, Septimus, Nicko. I have heard so much about you both from your father, my dear Silas. And you both look so much like him. In fact wherever I go in the Forest now I seem to bump into small—and indeed, some not so small anymore—versions of Silas. And all with the same wonderful green eyes too. Now, boys, sit down beside me for a few minutes. I won’t keep you long, for you have a hazardous journey before you.”

Nicko shot Septimus a glance, which said, *What does she mean, hazardous?*

Septimus raised his eyebrows at Nicko but kept his gaze fixed on Morwenna. Septimus liked the Witch Mother, but he knew that underneath Morwenna's motherly appearance something unpredictable and powerful lurked. Until Morwenna had taken over the Forest Coven, the Wendron Witches had been greatly feared by the inhabitants of the Castle. But since Morwenna had become Witch Mother, the Wendron Witches had changed, although no one knew why—except for Silas Heap. Silas Heap knew it because one night many years ago, when he was a young man with only one baby son, and Morwenna was a beautiful young witch, Silas had rescued Morwenna from a pack of wolverines. In return Morwenna had offered him anything he wanted and, to her disappointment, he had asked that the Wendron Witches stop preying on the inhabitants of the Castle. A few years later, when Morwenna Mould became Witch Mother, she had kept her promise—but no one was sure how long the apparent truce would last, and it was still considered wise not to offend the Forest Coven.

Morwenna began to speak in a low, musical voice, and everyone paid attention. “You are going on a long journey and I foresee some troubles ahead,” she said. “There are three things you must know. The first is that you will search for, and indeed find, your sister in the Port. The second is that a tall dark man, a stranger to some but not to all, will also search for your sister in the Port.” Morwenna paused. The boys waited politely for her to tell them the third thing they must know, but Morwenna stayed silent, lost in thought and gazing at the changing patterns of the leaves against the sky.

Eventually Septimus said, “Excuse me, Witch Mother, but what is the third thing we must know?”

“What?” Morwenna snapped herself out of her reverie. “The third thing? Oh, yes—don't go to the circus.”

Nicko burst out laughing. Septimus nudged him urgently and said, “Nik—don't be rude. It's not funny.”

“Yes...it is,” spluttered Nicko under his breath, his shoulders shaking. He rolled onto the grass and lay on his stomach with his hands over his head, emitting loud snorting noises.

“I'm sorry about my brother, Witch Mother,” said Septimus, worried. “He nearly got eaten by a wolverine last night and it has affected his mind.” Septimus aimed a kick in Nicko's direction. It had no effect. Nicko was beside himself, snorting like a pig in a trough.

Morwenna smiled. “Do not worry, Septimus, I am used to the antics of young Heaps now. Maybe before your brothers had come to live in our Forest I would not have understood, but now, believe me, nothing surprises me where a Heap is concerned. They are their father’s sons. And Nicko is only laughing. There is no harm in laughter.”

Morwenna stood up. Septimus, Jo-Jo, Marissa and Wolf Boy respectfully leaped to their feet. Nicko still lay on the grass, shoulders shaking.

“Well, boys,” Morwenna said, “we will meet again.” She reached into her pocket and brought out a small bundle of soft leaves, which she pressed into Septimus’s hand. “These will take away your bruise from the fall you had last night,” she said to him, “and the swelling from your ankle.”

“Thank you, Witch Mother,” Septimus said. He hauled Nicko to his feet. Nicko’s eyes were streaming, and he was weak with laughter. “I will take my brother away now, Witch Mother. I am sorry for his rudeness. Thank you for your advice.”

“Heed it well, Septimus, and you will find what you are looking for.” Morwenna smiled. “Farewell, boys. I wish you good speed on your journey.” She turned and disappeared into the tepee.

Nicko made a beeline for the edge of the Circle and threw himself to the ground. Then he rolled over and over, hurtling down the grassy slope, still shaking with laughter. A moment later Septimus joined him.

“Nicko,” he chided, “you just do *not* laugh at a Wendron Witch Mother. Ever.”

“I—I’m sorry, Sep,” spluttered Nicko. “It was just...it was all so serious...and *witchy*...and we all sat *waiting* and...and I thought the third thing would be something...*really* important...and then she said...she said—”

“*Don’t go to the circus!*” Septimus gave in and, yelling with laughter, he rolled down to the bottom of the hill with Nicko.

“You were really disrespectful to the Witch Mother,” said Jo-Jo grumpily when he and Wolf Boy joined them at the bottom of the hill. “Marissa is mad. She says I shouldn’t have brought you.”

“Oh, don’t—*hic!*—be silly, Jo-Jo,” said Nicko, who had stopped laughing but now had the hiccups.

“Are you going now?” Jo-Jo asked in a tone of voice that meant he hoped they were. “I’ll take you to the boat.”

Nicko and Septimus nodded. They both wanted to be out of the Forest and on their way to find Jenna before the day drew on.

Jo-Jo glanced in Wolf Boy’s direction. “You still taking him with you—or is he staying here?”

Septimus looked at Wolf Boy only to meet his deep brown eyes staring at him again. He wished he would stop staring like that. Surely even Wolf Boy should have got used to the Apprentice robes by now. They weren’t *that* weird, were they?

“He’s staying here,” said Septimus.

“But, Sep, we need him. He’s the reason we came here,” said Nicko. “We’ll never find Jenna without him now. The trail is over a day old. Only Wolf Boy can pick up a trail that cold.”

“But we know where Jenna is now,” said Septimus. “She’s in the Port.”

Nicko was silent for a moment.

“You didn’t believe that crazy witch, did you?” he asked, amazed.

“Nicko! She’s not crazy.”

“She’s a witch though. And worse than that, she’s a Wendron Witch. They used to kidnap babies. And if the baby was a boy they’d leave him out for the wolverines. And if you got lost in the Forest and asked them the way, you’d end up in a Witch Pit. Bo Tenderfoot’s aunt spent two weeks in a Witch Pit and she—”

“Bo *who*?”

“Jenna’s best friend. You remember. Nice kid with carrot hair.”

“Look, Nik, concentrate. We want to find Jenna. Remember? That’s why we’re here. And I believe Morwenna. Even Marcia says Morwenna has second sight, and Marcia thinks witches are a waste of space. I think Jenna is in the Port.”

“Don’t know why she’d go there,” grumbled Nicko. “It’s a dump.”

“Simon must have taken her there—to hand her over to that stranger you said was asking about her and that Morwenna said was looking for her. We’ve got to get there as soon as we can.”

“Okay.” Nicko sighed. “We’ll go to the Port.”

Jo-Jo led the way down the beach where the boat was moored, and, despite what Septimus had said, Wolf Boy still followed them. Then, when Nicko had untied the boat and Jo-Jo was pushing them off the shingle into the deeper water, Wolf Boy suddenly took a flying leap and landed in the boat, just as the current was taking it out into the middle of the river.

“Hey!” yelled Nicko as the boat rocked precariously. “What d’you think you’re doing?” Wolf Boy crouched on the deck like a wild animal and stared at Septimus until Septimus could stand it no longer.

“Stop staring at me!” he yelled.

Wolf Boy’s brown eyes did not flicker. They looked at Septimus closely until Septimus felt a strange shiver of recognition pass through him. He had been here before. On a boat. On the river. By the Forest. With Wolf Boy.

Suddenly he felt cold. He squatted down in the boat next to Wolf Boy, staring at him in return. “Four-oh-nine?” Septimus whispered.

Wolf Boy nodded and spoke for the first time in four years.

“You.” He grinned. “Four-one-two.”

They sailed down the river on the outgoing tide. Wolf Boy and Septimus sat on the deck of the boat with their arms around each other’s shoulders smiling broadly.

“He reminds me of you when we found you,” mused Nicko. “I remember you never said a word. Just stared at us as if we were all mad. It gave me the creeps.”

“Oh,” said Septimus. “Sorry.”

“We didn’t mind. Not really. We liked you. Just couldn’t understand why

you didn't speak. But it must be something to do with the Army. Must have been *horrible*."

"It was," said Wolf Boy very slowly, getting used to the sound of his own voice. "You couldn't trust anyone. But I trusted 412."

A silence fell in the boat. Nicko busied himself adjusting the sails and Septimus stared at the river. After a while Septimus said to Wolf Boy, "I tried to get them to go back for you. I really did. But they wouldn't. They *wouldn't*. The Leader Cadet laughed and said—what did we expect? It was a Do-or-Die. And you were the first Die. He was really excited about that. I tried to jump in after you but the Leader Cadet knocked me out. I came to when the boat landed and they threw me in the water. I'm sorry. I should have saved you."

Wolf Boy said nothing for a while. And then he said, "No, I should have saved *you*. I escaped the Army and you didn't. I swam ashore and hid. The next morning I saw you in the Forest. But I was afraid of being seen, so I stayed hidden. I should have saved you and we could have both been free. Not just me."

"It doesn't matter," said Septimus. "I would never have found out who I was if you had. And we're both free now."

"Free..." murmured Wolf Boy, gazing dreamily over the side of the boat as it cut through the calm green water, heading for the Port.

24

THE PORT



It had been a long, hot day. Jenna, Stanley and Thunder were making their way along the beach. The sea was calm and sparkled a brilliant blue in the sunlight, and the sand dunes stretched for mile after mile. Jenna had just given Thunder the last of the water from the bottles she had filled from the spring that morning. She tipped the bottle to give herself and Stanley a drink and discovered that there was nothing left but a hot trickle of rusty water that tasted of metal. Irritably she shoved the bottle back into the saddlebag and wondered, not for the first time, if Stanley's idea of reaching the Port by riding along the beach had been such a good one.

Jenna had soon discovered that it was very tiring for the horse to walk along soft sand. She had taken Thunder down to the tide line where he could walk on the firm sand left by the receding tide, but as the afternoon wore on the tide came in. Now the sea was high on the beach and Thunder was plowing laboriously through the soft dry sand that spilled from the sand dunes.

The sun was low on the horizon when at last Thunder wearily plodded around the foot of the final sand dune, and to her delight, Jenna could see the

Port in the distance, silhouetted against the reddening sky. Jenna felt tired and sunburned, but she kept up a stream of encouraging words to Thunder, urging the heavy-footed horse on to their destination.

Stanley, however, was wide awake. “I always get excited when I first see the Port,” he declared, sitting up in the saddle behind Jenna and looking around brightly. “So many things to do, so many rats to see. Not this time, of course. Got a job to do this time. Who’d have thought it, eh? Secret Rat on a Find and Return mission for *royalty*. What a start to my new career. That’ll show Dawnie. And her stupid sister. Huh!”

“Dawnie?” asked Jenna, leaning forward and patting Thunder’s neck.

“My missus. As was. She’s living with her sister, Mabel, now. And between you and me she’s beginning to regret it. Ha! Mabel is not the easiest rat to live with. In fact she’s a downright impossible rat to live with, if you ask me.” Stanley shot a glance at Jenna, wondering whether a few stories about Mabel’s shortcomings would go down well and decided against it. Jenna looked tired and preoccupied. “Not long to the Port now,” he said assuringly.

“Good,” Jenna answered, sounding more confident than she felt. The rapidly lengthening shadows of the sand dunes and the chill breeze coming off the sea had made her realize that she had no chance of reaching Aunt Zelda’s cottage before dark. She was going to have to spend the night in the Port, but where? Jenna had heard many stories from Nicko about the Port lowlife—the smugglers and muggers, the pickpockets and cutpurses, the blaggers and baggers, all waiting to pounce on an unwary stranger as soon as night fell. What was she going to do?

“Come on, Thunder,” she said. “Let’s get there before dark.”

“No chance of that,” Stanley told her, chirpily. “Got another hour to go at least. If not more.”

“Thanks, Stanley,” muttered Jenna, glancing anxiously behind her, for she suddenly had the strangest feeling that she was being followed.

Night had fallen by the time Thunder walked along the gravelly town beach and headed up the south slipway on the outer edge of the Port. Thunder’s hooves jarred on the stone cobbles after the soft sand, and the noise made

Jenna uneasy. The outskirts of the Port were dark and eerily quiet. Tall, dilapidated warehouses lined the narrow streets and towered into the night sky, making the streets feel like deep ravines and reminding Jenna uncomfortably of the Badlands. Most of the buildings were deserted, but, as the sound of Thunder's hooves bounced off their brick walls and echoed in the streets, Jenna caught a glimpse every now and then of a figure, silhouetted in an opening high above the street, looking down at them and watching their noisy progress.

Stanley poked Jenna in the back.

"Aargh!" she screamed.

"Hey, take it easy. It's only me."

"Sorry, Stanley. I'm tired. This place is creepy. And I don't know where to stay tonight. I've never stayed here on my own before." It crossed Jenna's mind that she had never stayed *anywhere* on her own before. Ever.

"Well, why didn't you say? I thought we'd be stopping with the Chief Reeve or some such high and mightiness." Stanley sounded disappointed.

"No," mumbled Jenna.

"I'm sure he'd be only too pleased if he knew a personage of your importance was on his patch, so to speak. I'm sure he'd be honored to—"

"No, Stanley," Jenna said firmly. "I don't want *anyone* to know I'm here. I don't know who I can trust."

"Fair enough," said Stanley. "I can see that Mr. Heap has got you a bit rattled. Don't blame you. He's a nasty character. Well, in that case I suggest Florrie Bundy's place. She runs a very secluded outfit down by the docks, and there are some stables around the back for the horse. I'll take you there, if you like."

"Oh, thank you, Stanley." Jenna felt as though a weight had been lifted from her. She hadn't realized just how much she had been worrying about where to stay. Now all she wanted to do was to find a room and go to sleep.

"It's not what I'd call smart, mind," Stanley warned her. "You'll have to put up with a bit of honest dirt. Well, quite a lot of dirt, actually. And it's probably not particularly honest, if I know Florrie. But she's a good enough

soul.”

Jenna was too tired to care anymore. “Just take me there, Stanley,” she said.

Stanley guided Jenna through the warren of old warehouses until they reached the bustling dockside in the commercial part of the town. It was here that the tall ships came in after months at sea, laden with exotic herbs and spices, silks and fine woven cloths, gold and silver bullion, emeralds and rubies, and South Sea Island pearls. As Thunder approached the dockside, Jenna could see that a huge ship, with a beautifully carved prow carrying a figurehead of a striking dark-haired woman, was being unloaded. The dockside was lit with burning torches that cast long flickering shadows over the throng of sailors, porters and dockhands who were scurrying like ants going back and forth from their nest, up and down the gangplank, busy unloading the wares from the ship.

Thunder came to a halt at the edge of the busy crowd, unable to push any farther through the throng, and Jenna was forced to wait for the crowd to clear before she could go on. Fascinated by the scene before her, she sat on the horse and watched four sailors as they struggled down the gangplank with a massive golden chest. Close behind them staggered a dockhand carrying an ornate vase almost twice his height, from which Jenna could see a few gold coins spilling each time he took a step. Behind him ran a small boy, picking up the coins and gleefully stuffing them into his pockets.

When the treasures reached dry land, they were carried across the dockside, where they disappeared through the massive open doors of a cavernous, candlelit warehouse. Jenna watched the stream of riches pour into the building, and she noticed an imposing woman in a long blue tunic with the yellow braid of a Chief Customs Officer on her sleeves, standing at the door. The woman was flanked by two clerks sitting at high desks, each with an identical, rapidly lengthening, list in front of them. As every precious object came through, the bearers paused for a moment while the Customs Officer told the clerks what to note down. Occasionally a tall dark man, richly dressed in foreign-looking robes of a heavy deep red silk, interrupted her. The Customs Officer seemed somewhat impatient with the man’s interruptions and did not let him stop her flow of instructions to the clerks. Jenna guessed that the man was the ship’s owner, disputing the Officer’s assessment of his cargo.

Jenna had guessed rightly. At the Port, when a ship was finally unloaded

and all was safely stored in the bonded warehouse, one list would be given to the owner of the ship, and Alice Nettles, Chief Customs Officer to the Port, would keep the other—and the key to the warehouse—until all the duty payable had been agreed between her and the owner. And paid. This could take anywhere from a few minutes to never, depending on how desperate the owner was to get hold of his cargo. And how stubborn he was. There were half a dozen abandoned and rotting bonded warehouses, some of which Jenna had passed that evening, which still contained the disputed cargos of ships that had entered the Port many hundreds of years ago.

The flow of goods from the ship began to slow, and a steward on the dockside started paying off some of the workers. Jenna was beginning to attract a few stares now that the pace had slackened and the workers had time to look about them. From inside the warehouse the tall foreigner standing beside Alice Nettles had, to Alice's relief, taken his eyes off his incoming cargo. He had turned his attention to the small yet striking figure outside: the gold circlet around her dark hair glinting in the torchlight, her bright red tunic with its gold hem shimmering as she sat upright on a black horse, with a rich, dark blue cloak falling from her shoulders. The man muttered something to Alice Nettles. She looked surprised and nodded, not for one minute taking her attention from a large golden elephant that was being carried past her. The man left her side and moved toward the door.

Jenna, meanwhile, had become aware of the attention she was attracting from the dockhands. She quickly slipped down from Thunder and began to lead the horse through the swarm of workers, guided by Stanley, who was sitting on Thunder's head, searching for gaps in the crowd. "Left a bit. No, no, right a bit. I meant *right*. Oh, look, there's a gap there. *There*. You missed it. You'll have to go around now."

"Oh, do be quiet, Stanley," Jenna snapped. She felt suddenly uneasy—she *knew* she was being followed. All she wanted to do was get through the crush, jump back onto Thunder and ride away.

"I was only trying to help," Stanley muttered.

Jenna ignored Stanley and pushed forward with the horse. "Excuse me... sorry, can I just get through...thank you...excuse me..." She was nearly there; she could see clear space in front of her now. All she had to do was get through this group of sailors who were busy untangling a rope, and then she'd be off—so why was Thunder insisting on hanging back now, just when she needed him to go forward? "Come on, Thunder," Jenna said, irritably. "Come

on.” She felt a sudden tug on the reins and swung around to see what Thunder had caught himself on.

Jenna gasped; a large hand had grabbed hold of the reins. She looked up, expecting to see one of the sailors angry because Thunder had stepped on his rope, but instead she found herself staring at the dark-haired stranger she had seen standing beside the Customs Officer.

“Let go,” Jenna told the man, angrily. “Let go of my horse.”

The stranger kept his grip on the reins and stared intently at Jenna. “Who are you?” he asked in a low voice.

“None of your business,” said Jenna briskly, determined not to show how scared she was. “Let go of my horse.”

The man dropped his grip from the reins but he did not drop his gaze from Jenna’s face. He stared at her with an intense expression that Jenna found unsettling. Flustered, she looked away and quickly swung herself back into the saddle, kicking Thunder into a fast trot and leaving the stranger staring after her on the dockside.

“Left here. I said *left!*” shouted Stanley, hanging on tight to Thunder’s ears.

Thunder shot off to the right.

“Don’t know why I bother,” Stanley muttered. But Jenna didn’t care which way they were going. Any direction was fine, as long as it was as far away from the tall stranger as possible.

THE DOLL HOUSE



I am not lost,” said Stanley indignantly. “A member of the Secret Rat Service is *never* lost. I am merely reassessing the direction.”

“Well, get a move on and reassess a bit faster,” said Jenna, glancing along the street, “before that man from the docks catches up with us. I’m sure he followed me.”

Stanley and Jenna were in the middle of The Rope Walk, a street just off Tavern Row, in the seedier part of the Port. Jenna had dismounted from Thunder when the rat insisted that the extremely ramshackle house in front of them was Florrie Bundy’s lodging house. Unfortunately, it was not. It actually belonged to the notorious Port Witch Coven, who were most definitely not White Witches and did not take kindly to a rat banging on their door late at night. Stanley had narrowly avoided becoming a toad. It was only Jenna’s speedy intervention with a silver half-crown—which she gave the witch to buy back the toad spell—that had saved him.

“I don’t understand it,” Stanley muttered a little shakily, running his paws over his face just to make sure he still had rat fur and not toad warts. “I was *sure* that was Florrie’s place.”

“Maybe it was,” said Jenna disconsolately. “Maybe the witches changed

her into a toad too.”

The street was busy with people coming and going. A late-night circus performance was taking place on a field just outside the Port, and noisily chattering circus-goers were pushing past Jenna, Thunder and Stanley.

Out of the chat, two familiar voices reached Jenna’s ears.

“But she said, *Don’t go to the circus.*”

“Oh, come on. It’ll be fun. You’re not going to take any notice of all that rubbish she told us, are you?”

Jenna knew those voices. She scanned the crowd but could see nothing. “Septimus? Nicko?” she shouted.

“That’s funny, Sep,” said a voice behind a very large woman who was walking toward Jenna, carrying two huge picnic hampers, “I thought I heard someone yell our names.”

“Probably some other people called the same.”

“No one’s got weird names like us, Sep. Especially like *you.*”

“Well, Nicko is pretty peculiar if you ask me. At least mine means something.”

Now Jenna was sure—and suddenly, there was Septimus’s straw-colored hair bobbing around behind one of the picnic hampers. She darted forward and grabbed him.

“Septimus!” she yelled. “It’s *you*—Oh, Sep!”

Septimus stared at Jenna. He could not believe his eyes.

“Jen?” he gasped. “But...hey, *Jen.* Oh, you’re all right. You’re *safe.* And you really are here. I don’t believe it!”

Jenna swung Septimus around in a bear hug; then Nicko pounced on them both and nearly squashed them.

“Hey, hey! We found you, *we found you.* Are you okay, Jen? What happened?”

“Tell you later. Hey, is he with you?” Jenna had noticed Wolf Boy. He had hung back from the reunion and looked a little lost.

“Yep. Tell you later,” Nicko said with a grin.

“Look, would you mind getting off my tail?” Stanley asked Nicko, who in his excitement had stepped on the rat. Nicko glanced down; Stanley glared up at him. “It hurts,” he said. “You’ve got very heavy feet.”

“Sorry,” said Nicko. He moved his boot. “Hey, look, Jen. It’s the Message Rat.”

“*Secret* Rat,” Stanley corrected. “Go anywhere. Do anything.”

“Except find Florrie Bundy’s lodging house,” said Jenna.

“Found it,” declared Stanley, pointing to a garish building with all the bricks painted in different colors, next to the Witches’ house. On the door was a big hand-drawn, painted sign that read

THE DOLL HOUSE

BOARD AND LODGING FOR DISCERNING CUSTOMERS

NO CREDIT

“She’s decorated it since I was last here. And changed the name. Follow me.”

Ten minutes later, the horse boy had taken Thunder to the stable at the back of the house and Nurse Meredith—a large, disheveled woman with mad, staring eyes—had told them that she had taken over from Florrie not long ago. Nurse Meredith had carefully counted out Jenna’s money three times and thrust it into a deep pocket in her none-too-clean apron.

Now Jenna, Nicko, Septimus, Wolf Boy and Stanley were following the bulky figure of the Nurse up a dusty flight of stairs.

“You’ll have to go in the annex,” she told them, as she squeezed around a

particularly tight corner. “It’s my last room. You’re lucky. I’m very busy tonight, what with the circus being in town. Very popular with the circus crowd, I am.”

“Really?” said Jenna politely, carefully stepping over a large doll that was sprawled across a step. The lodging house was stuffed full of dolls of all shapes and sizes. They were imprisoned in glass cases, piled high on overcrowded hammocks slung from the ceiling and nailed to the walls. An endless array of dolls was lined up on the stairs and Nicko had already managed to tread on at least two. Septimus was doing his best to avoid even looking at them. The dolls made him shiver; there was something dead about their gaze, and as he passed each one he could not shake off the feeling of something watching him.

“Mind my babies!” said Nurse Meredith sharply, as Nicko stepped on yet another doll. “You do that again and you’ll be out of here, young man.”

“Sorry,” Nicko mumbled, wondering why Jenna wanted to stay in such a strange place.

At last they reached the top of the house, but as they did so, a loud banging on the front door reverberated up the stairs. Nurse Meredith leaned over the banister and yelled down to the skivvy who lived in the cupboard under the stairs.

“We’re full, Maureen. Tell ’em to buzz off.”

Maureen scuttled off to open the door. Jenna looked down, curious to see who on earth would want to stay in the Doll House. As the thin, timid skivvy pulled the door open, Jenna gasped and jumped back into the shadows. Standing on the doorstep was the figure she had dreaded seeing—the stranger from the docks.

“What’s wrong, Jen?” Nicko whispered.

“Th-that man at the door. He followed me from the docks. He’s after me...”

“Who is he, Jen?”

“I-I don’t know. But I think he must have something to do with Simon.”

“Well, I don’t care *who* he is to do with, missy,” snapped Nurse Meredith.

“He’s not staying here tonight.”

Far below them Maureen’s reedy voice could be heard. “I’m sorry, sir. We are full tonight.”

The stranger’s voice was breathless and a little agitated. “I do not wish to stay, miss. I was only inquiring. I was told that a young lady with a horse was staying—”

“*Tell him to buzz off, Maureen!*” the Nurse yelled down.

“Er, sorry, sir. Buzz off, please,” said Maureen apologetically, and closed the door firmly.

To Jenna’s dismay the stranger continued to bang on the door, but Nurse Meredith was having none of it.

“Go and chuck a bucket of dirty dishwater over him, Maureen!” she yelled crossly. Maureen went to do her bidding and Nurse Meredith turned her attention to her latest guests.

“Follow me, please,” she said, and she climbed out of a tall window.

Jenna, Nicko and Septimus glanced at each other. Follow her out the window? *Why?*

Nurse Meredith’s head appeared in the window. “For Heaven’s sake, I haven’t got all night,” she chided. “Are you coming or not? Because if you’re not I’ll go and get the gentleman that just called and let him have the room. Ungrateful kids.”

Jenna quickly climbed out the window. “No, no, don’t give it to him. We’re coming.”

The annex was reached by a narrow wooden bridge, which spanned the gap between the Doll House and the house next door. Septimus only managed to get across by holding on to Wolf Boy and not looking down into the precipitous gap between the two houses. At the end of the bridge Nurse Meredith threw open another window.

“It’s in there. Squeeze past and climb in on your own. I can’t be doing with clambering in and out of windows all night.”

Septimus thought that squeezing past Nurse Meredith on a narrow bridge that wobbled with every step was even more terrifying than being surrounded by wolverines. But Jenna pulled him and Nicko pushed him until, with trembling legs, he fell through the open annex window and lay on the floor, shaking and staring up at the stained ceiling. That was it now, Septimus decided. He would have to stay in the annex room forever. There was no way he could ever walk back across that bridge.

Once they were all in the room, Nurse Meredith peered in.

“House rules are on the door,” she told them. “Any infringements and you’ll be out. Got that?”

They nodded.

Nurse Meredith continued in a businesslike tone. “Breakfast is served only between seven o’clock and ten minutes past. There is hot water between four and four thirty in the afternoon only. No fires allowed, no singing, no dancing. Residents in the annex are reminded that, although they remain guests of the Doll House, they are actually staying in the property of the Port Witch Coven and do so at their own risk. The management of the Doll House cannot be held responsible for any consequences arising from this arrangement. Oh, yes, and do you want the rat for supper? I don’t think he’d stretch any further than a bit of soup, but Maureen could rustle you up some if you like. We’re partial to rat soup, are Maureen and I. I’ll take him down, shall I?”

“No!” gasped Jenna, grabbing hold of Stanley. “I mean, thank you—it’s very kind of you, but we’re not very hungry.”

“Shame. Well, maybe for breakfast then. Good night.” Nurse Meredith slammed the window shut and wobbled back across the bridge to the Doll House.

“Mmm. Nice place, Jen.” Nicko grinned.

26

SLEUTH



It was very early the next morning, just as the eastern sky above The Rope Walk was turning pink, when a small, luminous green ball rolled noiselessly along the middle of the street and stopped outside the Port Witch Coven's house.

Sleuth paused for a moment, bouncing on the spot while it took stock. Sleuth was content. It knew it had nearly reached its destination. Since its Master had thrown it out with its **Tag**, it had faithfully followed not only Jenna's exact footsteps, but also the rhythm of her journey, speeding up where she had done so and stopping where she had stopped. Which is why the green ball was waiting a moment at the very spot where, not so very many hours ago, Jenna had questioned Stanley's sense of direction.

This was how the Tracker Ball operated, and it was extremely effective, although not without the occasional problem. Such as when, late that afternoon, ten feet of choppy sea-water had covered the route that Jenna took earlier in the day, when the tide was out. That had slowed Sleuth down a bit, and getting covered in sand afterward had not helped its progress either. Sleuth knew its Master would not be pleased about the delay and it was anxious to get on with its task. The ball bounced up to the door of the Port Witch Coven, only to feel a sudden urge to leave again. Sleuth was about to bounce away when the door was flung open and a hand shot out and grabbed it.

“Got it!” a triumphant witch yelled. Sleuth was furious. It struggled but the witch held it tight in her grasp.

“Got *what*, Linda?” Sleuth glimpsed another, older, witch’s shocked face as Linda showed off her catch. Her face was white with fright. “Oh, Covens above—are you trying to get us all killed?”

“What are you going on about?” snapped the younger witch. “You’re just cross because you missed that rat earlier. Anyway—it’s *my* ball now. So shove off.”

“Linda—for Coven’s sake, let it go. It belongs to the Master. It’s a Tracker Ball on a mission. Drop it right now!”

The witch dropped Sleuth like a hot potato. The ball shook itself and bounced back into the street, then made its way to the door of the Doll House. The two witches watched, fascinated, as Sleuth briefly bounced on the spot and, on the third bounce, squeezed through the letterbox and disappeared inside.

“Shame it’s not come for anyone here,” said the older witch. “We could have **Kept** them for the Master. That would have put us in his good books.”

“We’re never in the right place at the right time, are we?” Linda sighed gloomily as she slammed the door with a loud bang.

“Nicko?” whispered Jenna. “*Nicko?*”

“Werr?”

“Nicko, there’s someone tapping on the window.”

“’S only mad Nurse, Jen. Ger bakoo sleep,” Nicko mumbled drowsily from his lumpy bed in the corner of the grubby room.

Jenna sat up in her equally lumpy bed and pulled Lucy’s cloak around her. She stared into the gloom, her heart pounding, and listened again. It sounded as though the Nurse was bouncing a ball outside their window. Why? She hadn’t looked the sporty type. And then, as the fog of sleep finally left Jenna’s brain, she remembered. *Sleuth*.

Jenna leaped out of bed and immediately fell over the sleeping form of

Septimus, who was wrapped up in a blanket on the floor. He did not stir. Slowly, she crawled over to the window, keeping low in the hope that Sleuth would not see her—although Jenna suspected that it did not matter one bit whether or not the Tracker Ball saw her. It *knew* she was here.

And then Jenna trod on something soft—and alive. She opened her mouth to scream but before she could, a hand had snaked over her face and covered the scream. A smell of damp earth filled Jenna’s nostrils and two big eyes stared at her.

“Shh,” whispered Wolf Boy, who had been lying under the window listening to Sleuth for the last five minutes. “There’s a **Thing** outside. I saw one just like it in the Forest once.”

“I know,” whispered Jenna. “It’s come to find me.”

“Do you want me to catch it for you?” asked Wolf Boy, his eyes glittering in the green glow that was shining through the grime on the window. Outside, Sleuth was growing brighter by the second. It had found the quarry; now it was gathering the energy to **Tag** the quarry. Once Sleuth had done that, it would return to its Master, mission accomplished. From then on, the quarry was **Tagged**, and its Master would know where to find it.

“*Can* you catch it?” wondered Jenna, thinking that Sleuth would be far too fast for Wolf Boy.

“Easy.” Wolf Boy grinned, his dirty teeth shining a nasty shade of green in the ever-brightening glow. “Watch.”

Quicker than a witch, Wolf Boy threw open the window and had Sleuth clasped in his hand in a flash. He slammed the window shut with a bang.

“Get him!” yelled Septimus, sitting bolt upright, his eyes open wide, still in the middle of a dream.

“What?” mumbled Nicko. “Wha—what’s going on? Jen? Why’s he gone green?”

Wolf Boy looked very peculiar. The bright pulsing light from the trapped Sleuth shone through his hands in a reddish-green glow, outlining the bones as dark shapes beneath his skin. The rest of Wolf Boy was turning a horrible shade of green as Sleuth glowed ever brighter, trying to gather the energy to escape.

The Tracker Ball was furious. It was so near and yet so far, for unless it could **Tag** the quarry, what use was it to its Master? No more use than a bald old tennis ball, that's what. Sleuth knew all about bald old tennis balls, for it had once been one itself. Sleuth owed everything to its Master, Simon, and it would never let him down. Nothing was going to stop it from **Tagging** the quarry. *Nothing*.

However, Wolf Boy was doing his best. His strong wiry hands held Sleuth in a grip of iron, while Sleuth gathered all its energy and slowly but surely began to heat up. It was a risky ploy, but the Tracker Ball was willing to risk the possibility of meltdown. It would rather liquefy into a pool of rubber than fail its Master.

"Why are your hands green, 409?" asked Septimus, still bleary-eyed and under the impression he was back in the Young Army dormitory with Boy 409.

"Dunno. It's some kind of **Thing**. Jenna asked me to catch it. So I did. Funny, it's getting quite hot."

"It's Sleuth," whispered Jenna. "Simon's Tracker Ball. He's sent it to find me. What are we going to do with it?"

Septimus was suddenly wide awake. "Don't let it touch you, Jen. He's put a **Tag** on it. It *mustn't* touch you—got that?"

"I don't want it to." Jenna shuddered. "Horrible thing."

"If it doesn't touch you, it won't be able to go back to Simon and tell him where you are. So you're still safe. Okay?"

Jenna looked anything but okay. She was pale and trembling and had a green tinge about her.

"Ouch..." Wolf Boy muttered. "Ooh—ah. *Ouch!*"

"You all right?" asked Nicko.

"Ah...It's getting hot...I can't—I can't hold it...Aargh!" Wolf Boy dropped the Tracker Ball, the palms of his hands burned raw.

Sleuth was glowing so bright it hurt to look at it—it was red-hot. At lightning speed it shot over to Jenna, jumped up and touched her arm. Jenna

screamed with pain and shock. The ball hurled itself through the window, smashing the glass, and burned its way through the wooden bridge, landing far below in the witches' rotting rubbish heap with a loud hiss. It lay for a moment deep in the pile of tea leaves, rabbit bones and frog heads, and waited until it had cooled down.

Then, triumphantly, it shot out of the rubbish heap, shook off a thick coating of tea leaves and sped away, back to its Master, Simon Heap.

THE HOUSE OF THE PORT WITCH COVEN



There was a stunned silence in the annex. It was broken a few moments later by Septimus, who gasped, “The bridge—it’s on fire!”

Nicko turned his attention from Jenna, who was sitting with her hand clasped over the small circular burn that Sleuth had left on her arm, and followed Septimus’s gaze. Flames were flickering from the charred hole that Sleuth had made in the bridge, and as they watched, the dry, old, wooden bridge suddenly erupted in a ball of fire and fell six floors down to the ground with a crash.

“Uh-oh...” said Septimus.

“Rats,” muttered Nicko.

“It’s nothing to do with *rats*,” Stanley protested. “It’s all because of that Mr. Heap, if you ask me. And I don’t know what old Nursie’s going to say about her bridge going up in flames either.”

“Bother what old Nursie has to say about it,” Nicko retorted. “That’s the least of our worries. Have you forgotten where we are?”

“Stuck at the top of the headquarters of the Port Witch Coven,” said Septimus glumly.

“Exactly,” muttered Nicko.

Another silence fell. Wolf Boy shoved his burned hands under his arms and looked preoccupied. He was doing a slow dance from foot to foot, trying to take his mind off how much they were hurting. Jenna shook herself out of her own worries and went over to him.

“Are they bad?” she asked. Wolf Boy nodded, gritting his teeth.

“We ought to bandage you up,” Jenna said. “Protect your hands. Here.” She unwound the gold silk sash she wore around her waist and, using her teeth to start it off, she tore the sash in half.

Septimus and Nicko watched Jenna carefully wrap the gold silk around Wolf Boy’s burned hands. But their minds were elsewhere, trying to think of a way to get out of the witches’ house.

“Listen,” said Septimus in a low voice.

“What?” whispered Nicko. Jenna and Wolf Boy looked up anxiously. What had Septimus heard?

“Can you hear anything?” muttered Septimus.

There was a tense silence while everyone listened for—what? Footsteps outside the door? Simon Heap at the window? Nurse Meredith discovering her bridge had been burned to cinders? After a few minutes, Nicko whispered, “I can’t hear anything, Sep.”

“Exactly. Nothing.”

“Oh, Sep,” protested Nicko. “We thought you’d heard something. Don’t do that again, okay?”

“But that’s it, don’t you see? The bridge fell down with a great crash into their backyard and the witches haven’t stirred. Not a peep. *Nothing*. It’s dawn and now they must have gone to bed. Marcia says that **Darke** Witches usually sleep all day and do their stuff at night. So we can just walk out. Easy.”

“Oh, yeah, *easy* to walk all the way through a creaky old house stuffed full of traps and witches waiting to grab you and change you into a toad and then even *easier* to get out their front door which, I’ll bet, is **Barred** with something nasty. *Easy-peasy*.”

Jenna looked up from finishing off Wolf Boy’s hands. “There’s no need to be so grumpy, Nik. We don’t have any choice anyway. We have to get out through the witches’ house. Unless you want to jump the twenty-foot gap back to that creepy house full of dolls.”

A few minutes later they were standing in the dingy, cobweb-strewn passageway outside the annex. Nicko was invisible. He was using his **Silent Unseen Spell** that, with Septimus’s help, he had eventually managed to get right, after much prompting—“No, Nik, it’s **Not seen, not heard, not a whisper, not a word**. And you have to imagine it too. It’s no good just rattling it off like a demented parrot.” So far the spell seemed to have worked—at least they had managed to get out of the room without activating the **Creak** on the door. Jenna and Septimus both had an **Unseen Spell**, which was not silent, but they had decided not to use it. It did not seem fair to leave only Wolf Boy visible to the witches.

They stood uncertainly outside the annex door, wondering which way to go; it was difficult to work out which way led up and which went down. The Port Witches were great home-improvement enthusiasts—although improvement was not the word most people would have used to describe the results of their efforts. Over the years the Coven had turned the house into a warren of dead-end corridors and twisted staircases that usually ended in midair or dropped you out of a window. There were doors that opened into rooms where the witches had taken the floors out and not got around to putting them back; there were dripping pipes sticking out of the walls and at every step a rotten floorboard threatened to snap and send you plunging to the floor below. Added to the home improvements were the **Blights, Banes** and **Bothers** that infested the house and were designed to trip up any unwary intruder.

A small blue **Bother** was hanging from the ceiling by a string just outside

their door. The **Bother** was an unpleasant, one-eyed, spiky creature covered in fish scales whose sole purpose in life was to stop anyone from doing what he or she wanted to do—but first, before it could do anything, it had to catch the person’s eye. Jenna had not noticed the **Bother** and had walked straight into it. She had stepped back at once, but it was too late—she had glanced up and met its beady blue eye staring at her. Now the **Bother** set about its task with glee. It bounced around in front of Jenna, chattering in its babyish way. “Hello, ickle girly. Hellooo, there. Are ’ooo losty-wost? Me wanoo help ’ooo. Ooh me *dooo*.”

“Oh, shut up,” Jenna muttered as loud as she dared, trying to edge away from the creature.

“*Oooh*. That’s *rudy-wude*. Me only wanoo help ’ooo...”

“Sep, can you stop this **Bother Bothering** me before I throttle it?”

“I’m trying to think of something. You’ve got to calm down, Jen. Try to ignore the stupid thing.”

“*Oooh*. *Nasty* boy. *Nasteeee*...”

“Sep,” said Jenna irritably. “What are you waiting for? Just get rid of it, will you? Now!”

“Not rid of meeee. I *help* ’ooo.”

“Oh, shut up!”

“Jen, Jen, don’t let it get to you, that’s how it works—it irritates you so much that you can’t do anything. Just give me a moment. I’ve got an idea.”

“*Oooh*. *Nasty* boy’s got an *idea*. *Oooh*.”

“I’m going to kill it, Sep. I *am*.”

“*Oooh*, *bad* girly. Not nice saying things like that. *Oooh*.”

Septimus was busy rummaging in his Apprentice belt. “Hang on, Jen. I’ll just find my **Reverse**. Ah, here it is.” He took out a small triangular **Charm** and laid it in the palm of his hand with the sharp end pointing toward the **Bother**.

The **Bother** looked at it suspiciously. “What ’ooo got there, *nastee* boy?”

it asked querulously.

Septimus did not reply. He took a deep breath and chanted very slowly and quietly so as not to wake the witches,

“Bothersome Bother, Bother no more, Forget what you’re created for.”

“Oh, dear,” said the **Bother** faintly. “I feel all peculiar.”

“Good,” muttered Septimus. “Sounds like it’s working. Now, I suppose I had better test it.”

“Be careful, Sep,” said Jenna, who suddenly felt much less hot and **Bothered**.

Muttering a simple **SafeShield Spell** to himself, Septimus forced himself to look at the **Bother**.

“Good morning,” said the **Bother** brightly. “How may I help you?”

“You’re getting good at this **Magyk** stuff,” Jenna whispered to Septimus.

Septimus grinned. He loved the feeling of a spell working right. The **Bother** hung from the ceiling patiently awaiting an answer. “Could you please show us the way out?” Septimus asked it politely.

“With pleasure,” replied the **Bother**. “Follow me, please.” The creature detached itself from its piece of string and landed lightly in front of them on all four of its spindly legs. Then it scuttled off and, to everyone’s surprise, leaped into an open trapdoor.

“Quick,” said Septimus, “we’d better follow it. You go first, Nik, so that we’re still **Silent**.”

They followed the **Bother** down a long and very precarious ladder, which took them all the way through the house. The ladder bounced and flexed with the unaccustomed weight—for none of the witches ever dared use it—and by the time they reached the ground, Septimus was shaking.

As they stepped off the ladder into darkness they were greeted with a chorus of malevolent hissing. Wolf Boy hissed back.

“What’s that?” Jenna whispered.

“Cats,” muttered Septimus. “Loads of them. Shh, 409, don’t annoy them.” But Wolf Boy’s hissing had done the trick—the cats were quiet, terrified by the sound of the biggest, fiercest cat they had ever heard.

The **Bother** waited until they were all safely off the ladder. “As you see, ladies and gentlemen, we are now in the Coven kitchen, which is the hub of household activities. Follow me, please, and I will conduct you to the exit.”

The Coven kitchen smelled of old fried fat and cat food. It was too dark to make out much except for the dull glow of the stove and the green glittering of a forest of cats’ eyes, which followed their **Silent** progress across the room.

They were soon out of the kitchen and keeping close behind the **Bother** as it scuttled along a narrow passage. It was hard to see where they were going, for the house was very dark and gloomy; black cloths were pinned up at the windows and the walls were covered with a dirty brown paint and a few cracked paintings of witches, toads and bats. But as they squeezed around a narrow corner, a dusty shaft of light suddenly fell across the passageway—a door creaked open and a witch wandered out.

Nicko stopped dead and Septimus, unable to see him, crashed into him, followed closely by Jenna and Wolf Boy. Stanley, who was running in front of Nicko, was caught in the shaft of light.

The witch stared at Stanley with wide eyes, and, aghast, Stanley stared at the witch.

“Hello. You’re my rat, aren’t you, boy?” the witch said in a strange singsong voice. “Let me turn you into a nice fat toad.”

Stanley’s mouth opened and closed again, but no sound came out. The witch blinked slowly; then she turned and peered at Septimus, Jenna and Wolf Boy, who had all shrunk back into the shadows.

“You’ve brought your friends with you too...mmm yum. Children. We like children, we do...and here’s my own special **Bother**, which I hung up last night...”

“Hello, Veronica,” said the **Bother**, somewhat disapprovingly. “Are you sleepwalking again?”

“Mmm,” murmured the witch. “Sleepwalking...lovely.”

“Go back to bed now,” the **Bother** said crossly. “Before you fall down that trapdoor again and wake them all up.”

“Yes. Back to bed now...nighty-nighty, **Bother**,” murmured the witch, and she shuffled off down the passageway, eyes wide-open and staring into space. Jenna and Wolf Boy squeezed against the wall to let the sleepwalking witch go by.

“Oh, *phew*,” breathed Septimus.

“This way now, if you don’t mind please, ladies and gentlemen,” said the **Bother** briskly, and it scuttled off under a thick black curtain that was draped across the passageway. Septimus, Jenna, Wolf Boy, Stanley and the **Silent Unseen** Nicko pushed their way around the dusty curtain and sighed with relief—on the other side was the front door.

The **Bother** ran up the door like a lizard on a hot wall and busily set about opening an array of bolts, locks and chains. Jenna smiled at Septimus—they were nearly out.

And then it started.

“Ow! Help. *Help!* Someone’s attacking me. Help. Get off. Get off me!” screamed a piercingly high metallic voice. One of the locks was **Alarmed**.

“Shh, Donald,” the **Bother** told the lock crossly. “Stop fussing, it’s only me.” But the lock would not be shushed. It set itself into a loud, repetitive wail. “Ooh-ooh-ooh *help*...Ooh-ooh-ooh *help*...Ooh-ooh-ooh *help*...”

Suddenly above their heads came the sound of running footsteps and then agitated voices. The Port Witch Coven was awake. A few moments later came sounds of heavy footsteps on the stairs, followed by a loud crack of splintering wood and a scream.

“You idiot, Daphne!” yelled a voice. “I’d only just fixed that step and now look at it. Ruined.” An answering groan came from Daphne.

Another voice shouted, “I smell intruders. I smell a rat! Quick, quick! Go down the back way.” What sounded like a herd of stampeding elephants thundered above. The house shook. The Port Witch Coven was on its way.

“Ooh-ooh-ooh *help*...Ooh-ooh-ooh *help*...” shrieked the lock.

“Sep?” Jenna turned to Septimus in a panic. “Sep—can you do anything?”

“Dunno. I’m thinking—hang on.” Septimus fumbled in his Apprentice belt again and pulled out a small packet labeled **Rush Dust**. Quickly he poured it into his palm and threw it over the **Bother**. The **Bother** coughed and spluttered; then suddenly it speeded up until it was nothing more than a blue blur, scrambling up and down the door, shooting bolts, undoing locks and freeing chains, while all the time the lock continued its ear-splitting wail. “Ooh-ooh-ooh *help*...Ooh-ooh-ooh *help*...Ooh-ooh-ooh *help*...”

Suddenly Jenna heard the sounds of witches downstairs in the kitchen, but at that moment, the front door flew open, pinning the **Bother** flat against the wall. In a flash Jenna, Septimus, Nicko, Wolf Boy and Stanley were out of the house and tearing down The Rope Walk, hardly daring to glance behind to see if a stream of witches were after them.

Back in the house of the Port Witch Coven the hall floor finally surrendered to years of being eaten by Daphne’s giant woodworm colony and plunged the entire Coven headlong into the basement—where their fall was broken by the accumulated contents of a leaking sewage pipe.

THE CAUSEWAY



Jenna, *Septimus*, *Nicko*, *Wolf Boy* and Stanley took the Causeway out of the Port toward the Marram Marshes. Jenna led the way and behind her trotted Thunder, shaking his head and snorting in the cool morning air, glad to be out of the smelly stable he had spent the night in at the rear of the Doll House.

Jenna had insisted on going back for Thunder. She was afraid that if they left the horse behind, Nurse Meredith might have been tempted to sell him to the meat pie shop down by the harbor. So, when they had rounded the end of The Rope Walk and still no witches had come out of the house, Jenna had crept down the dirt track that ran behind the houses and led Thunder away.

The Causeway ran along the high ridge that skirted the fields at the edge of the Port. As they walked in the early-morning haze, Jenna could see the faded circus tent and smell the well-trodden grass from the crowds the night before. It was a quiet and peaceful scene, but Jenna was on edge—the burn on her arm from Sleuth stung and was a constant reminder that Simon now had a **Tag** on her—and any sudden movement or sound made her jump. So when, out of the corner of her eye, Jenna saw a small dark shape making a strange clattering noise and heading toward her, she panicked and grabbed hold of Septimus.

“Ouch!” gasped Septimus. “What’s up, Jen—what is it?” Jenna ducked behind him. Something was heading straight for her.

“Eurgh—eurgh gettitoff! Gettitoffme!” Jenna yelled, frantically brushing a large spiky insect off her shoulder.

The boys knelt down and peered at the bug, which lay on its back in the fine dust of the Causeway, legs slowly waving in the air and making a faint buzzing noise.

“But I thought it was dead,” said Septimus, poking at the bug with his finger.

“How did it get here?” asked Nicko, shaking his head.

Wolf Boy stared at the bug. It didn’t look very edible to him. Far too crunchy, he reckoned, and spiky too. He would not be surprised if it had a nasty sting.

Jenna peered over their shoulders. “What is it?” she asked.

“It’s your Shield Bug,” Septimus said.

“No!” Jenna dropped to her knees and very gently picked up the bug and laid it in the palm of her hand. She brushed as much dust off it as she could, and after a few moments, watched by a fascinated audience, the bug stood up and shakily began cleaning its wings, buzzing and fussing as it tried to get everything back into working order. And then, suddenly, with a triumphant clatter of wings against its green armor-plated shell, the bug rose into the air and took its rightful place on Jenna’s shoulder—just as it had done more than a year ago when it had first been created at Aunt Zelda’s cottage. Jenna’s spirits lifted; now she had something to defend herself with if—or was it when?—Simon came looking for her.

The large horse with a rat perched upon his saddle and four figures walking beside him made slow but steady progress along the Causeway. They had passed the fields that surrounded the Port and had now reached the reed beds, which provided thatch, baskets, flooring and all manner of bits and pieces for the inhabitants of the Port. As the morning sun rose higher it burned off the few remaining tendrils of mist that hung over the reed beds, which stretched almost as far as the eye could see. Beyond the reed beds lay the Marram Marshes, still shrouded in thick marsh mist.

Stanley was keeping what he called a low profile. He was not a happy rat

that morning, for he had just recognized the turn-off to Mad Jack's hovel where, the previous year, he had spent the six most miserable weeks of his life being imprisoned in a rat cage; he had only managed to escape after starving himself until he was thin enough to squeeze through the bars.

It was midmorning by the time Stanley saw that the reed beds were growing sparser and he smelled the dank smell of the Marram Marshes drifting in, and he at last relaxed—now that they were well away from Mad Jack. Soon the Causeway petered out into a boggy track and the group came to a halt.

Jenna shielded her eyes against the glare of the sun and squinted into the Marsh. Her heart sank—she had no idea where the track to Aunt Zelda's cottage was. The last time she had been here with Nicko it had been covered in ice and snow during the Big Freeze and had looked nothing like it did now.

Septimus stood next to her. "I thought the Boggart would be waiting for us," he said, puzzled. "I'm sure Aunt Zelda must know we're here."

"Um, no, I don't think she does, Sep," said Jenna. "Her hearing's not so good now and she finds it hard to **Listen**. I'm going to send Stanley out to tell her where we are."

"Excuse me? Did I hear you correctly?" the rat asked incredulously.

"Yes, Stanley, you did hear me correctly," replied Jenna. "I want you to go to Keeper's Cottage and tell Aunt Zelda we're here."

"Sorry, Your Maj, but as I said earlier, I don't do marshes—"

"If I ask you to do marshes, Stanley, you *do* them. Understand?"

"Er..." Stanley looked somewhat taken aback.

"And if you don't do what I ask, I'll have you dismissed from the Secret Rat Service."

"But—"

"Is that clear?"

Stanley could not believe his ears. Neither could Septimus or Nicko; they had never heard Jenna sound so determined.

“Is that clear, Stanley?”

“As crystal. Absolutely.” Stanley looked miserably toward the Marram Marshes. Jenna was, he thought with grudging admiration, going to be a much tougher cookie as Queen than her mother had been.

“Well off you go then,” said Jenna. “Make sure you tell Aunt Zelda to send the Boggart out to the Port side with the canoe. And be as quick as you can. Simon put a **Tag** on me, remember?”

They all watched the rat as he ran off along the boggy track, took a flying leap into the rough sedge grass that grew on the outer marshes and disappeared from view.

“I hope he’ll be all right,” said Jenna, shading her eyes and gazing in the direction Stanley had gone. She had not liked threatening Stanley but she had felt there was no other choice. Since Sleuth had **Tagged** her she knew it was only a matter of time before Simon found her—and she longed to get to the safety of Keeper’s Cottage.

“He’s a good rat,” said Septimus. “He’ll be back with the Boggart soon, just you see.”

They sat down on the side of the Causeway. Thunder nibbled contentedly at the grass and Jenna passed around the water bottle she had filled up at the Port spring on the way out. Nicko lay down and gazed at the sky, happy to spend a morning doing nothing much. Wolf Boy was restless; his hands hurt him and after a while he got to his feet and paced up and down the track to take his mind off the pain.

Jenna and Septimus were on edge and watchful, scanning the Marsh and the reed beds for any unusual movement. Every now and then an eddy of wind rustled across the reeds, a water vole dived into the water with a muffled splash or a bird suddenly called out to its mate with a mournful marsh cry—and Jenna and Septimus jumped. But as midday approached and the air became warm and sultry, the wind dropped and the sounds of the animals and birds quieted. Jenna and Septimus began to feel drowsy and their eyes slowly closed. Nicko fell asleep. Even Wolf Boy stopped his pacing, lay down and rested his burning hands on the cool grass.

Above them the hot sun glowed white in the cloudless sky—and far away, beyond the Marram Marshes, a dark speck appeared on the horizon.

FIGHT & Flyte



S*eptimus saw it first.* Something **Darke** crackled in the air and made the hairs on the back of his neck bristle. He sat up with a sudden jolt.

“What’s the matter?” asked Jenna, waking up with a start. “Ouch,” she grimaced, as the **Tag** burn on her arm began to throb.

“Look—over there.” Septimus pointed to the sky. “I-I don’t like the look of it. It’s too big for a bird.”

Jenna rubbed her arm and squinted up at the bright blue expanse, following the direction of Septimus’s finger. In the distance, high above the Marram Marshes, she saw a large, black, birdlike shape. “It might be a Marsh Kite...” she said uncertainly.

Septimus shook his head and stood to get a better look, shielding his eyes against the glare of the bright light. He looked pale and serious.

“Wassup?” asked Nicko, blearily opening his eyes. Wordlessly, Jenna

pointed toward the approaching shape. Wolf Boy stopped his pacing and looked.

“Weird...” he muttered under his breath.

“What can you see?” asked Nicko, worried. He knew that Wolf Boy’s sight was as keen as a hawk’s.

“Looks like a massive, great bat...but, no, hang on a minute...gosh, it’s going fast...it’s—*no*, that’s not possible—”

“What?” asked Septimus edgily. “What’s not possible?”

“Some idiot up in the air. Flying.”

“You sure, 409?”

“Yep, 412.”

“But that *is* impossible—no one can fly like that—I mean, properly, like a bird,” said Jenna, with a feeling of dread.

“They did once. So it’s been said.” Septimus whistled under his breath.

The black speck was moving fast and soon there was no mistaking the shape of a flying man, his black cloak streaming out behind him, swooping over the Marshes, zigzagging back and forth somewhat erratically, and scanning the land below. He was honing in fast on the **Tag** that Sleuth had provided.

“It *is* Simon!” gasped Jenna, hardly able to believe what she was seeing.

“We need to hide,” said Septimus. “Come on, Jen, the reed beds—quick!”

“Well, I don’t see what you’re all so bothered about,” declared Nicko, staring up at the approaching figure. “There’s four of us here and it’s only Simon after all—just old smarty-pants big brother Simon. Okay, so he’s learned to fly, but so what? I bet Sep can do that too. Can’t you, Sep?”

“No, Nik. Not like that. That’s the real thing—that’s **Flyte**.”

“But you can go up and down, can’t you, Sep? That’s flight.”

“Only a few feet off the ground, Nik. I couldn’t fly like that in a million

years. I didn't think *anyone* could."

Jenna had taken refuge next to Thunder and was holding on tightly to his reins. Somehow she felt safer beside the solid, unflustered animal as she watched the approaching figure in the sky. Septimus stood beside her, determined to protect Jenna this time. From a secret pocket in his Apprentice belt he took his most precious **Charm**. It was a tiny pair of silver wings that Marcia had given him when she had first asked him to become her Apprentice. The wings sat in Septimus's right palm and glittered in the sun. Across the shining silver, four words were written in letters of pure gold: **Fly Free With Me**.

Septimus tried to remember what it was he had done that morning with Marcia beside the Boggart patch—which seemed so long ago now—when he had first held the **Charm** and felt the tingle of **Magyk** shoot through him. He remembered that he had said the words to himself and imagined that he really was flying. That was all. Surely there was more to it than that?

"See—I knew you'd be able to do it, Sep," said Nicko admiringly as Septimus's feet lifted a few inches off the ground. Septimus looked down and landed with a thump.

Jenna, meanwhile, had not taken her eyes off the dark figure in the sky. He was close enough now for her to see his long straw-colored hair streaming behind him as he came down low above the reed bed, honing in on the **Tag**. At the last minute, when it looked as if he might hurtle headlong into the Causeway, Simon swooped up and skidded to a halt with a look of extreme concentration on his face. This was Simon's first attempt at **Flyte**. He had crashed three times on takeoff from the top of the Observatory roof and had narrowly avoided smashing into one of the marsh islands which had been overrun with chickens. It was nothing like as easy as Hugh Fox had told him it would be.

Simon hovered now with some difficulty, as if buffeted by the wind, and stared in surprise at the group below. He had seen something he had not expected to ever see again—something he thought had been eaten by the massive Land Wurm that now inhabited his Burrow (which was about to give birth to ten little Land Wurms and was consequently extremely bad-tempered and hungry).

"You've got my horse!" Simon yelled at Jenna. "You—you *horse thief!*"

Everyone was transfixed by the sight of Simon in midair. Forgetting the

danger, they watched him, wondering what he was going to do next.

“Go away and leave us alone, Simon!” said Jenna fiercely.

“Leave my horse alone then,” Simon retorted, and suddenly he lost concentration—and height. Falling fast, he landed awkwardly beside Jenna, turning his ankle. Jenna leaped out of the way, pulling Thunder with her.

“Go away, Simon,” Septimus told him angrily.

Simon laughed. “So you are going to *make* me go away, you Young Army brat? I don’t think so.”

With a surprising turn of speed, Simon grabbed the reins from Jenna and at the same time caught hold of her arm. He twisted it up behind her back until Jenna gasped with pain.

“Let her go, you *pig*,” Nicko demanded. He hurled himself at Simon, but Simon was ready with a **StunFlash**, which he threw at Nicko’s feet. The **StunFlash** knocked Nicko to the ground and caught Wolf Boy as it bounced away. Nicko tried to get up, but he couldn’t; his head felt as though it was nailed to the ground. He closed his eyes—the light was hurting them, and the noise inside his head was making him feel horribly sick.

“Just be grateful that I know you’re my brother,” Simon told Nicko as he lay pale and sprawled on the dusty Causeway. “I don’t **Harm** family. Well, not terminally anyway. But I don’t see any more family around me—only a couple of kids who’ve stolen our name for themselves. Just like one of them stole my horse.”

Simon tightened his grip on Jenna.

“Stop it, Simon,” gasped Jenna. “You’re hurting me.”

“Am I? *Ouch!*” Simon’s free hand flew up to his neck. “Blasted Marsh Flies,” he complained, looking at the smear of blood on his hand as, unbeknownst to him, Jenna’s Shield Bug stood on his shoulder, having just missed Simon’s jugular vein with its razor-sharp sword, and lined up the sword for a second stab. The bug was out of practice—ever since it had been parted from Jenna in what was now known as The Great Storm, the bug had had no one to protect and had spent much of its time chasing an old enemy, the Hunter, who was now a buffoon at the circus. But the bug had never forgotten Jenna, and when it had seen her walk past the circus tent, it knew

that once again it had a purpose in life—to protect her from her enemies.

The Shield Bug's sword flashed toward Simon's neck.

"Stop!" Jenna yelled out, unable to let the bug kill someone she still saw as her brother.

The bug paused, confused. Why was it not allowed to complete its job? The small, heavily armored creature stood on Simon's shoulder, still eyeing up his neck, its arm itching to raise its sword and strike.

"Stop what, Princess? Surely I am not still hurting you. In fact, it appears to be me who's been hurt—as ever," said Simon, somewhat self-pityingly. He stared around him, suddenly gloomy. His neck stung badly from the Marsh Fly bite, his ankle stabbed with pain when he put any weight on it and somehow he had to get this awkward girl back to the Badlands. This time he would enjoy leaving her out for the Magogs. "Get on the horse," he said sharply to Jenna. "We're going."

"No, we're not, Simon," Jenna told him calmly.

"Don't tell me what we are or are not doing. Get on the horse." Simon yanked at Jenna's arm angrily.

"If you do that again, Simon, I will tell my Shield Bug to finish what it has started. I don't want to, but I will."

"What Shield Bug?" Simon glanced around him warily, and then it dawned on him just what had bitten him. His hand flew to his neck. He caught the bug, tapped it with a **Reverse**, and it rolled up into a tight ball. Simon hurled the bug into the reed beds. "Oh, *that* Shield Bug," he smirked triumphantly. "Now get on the horse."

"*You* get on the horse." Septimus's voice came out of nowhere. "Then get out of here and don't come back."

Simon and Jenna both looked up in surprise. Septimus was hovering about ten feet above them.

In a moment, Simon had let go of Jenna and shot up off the ground to confront Septimus. Jenna watched the two brothers squaring off to one another ten feet above the ground. Septimus's lack of height compared to Simon was no longer a problem, and he stared Simon in the eye, daring him

to make a move.

“Let Jenna be, Simon,” Septimus told him, concentrating hard on trying to speak and hover at the same time, which was not as easy as he had hoped. As soon as he thought of what to say he found himself dipping toward the ground. “Go back...whoops...to wherever you came from and...ah...take your **Darke Magyk** with you.”

Simon’s eyes darkened with anger. Septimus noticed that they had become almost black, with disconcerting flashes of green playing across the irises like lightning in a thunderstorm.

“You don’t fool me; you’re a fake,” Simon sneered. “You’re a fake Heap and fake Apprentice. You’ve just got hold of one of those dinky little **Wing Charms**. Ten a penny, they are. No maneuverability, no speed and you’ll get no higher than a hovel’s chimney with those.” As if to prove his point, Simon shot far above Septimus, then whizzed down again and buzzed around him in circles, like an angry bee.

“**Flyte**,” Simon continued, circling Septimus and trapping him in midair. “**Flyte**, as you should know, being the ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s little pet, is the last Lost Art, which *I* have rediscovered.” Simon was gratified to see a look of amazement flash across Septimus’s face. He had the kid rattled now; he knew it. This was turning out to be fun—at last. “And wouldn’t you like to know where I discovered it, you little worm, hey?”

Septimus stared at Simon, determined not to give anything away and focusing all his concentration on staying in the air.

“Of course,” Simon carried on, “I’d really like to say that you can go home to *dear* Marcia and her faithful **Shadow** and tell them all about how the next ExtraOrdinary Apprentice has discovered the Lost Art of **Flyte**, but unfortunately for you and the lovely Miss Overstrand, you will not be going back. You will be staying here in the reed beds along with the Shield Bug. *Forever.*”

Now Simon stopped his manic circling and came to a halt in front of Septimus. Almost lazily Simon reached into his pocket, while Septimus watched him, wondering what he was about to do. Then, with a sudden flick of his wrist, Simon hurled a **Thunderflash** at Septimus. Somehow Septimus threw himself to one side, and, with a deafening roar, the **Thunderflash** shot past his ear, singeing his hair and scorching the side of his face. Burning with a brilliant white light, it shot into the reed beds and exploded with a deafening

clap of thunder, sending up a huge plume of muddy water, which landed on Nicko and Wolf Boy and woke them from the **StunFlash**.

The shock waves from the **Thunderflash** threw Septimus off-balance and, to his horror, he found himself falling against Simon. As Septimus crashed into him, Simon threw off his cloak and wrapped it tightly around his youngest brother, pinning Septimus's arms to his sides. Septimus struggled and fought but, at a muttered **Command** from Simon, the **Darke** cloak **Transformed** into a huge black serpent and curled around him, trapping him within its coils. With every breath that Septimus breathed out, the snake tightened its grip, so that each new breath was shallower and harder to take. Slowly, deliberately, Septimus was having the life crushed from him.

Simon hovered and watched the proceedings with a smirk—until a sharp stone caught his hand and sent him tumbling backward with surprise.

“You got him!” came Jenna’s voice from below. “Quick, quick, do another one!”

Wolf Boy did not need telling; he was already lining up his catapult for another shot. He drew back the sling and let loose a small round stone. It caught Simon’s right eye and sent him plunging to earth, screaming in pain. He hit the ground with a dull thud. The serpent fell away from Septimus and followed its Master. It landed with a thump and slithered off into the reed beds. Septimus, dazed and light-headed from lack of oxygen, sank slowly down until Jenna, Nicko and Wolf Boy caught hold of him and laid him down on the bank. They were too concerned with Septimus, who was deathly white with a blue tinge to his lips, to notice that Simon had struggled to his feet. It was only when Jenna heard the sound of Thunder’s hooves galloping along the Causeway that she looked up.

Simon Heap, one hand held to his blinded right eye, the other grasping Thunder’s reins, was on his way back to the Badlands.

ON MARRAM MARSH



Now?” Stanley said incredulously. “You want me to go back *now*?”

“That *is* what I said,” snapped Aunt Zelda, who had just unwrapped Jenna’s sash from Wolf Boy’s burned hands and did not like what she found.

Stanley stood on the doorstep of Keeper’s Cottage, looking out into the brilliant sunshine where Jenna, Nicko and Septimus were sitting beside the Dragon Boat. Jenna had a clean white bandage around her arm and Septimus looked much less pale after one of Aunt Zelda’s Anti-Snake cakes. Nicko was happily dabbling his feet in the warm marsh water.

Stanley gazed at the Dragon Boat. It was the most beautiful boat the rat had ever seen, and he had seen a lot of boats. Her prow was a tall arched dragon neck covered in iridescent green scales, her head was a shimmering gold and her eyes were a deep dragon-green. The hull of the boat was wide and smooth and shone a deep burnished gold in the sunlight, and folded alongside it were a pair of leathery, green dragon wings. At the stern, where the massive mahogany tiller rested, the dragon’s tail rose into the air, its golden arrow point flashing in the sunlight. It was a peaceful, happy scene and Stanley felt safe on Aunt Zelda’s island—he didn’t want to leave. Aunt Zelda, however, had other ideas.

“There’s no point hanging around,” she told him. “If you go now you’ll be off the Marsh by nightfall. It’s the longest day of the year today and the

best day to travel through the Marsh. It's far too hot for most of the creatures; they'll all be under the mud keeping cool."

"Except for the Bogle Bugs," Stanley said, gloomily scratching an ear. "Got followed by a cloud of Bogle Bugs all the way here. I'm still itching. Nasty things."

"Did they go up your nose?" asked Jenna, joining Stanley on the doorstep.

"What?" asked Stanley.

"The Bogle Bugs. Did they go up your nose? That's what they do. They go up your nose and then they clean out all the—"

"Jenna, Jenna, please. There is no need to go into details. We all know quite well what Bogle Bugs do." Aunt Zelda's voice came from the other side of a half-open door under the stairs with the sign UNSTABLE POTIONS AND PARTIKULAR POISONS on it. She was in her potion cupboard, searching for some **Burn Balm**.

"Stanley doesn't," Jenna pointed out.

"Stanley doesn't need to," said Aunt Zelda, emerging from the cupboard with a large glass jar of pink ointment. "Bogle Bugs don't do rats. Anyway, I'm trying to get him to go back to Marcia and tell the poor woman—and your mother and father too—that you are all safe. There's no need to worry him about Bogle Bugs as well as everything else."

"Won't he go?" asked Jenna.

The rat raised a paw in protest. "Excuse me," he said. "I'm still here. And I didn't exactly say I *wouldn't* go, Your Maj. Just that I would rather *not* go. If it's all the same to you."

"Well it's not all the same to me," said Jenna. "Or to Aunt Zelda."

"No. Didn't think it would be, somehow. I'll be off then. Do you have anything in particular you would like me to convey to the ExtraOrdinary?" Stanley asked glumly.

"Tell Marcia—and my parents at the Palace—that we are all safe at Aunt Zelda's cottage and I have arrived in time for the MidSummer Visit."

“Fine. Will do, Your Majesty.”

“Good,” said Jenna. “Thank you, Stanley. I won’t forget this, I promise. I know you don’t like the Marshes.”

“No. I don’t.” Stanley jumped off the doorstep.

“Wait a minute,” Aunt Zelda called out. Stanley looked back, hoping that she may have changed her mind. “Would you like to take a sandwich with you? I’ve got some left over from lunch.”

“Um, what would be in the sandwich, exactly?” asked Stanley warily.

“Cabbage. I stewed it all morning, so it’s lovely and soft.”

“Very kind of you, but no thanks. I’ll be off now.” And with that, Stanley ran down the path. He scurried over the Mott bridge and out onto the Marram Marshes.

“Well,” said Aunt Zelda, “I hope he’ll be all right.”

“So do I,” said Jenna.

By late afternoon, Wolf Boy had developed a fever. He lay on Aunt Zelda’s sofa, his hands covered with **Burn Balm** and clean white bandages, mumbling deliriously, lapsing in and out of consciousness. Septimus sat beside him, holding a cool damp cloth on Wolf Boy’s forehead, while Aunt Zelda leafed through a large and well-thumbed book, the *Witch and Warlock Pharmacopoeia*.

“It’s a **Darke** burn, that’s for sure,” muttered Aunt Zelda. “I dread to think what that Simon Heap is up to. If he’s incubated a Tracker Ball—and a very effective one too—who knows what else he can do.”

“**Flyte**,” said Septimus glumly, wishing that 409 would cool down.

“**Flyte**?” Aunt Zelda looked up from the book, eyebrows raised, with shock in her bright blue witch’s eyes. “*Real Flyte*? Are you sure, Septimus—sure it wasn’t just hovering and a bit of illusion? They’re good at illusion, are the **Darke** ones.”

“I’m sure. I mean he couldn’t have got to us any other way. Not with the

Marram Marshes to get across.”

Aunt Zelda looked pensive as she continued turning the thick, crackly pages of the *Pharmacopoeia*, looking for the right potion. “Well, I just don’t believe it,” she said as she scanned each page of closely written vellum, trying to pick out the symbols she was looking for. “I mean, where has he got it from?”

“Marcia says the **Flyte Charm** doesn’t exist,” said Septimus. “She says it was thrown into a furnace by the Last Alchemist. He **Sacrificed** it in order to make the purest gold.”

“Maybe,” Aunt Zelda said. “Or maybe not.”

“Oh?” asked Septimus, who was always interested to hear what Aunt Zelda had to say about **Magyk**. Her approach was refreshingly different from Marcia’s—and sometimes Aunt Zelda knew surprising things that Marcia did not.

Aunt Zelda looked up from the *Pharmacopoeia* and regarded Septimus with a thoughtful expression. “This is between you and me,” she said in a low voice.

Septimus nodded.

“There is a story,” Aunt Zelda continued, “that the Last Alchemist did not **Sacrifice** the **Flyte Charm**. That he kept it for himself. You see, it was made from the most beautiful gold there is—from pure gold threads spun by the Spiders of Aurum. He fell in love with it and could not bear to let it go. So he **Concealed** it.”

“Where?” asked Septimus.

Aunt Zelda shrugged. “Who knows? At the top of the tallest tree in the Forest? Under his mattress? In his socks?”

“Oh.” Septimus was disappointed; he had expected more.

“But…” Aunt Zelda continued.

“Yes?”

“I have always believed that the **Flyte Charm** was here.”

“Here?” Septimus gasped. “In Keepers Cottage?”

“Shh. Yes.” Aunt Zelda turned another page and squinted at the formulae scrawled across it. “Naturally I have looked everywhere for it, but the problem with these ancient **Charms** is that they come from the **Darke** Age of **Magyk**, and they often only respond to a touch of **Darkeness**—and that is one thing, Septimus, that I do not possess. Or have any wish to possess.”

The cloth on Wolf Boy’s forehead had become hot. Still thinking about the **Flyte Charm**, Septimus got up and took the cloth into Aunt Zelda’s small kitchen. He dipped it in a bucket of cool spring water and wrung it out, then sat down again beside Wolf Boy and carefully laid it back in place. Wolf Boy did not stir.

“But...” said Septimus.

“I thought there’d be a ‘but’,” Aunt Zelda said with a smile in her voice.

“But why did you think the **Flyte Charm** was here? I know you must have had a reason.”

“Well—you know, Septimus, that a Keeper may not marry?”

“Yes.”

“And quite right too, for no wife should have to keep secrets from her husband, and a Keeper has many secrets to keep. But Broda Pye, one of the early Keepers, was secretly married—to the Last Alchemist. It’s my belief that her husband **Concealed** the **Flyte Charm** here. I also believe that she may have kept some part of it for herself, if her Keeper’s Diaries are to be believed—so the **Flyte Charm** may not be complete.”

“But...”

“Yes? Oh, this looks promising.” Aunt Zelda was peering through her spectacles at a blackened page in the *Witch and Warlock Pharmacopoeia*.

“I don’t see why he didn’t just **Conceal** it in the Castle,” said Septimus. “It was a dangerous journey to make with a precious **Charm**. Weren’t the Marshes much worse in the old days—stuffed full of carnivorous pikefish and all sorts of **Darke Things**? Well, you wouldn’t think he’d risk losing the **Flyte Charm** in some horrible bit of Quake Ooze, would you?”

Aunt Zelda looked up and regarded Septimus over the top of her spectacles. “There is more than one way to kill a cat,” she said cryptically. And before Septimus could ask her what she meant, Aunt Zelda dumped the heavy *Witch and Warlock Pharmacopoeia* in his lap. “Have a look at that one,” she said, pointing to the scorched page. “I think it might do the trick. It’s got a genuine Boris Boil **Reverse**, so there’s a bit of **Darkeness** in it. What do you think?”

“*Black Burn Brew—a Cat’s Claw Concoction,*” Septimus read. “*For added efficacy in suspected **Darke** contamination we recommend forming an Admixture with Boris Boil’s **Reverse** Remedy Number III. Caution: DO NOT BOIL. See page xxxv for Final Formula. Apply immediately. Stable for thirteen minutes precisely. Dispose of with extreme care.*” Septimus gave a low whistle. “That sounds really complicated.”

“It is really complicated,” replied Aunt Zelda. “It will take me an hour or so to **Mix** it. But I know I’ve got all the ingredients. I always keep a bottle of Boil’s Bane in the safe, and I bought some Cat’s Claw from the year-and-a-day market last year.” She got up and disappeared back into her potions cupboard.

Septimus stayed beside Wolf Boy, who lay white and still like a rock in the sun, burning up inside with a **Darke** fever. Anxiously, Septimus watched the firmly closed potion cupboard door. He remembered it well from his previous time with Aunt Zelda. Inside was a small, dark cupboard crammed full of all manner of Aunt Zelda’s most precious and delicate potions—and a trapdoor to the tunnel that had once led to the old temple where the Dragon Boat had lain under the earth for hundreds of years. But since the walls of the temple had been washed away in The Great Storm, the tunnel now went to the cabbage patch and Aunt Zelda had got into the habit of using it as a shortcut.

Jenna appeared, silhouetted in the bright light of the doorway. “How is he?” she asked in an anxious voice.

“I don’t think he’s very well,” Septimus replied quietly. “Aunt Zelda’s doing a really complicated potion for him.”

Jenna sat down beside Septimus. “Do you think he’ll be all right, Sep?” she asked.

“I don’t know—oh, that was quick—”

Aunt Zelda had burst out of the cupboard looking flustered. “Marsh Bane.

I need fresh Marsh Bane. Would you believe it—*fresh*. Wretched recipe. Go ask Boggart, would you? Now. Please.”

Septimus jumped up.

“No, Sep. You stay with him. I’ll go,” Jenna said.

“Tell Boggart it’s urgent,” Aunt Zelda called out after Jenna’s departing figure. “Just ignore it if he makes a fuss.”

The Boggart did make a fuss. Jenna had to call him three times before the large brown marsh creature surfaced from his mud patch in a sea of muddy bubbles.

“Can’t a Boggart get no sleep on the hottest day of the year?” he demanded, his black eyes blinking crossly in the bright sunlight. “Waddy you want *now*?”

“I’m really sorry, Boggart,” Jenna apologized, “but Aunt Zelda urgently needs some fresh Marsh Bane and she—”

“Marsh Bane? I gotto go an’ get *Marsh Bane*?”

“Please, Boggart,” pleaded Jenna. “It’s for the boy with the burned hands. He’s very ill.”

“Oh. Well, I is very sorry to ’ear that. But I is also sorry to be out again gettin’ sunburned and havin’ no sleep. Not ter mention havin’ ter ferret around under all them *disgustin’* slugs.” The Boggart shuddered and blew a large bubble out of his snub, seal-like nose. Jenna caught a whiff of the fabled Boggart Breath; she stepped back and swayed slightly. Boggart Breath was even stronger in the hot sun.

“Tell Zelda I’ll bring the Marsh Bane around as soon as I finds some,” said the Boggart, and with that he sank back into the mud.

A few minutes later Jenna saw him surface in the Mott, a wide channel that ran all the way around the island. She watched the Boggart make speedy progress along the channels and ditches that led from the Mott out into the Marsh until, some distance away, he came to the Hundred-Foot Pit where the Marsh Bane grew. Jenna watched him raise his head from the water, take a deep breath and disappear from view.

The Boggart closed his ears and nostrils and sank like a stone into the Hundred-Foot Pit. He was an expert diver and could hold his breath for at least an hour, so he did not mind the diving part of his errand at all. What he did mind, however, were the things he knew he would find on the bottom of the pit. The Boggart was not a squeamish creature, but the Great White Marsh Slugs—which were forever in a state of semi-decomposition—made even him shudder. A pile of the giant slugs lived at the bottom of the pit, and it was underneath these that the Marsh Bane flourished, nourished by the rotting slug flesh. Marsh Bane was a powerful catalyst for any potion, but *fresh* Marsh Bane...the Boggart shook his head disapprovingly. He hoped Zelda knew what she was doing, messing around with the fresh stuff.

Jenna sat beside the Mott, waiting for the Boggart to resurface. To while away the time she picked up a few small gray pebbles and stroked them, in the hope that one of them might be her old pet rock, Petroc Trelawney. Silas had given her Petroc for her tenth birthday, but he had wandered off during Jenna's last MidSummer Visit. Jenna still hoped she might find him, but none of the pebbles she stroked stuck their stumpy little legs out as Petroc would have done. She sighed and threw them one by one into the Mott and hoped that the Boggart would not be too long.

Jenna was not the only person waiting for the Boggart. Beside the Hundred-Foot Pit, lying on a patch of soft grass, lay the long, thin figure of a boy. He was dressed in a pair of ill-fitting patchwork trousers and a loose tunic made from some rough woven cloth. Despite Aunt Zelda's best efforts to feed him up, Merrin Meredith, ex-Apprentice to DomDaniel, was still as thin as a stick. It was now well over a year since Aunt Zelda had nursed him back to life after he had been **Consumed** by his old Master, but echoes of the experience still hovered in the haunted look in his deep gray eyes. On his good days Merrin did not mind Aunt Zelda's company, but on his bad days—and this was one of them—he could not bear to be near her, or anyone else. On these days, Merrin still felt as if he were **Consumed** and did not really exist.

Merrin was cross. He had felt cross ever since a talkative rat had arrived with an urgent request for the Boggart to go out to the Port side of the Marsh and take the canoe to collect the horrible Princess girl. Merrin had hung around by the channel that came in from the Port side, and when the canoe came into view he had felt even more cross.

Sure enough, there was the stuck-up Princess girl sitting in the front of the canoe, just as he had expected. But there were three others with her. *Three*.

One of them didn't look too bad. He was a thin, grubby boy who reminded Merrin of the pet wolf his old Master had kept for a while. But the other two were the last people in the world that Merrin wanted to see. There was that nasty Nicko boy who had once fought him and called him a pig and twisted his arm so that it had really hurt. But worst of all there was that Septimus Heap kid—the one who had stolen his name. His *own name*. It was no good that Aunt Zelda kept telling him that his real name was Merrin Meredith—what did she know? He had been called Septimus Heap all his life. It may have been a stupid name, but it was all he had known.

In a bad temper, Merrin had gone off to his place by the Hundred-Foot Pit. He knew he would not be disturbed until Aunt Zelda called him back at dusk, but now, to his irritation, he *had* been disturbed—by the smelly old Boggart.

Merrin lay angrily jabbing a pointed stick into the mud, waiting for the Boggart to go away and leave him alone. After what felt like an age, there was a spluttering gurgle beside him, and he saw the Boggart's head break the surface of the thick brown water. Merrin said nothing; he was wary of the Boggart, as he was of most creatures. The Boggart shook his head and spat out a spray of foul-smelling water, some of which landed on Merrin.

“Disgustin’” the Boggart told Merrin. “Filthy things. There’s more of ’em down there than ever. Had to *shovel* ’em out of the way. I’ll be pickin’ bits a slug outta me nails fer days. Eurgh.” The Boggart shuddered. “Still, I got Zelda’s Bane.” He held up a fistful of wriggling white streamers that immediately began to shrivel up in the sunlight. “Oops,” said the Boggart, plunging them back under the water. “Mustn’t let ’em dry out.” With that he was off along the channels to the Mott where Jenna saw him and ran to the bridge to meet him.

Merrin watched her while he speared an unsuspecting Marsh beetle with a well-aimed stab.

DRAGONS

There had been two small explosions in the potion cupboard—and a good deal of foul-smelling green smoke had poured out from under the door when Aunt Zelda added the fresh Marsh Bane—but now, at last, after she had dripped thirteen drops of Cat’s Claw Concoction onto his tongue, Wolf Boy was sleeping peacefully.

The MidSummer sun had just set. Jenna, Nicko and Septimus were sitting on the doorstep watching the last streaks of red disappear and the pinpoint light of Venus become steadily brighter in the darkening sky. Merrin was keeping as far away from them as he could. He was busying himself at the far end of the cottage, feeding and counting his large collection of ants, which Aunt Zelda let him keep in an assortment of old potion jars.

As midnight approached, Aunt Zelda lit a lantern for Jenna’s yearly meeting with the Dragon Boat. Merrin was already upstairs huddled underneath his quilt. But, despite telling himself that he did not care one bit what that stupid bunch were doing with that weird boat, Merrin found himself drawn to the small attic window that looked out onto the Mott where the Dragon Boat was moored.

What Merrin did not understand—because, knowing of Merrin’s delight in hurting living creatures, Aunt Zelda had taken care not to tell him—was that the Dragon Boat was indeed partly a living, breathing dragon. Many,

many hundreds of years ago, the Dragon Boat had once been a complete dragon. She had been a rare human hatching, hatched by Hotep-Ra, the first ExtraOrdinary Wizard, long before he had ever dreamed of traveling to the Castle and building the Wizard Tower. Many years later, on a terrifying night when Hotep-Ra fled his own country and began his journey north, the dragon had **Transformed** herself into a beautiful boat in order to save him from his pursuers. It was a generous gift, for a dragon can undergo only one such transformation in a lifetime; thus Hotep-Ra's dragon knew she would remain a boat until the end of her days.

At the prow of the boat was the living dragon's neck and head, at the stern was her barbed tail. The sails were her wings, folded neatly along the sides of the large wooden hull. When she had **Transformed**, the dragon's ribs had become the hull's ribs supporting the curved wooden planks, and her spine, running down the length of the hull, had become the keel. Deep in a locked hold, which no one had opened—not even Aunt Zelda—beat her heart, silent and slow.

In the light cast by the lantern, Merrin watched Aunt Zelda walk with Jenna down to the Dragon Boat. They stood for a moment in front of the prow, gazing up at the green and gold head of the dragon. Then, to his amazement, Merrin saw the dragon's head *move*. Jenna stood still in the yellow pool of lantern light, while the prow of the boat dipped down to meet her, until the dragon's head was level with Jenna's face. The dragon's emerald-green eyes looked directly into Jenna's and cast a rich green glow over her dark hair. It was as if they were talking to each other without words, thought Merrin. He watched Jenna reach out to stroke the dragon's nose and somehow he could tell that the nose was soft and warm to the touch. Merrin felt a longing to touch the dragon too, but he knew it was not for him. He noticed, with a feeling of satisfaction, that it was not for that Septimus Heap boy, or the pig boy either, as they were hanging back in the shadows watching, just as he was.

Merrin watched Jenna put her ear close to the dragon's head. He thought he saw Jenna's smile fade and turn to a frown, and he wondered what the dragon had said. Merrin loved knowing what people were talking about; he had got into the habit of listening to other people's plots and schemings when he was DomDaniel's Apprentice, mostly because no one would talk to him, and it was the only way he got to hear the sound of a human voice that wasn't shouting at him. Intrigued now by the scene by the Mott, he hopped about impatiently at the window, longing to hear what was being said.

What Merrin did not realize was *no one* could hear what was being said. His first impressions were right: Jenna and the dragon were communicating without words, as all the Queens throughout the ages had done with the Dragon Boat. Every MidSummer Day, when the power of the Dragon Boat was at its height, the Castle Queen would visit the boat. The first visit of a Castle Queen had been many, many hundreds of years ago, when the Dragon Boat was being repaired by Hotep-Ra's boat builders after she had been shipwrecked at the mouth of the river on the way to the Castle. Those were sunny visits, with the Dragon Boat regaining her strength in the bright Marsh air. But, as Hotep-Ra grew old and his powers began to wane and his plans go awry, he had become afraid for the safety of the Dragon Boat and had walled her up in an old underground temple on the island where Aunt Zelda now lived. By the instructions of Hotep-Ra, the Dragon Boat was watched over by a succession of Keepers and visited by a succession of Queens every MidSummer Day. No one knew why this had to be done, for Hotep-Ra's writings had been lost. All the Keepers and the Queens knew was that it was one of the two things that kept the Castle safe—the other was the presence of the Queen.

And now the visit was complete, Merrin watched Jenna put her arms around the dragon's neck as if to say good-bye, and then as she let go, he saw the dragon slowly raise her head to its usual position and become nothing more than a beautiful boat once more. Jenna looked at the Dragon Boat for a moment and then she and Aunt Zelda walked back up the path. As they came nearer the cottage, Merrin lost sight of them. Suddenly Merrin felt very sleepy; the slow, silent scene that had been played out in front of him had had a strangely soporific effect. For once, instead of listening at the top of the stairs as he usually did, he went back to bed and fell asleep. For the first time ever, that night Merrin did not have his usual nightmares.

Downstairs, Aunt Zelda had lit a small fire of apple wood and was pouring some celebratory parsnip and cabbage juice. MidSummer Night was an important night for all White Witches, but it was especially important for the White Witch Keepers on Draggen Island. Aunt Zelda was the latest in a long line of Keepers, but she was the very first to have the Dragon Boat moored outside her cottage, just like any ordinary marsh boat. In the past, on MidSummer Night, all the previous Keepers had taken the Queen down through the trapdoor in the potion cupboard and along the tunnel to the old temple, where the Dragon Boat had been left by its first Dragon Master, Hotep-Ra.

The Dragon Boat's second Dragon Master now sat sipping parsnip and

cabbage juice beside the fire, fiddling with the Dragon Ring he wore on his right index finger and saying to Jenna, “What’s the matter? What did she say? Tell us, Jen.”

Jenna did not reply. She stared into the fire, thinking hard.

Aunt Zelda came and sat beside them. “You should never ask the Queen—or, indeed, the Queen-to-be—what the dragon said. Even in the old days when the ExtraOrdinary Wizards still knew about the Dragon Boat, they would not have dared to ask *that*,” she told Septimus sternly.

“Oh. But Jen doesn’t mind telling us, do you, Jen? Anyway, if it’s something bad she shouldn’t have to think about it all on her own.”

Jenna looked up from the fire. “I don’t mind Septimus asking,” she said.

“I’m sure you don’t,” said Aunt Zelda. “But you do need to know about how things are done—how they’ve always been done. And without your...oh, dear...without your mother here to tell you...well, I feel I should let you know all that I can.”

“Oh,” said Jenna, and then lapsed into silence. After a while she said, “I *do* want to tell you what the dragon told me. She told me that she knows a **Darke One** is coming. She says she is no longer safe here—”

“Of course she’s safe here,” Aunt Zelda spluttered indignantly. “She is with *me*—I am the Keeper. I **Keep** her safe.”

Jenna carried on, speaking in a low, steady voice, all the while staring at the fire, unable to look at Aunt Zelda while she was telling her so many unwelcome things. “The dragon said that since the temple was washed away and she has been outside, she has been expecting a **Darke One** to find her.”

“Well, why didn’t she tell you that when you came last year?” asked Aunt Zelda somewhat peevishly.

“I don’t know,” said Jenna. “Maybe she didn’t want us to put her back under the ground again. She’s only human—I mean, dragon. She loves the sun and the smell of the marsh air.”

“Exactly,” said Aunt Zelda. “It would be a terrible thing to hide her away again. And she looks so beautiful. I talk to her all the time now that she’s out there.”

Jenna wondered how she was going to tell Aunt Zelda what the Dragon Boat had asked her to do. “She says she must leave,” Jenna mumbled.

“She *what?*” gasped Aunt Zelda.

“She wants me to ask her new Dragon Master to take her away to safety—to keep her safe just as the last one did when he put her into the old temple. I’m really sorry, Aunt Zelda, but that’s what she said. She said the Time has Come for her to complete her journey to the Castle.”

“But I am the Keeper,” Aunt Zelda protested. “There have always been Keepers here...I have made the Keeper’s Promise—to **Keep** her safe at all times. And I *will*. I can’t let her go. I *can’t*.” She heaved herself up from the stool she was sitting on. “I’m going to make a cabbage sandwich. Does anyone want one?”

Jenna and Nicko shook their heads but Septimus hesitated a moment. Since he had become an Apprentice he had missed Aunt Zelda’s cabbage sandwiches, and even though Marcia had made him one as a treat on his last birthday, it had not tasted the same. But he too shook his head; he did not feel at all hungry just then.

As he sat on the floor beside the fire, worrying about what he was expected to do with the Dragon Boat—not to mention what Aunt Zelda was going to have to say about it if he did—Septimus became aware of something pecking at him. It must be Bert, he thought, reaching out to shoo her away. Bert was Aunt Zelda’s cat who had taken the form of a duck and was in the habit of pecking anyone who sat in her place beside the fire. But there was no sign of Bert.

“What’s up, Sep?” asked Nicko.

“I felt something peck me. But Bert’s not here...Ow! There it is again.” Septimus jumped up. “Ouch! There’s something in my pocket. It’s biting me!”

“Eurgh,” gasped Jenna. “I bet it’s one of those Mud Snappers. They were jumping all over the place while I was waiting for the Boggart. Get rid of it, Sep. Chuck it out the door—quick!”

Septimus headed to the door.

“What’s going on?” asked Aunt Zelda, coming back with a great doorstep

of a cabbage sandwich in her hand.

“Sep’s got a Mud Snapper in his pocket,” said Jenna. “It’s biting him.”

“Vicious little brutes,” said Aunt Zelda. “Make sure you throw it over the other side of the Mott, Septimus. We don’t want it coming back indoors.”

Septimus opened the door and gingerly turned out his tunic pocket. To his surprise, there was nothing there. Then, as his hand hovered near his belt, something poked its head from a large hole that had appeared in the pouch he wore at his waist. It bit his finger—hard, and this time it hung on to it.

“Aargh!” yelled Septimus, dancing around, frantically shaking his hand to try to get rid of the small green thing with very sharp teeth, all of which were sunk into his right index finger, just above his Dragon Ring.

“Good heavens,” gasped Aunt Zelda. “What have you got there?”

“Getitoffme!” Septimus shouted, not daring to look. And then, the small green thing (which had not yet worked out how to breathe and bite at the same time) took a breath. It let go of Septimus’s finger and, as Septimus gave his hand yet another wild shake, it arched high into the air, narrowly missing Aunt Zelda’s collection of brooms that hung from the rafters. Everyone watched as, at the height of its trajectory, the creature opened two small wings and flapped them ineffectively as it headed straight for Jenna—and landed in her lap.

Jenna sat, staring with amazement at a small baby dragon.

SPIT FYRE

You're stuck with it now," Aunt Zelda told Septimus as she bandaged his bleeding finger. "It **Imprinted** you when it bit your finger. It's going to be a bit of a handful when it grows up, mind. You ought to get yourself a Dragon Training manual from somewhere. Though where you'd find one nowadays, I don't know."

Septimus sat looking at the cracked remains of the rock that Jenna had given him during their previous stay with Aunt Zelda. She had found it while Septimus was helping her escape from the Hunter—it had been lying in the tunnel that led to the temple where the Dragon Boat was hidden. Septimus had treasured the rock; it was the very first present that anyone had ever given him. As he stared at the thick green eggshell that lay in pieces in his cupped hands, Septimus could not believe that his beautiful rock had turned out to be a dragon egg—what were the chances of *that* happening? he wondered.

The chances were remote. Septimus did not know that there were only about five hundred dragon eggs scattered throughout the world, and it had been many, many years since a human had helped to hatch a dragon. Dragon eggs are usually found in old, long-forgotten dragon haunts, and many people who find them do pick them up and keep them on account of their beautiful sheen. Not all dragon eggs are green—many are blue and occasionally a rare red is found. But generally they spend their days in display cabinets or tucked away in old shoe boxes and never hatch, for a dragon egg needs to follow a complicated sequence of events, all in the right order, all within a certain

amount of time, to allow it to become a baby dragon. The last time that had happened had been five hundred years ago on a small desert island, when a lone shipwrecked sailor had awoken one morning to find that his treasured blue rock had hatched into an unexpected, and extremely troublesome, companion.

Like the shipwrecked sailor, Septimus had unknowingly done all the right things that needed to be done in order to hatch a dormant dragon egg. Firstly, he had kick-started the incubation by leaving the egg close to the fire at Aunt Zelda's on his last visit. A dragon egg needs sustained heat of over eighty degrees for at least twenty-four hours in order to get the process going. It then needs a year and a day of constant warmth and movement.

After rescuing the dragon egg from beside the fire, Septimus had decided to keep it in his pocket, which provided not only the warmth that the dragon needed but also the sensation of movement. A dragon will not hatch just because it is warm; it needs to think that its mother is carrying it around with her and will be there to care for it when it hatches. To a dragon egg, no movement means no mother. Septimus unwittingly provided the egg with a year and a day of warmth and quite enough running and jumping to convince the tiny dragon that its mother was very lively indeed. After the year and a day had passed, the dragon would be almost ready, but even at this stage all could go wrong. It now needed a sharp tap to wake it up—if this did not happen within the following six months, the dragon would die and never have the chance of hatching. A dragon mother would normally use this time to find a safe place in which to hatch and bring up the baby dragon. When she had done so she would give the egg a very gentle bite. Luckily for Septimus's egg, the wolverines had thoughtfully stepped in for the dragon mother when they had broken their teeth crunching the outer shell. At that point the baby dragon was very nearly hatched—nearly, but not quite. There was one last thing it needed, and this was provided not by Septimus, but by his brother Simon. The dragon egg needed a touch of **Darknesse**.

All dragon mothers had different ways of providing the last requirement. Some would kidnap a passing **Thing** and show it to the egg; some would leave the egg outside a **Darke** Witch's house overnight and hope that it would still be there in the morning. Some dragons had enough of their own **Darknesse** and no need to go looking for more. So when Simon's cloak had become a snake and wrapped itself around Septimus and the egg, it had provided the final touch and started the clock ticking. The baby dragon was then set to hatch in twelve hours' time—which was exactly what it had done.

“I don’t know much about dragons—well, not newborn ones anyway,” said Aunt Zelda as she finished bandaging Septimus’s finger and the last bite of her cabbage sandwich at the same time. “But I do know that the sooner you give them a name the better. If you leave it too long they will be Nameless and never come when you call. It’s hard enough getting them to take any notice of you at the best of times, from what I understand. And for the first twenty-four hours it should not leave your side—so you’d better let Septimus have it back now, Jenna.”

“Here you are then, Sep,” said Jenna a little regretfully. She scooped the tiny winged lizard out of her lap and handed it to Septimus. “It’s cute, isn’t it?”

Septimus stared at the sleeping dragon, which lay curled up in the palm of his hand. It felt surprisingly heavy for its size, cool to the touch and as smooth as the egg from which it had hatched.

Nicko gave a loud yawn and stretched sleepily. “Gotta get some sleep,” he said. The yawn was catching.

“Name first, then sleep,” said Aunt Zelda. “What’s it to be?”

Septimus had no idea. He stared at the dragon and caught Nicko’s yawn. He was far too tired to go making up names for dragons. Suddenly the dragon sat up and coughed up some egg sac; two tiny bursts of flame spluttered from its nostrils and scorched Septimus’s hand.

“Ouch!” he gasped. “It’s spitting fire at me. That’s it—Spit Fyre. That’s its name. *Spit Fyre.*”

“Go on, then,” said Aunt Zelda.

“Go on what?” asked Septimus, sucking his burned fingers.

“Dragons like everything to be done by the rules,” Aunt Zelda told him. “You have to say...now let me think...ah, yes—**Oh, faithful companion and fearless friend, who will be with me until the end, I name thee Spit Fyre**—or Poodle-Face or Derek or...well, whatever you happen to have decided.”

Septimus stared at the dragon in his hand and murmured wearily, “**Oh, faithful companion and fearless friend, who will be with me until the end, I name thee Spit Fyre.**” The dragon gazed at him with its unblinking green eyes and coughed up some more egg sac.

“Yuck,” said Septimus.

Septimus did not get much sleep that night. Spit Fyre was fretful; whenever Septimus dozed off the dragon nipped his fingers or scrabbled at his clothes with its sharp claws. Eventually, in a bad temper, Septimus stuffed the dragon back into the pouch he had kept the egg in and at last it settled down to sleep.

They were all woken far too early the next morning by Spit Fyre fluttering frantically at the window like a butterfly trying to get outside.

“Tell it to be quiet, Sep,” Nicko said blearily, stuffing his pillow over his head and trying to get back to sleep. Septimus got up and snatched Spit Fyre off the windowpane. He was already beginning to see what Aunt Zelda meant about a baby dragon being trouble. The dragon scrabbled against his hand with its sharp little claws, and Septimus shoved it back into its pouch again.

The morning sun was already high in the sky and shining through the marsh mist. Septimus knew he was too wide-awake to go back to sleep again. He glanced at Jenna, Nicko and Wolf Boy who were all still bundled up in their quilts and had gone back to sleep. Not wanting Spit Fyre to disturb them, Septimus decided to take the dragon outside for its first breath of morning air.

Silently he closed the heavy door behind him and walked down the path toward the Dragon Boat. Someone was already there.

“It’s a beautiful morning,” said Aunt Zelda pensively.

Septimus sat beside her on the wooden bridge that spanned the Mott. “I thought maybe the Dragon Boat should meet her baby. I mean, I suppose Spit Fyre is the Dragon Boat’s egg?”

“I imagine so,” said Aunt Zelda. “Although one can never be sure with dragons. But Spit Fyre has **Imprinted** you, so I wouldn’t complicate matters. Here, I found this for you. I knew I had one somewhere.” Aunt Zelda handed Septimus a small green book bound in what looked suspiciously like dragon skin. It was called *How to Survive Dragon Fostering: A Practykal Guide*.

“Of course what you really need is the *Winged Lizard’s Almanac of the Early Years*,” Aunt Zelda told him. “But I doubt that even the Pyramid Library has one of those. Unfortunately they were written in rather flammable parchment and you just don’t get them anymore. Still, this might be some

help.”

Septimus took the musty-smelling book and idly stared at the endorsements on the back cover.

“This book saved my life. No dragon tooth can get through the cover. Wear this book at all times.”

“I only lost one finger while I fostered Fang, thanks to the handy hints section in this invaluable guide.”

*“After I got **Imprinted** by Skippy all my friends deserted me and I was going crazy until I read this book. Now I am allowed out of the Asylum at weekends—and who needs friends anyway?”*

“Oh, thanks, Aunt Zelda,” Septimus said gloomily.

Septimus and Aunt Zelda sat in a companionable silence, each with their own thoughts, listening to the marsh sounds as the heat of the summer day began to seep through the mist and wake up the more active marsh creatures. Like Jenna, Septimus had become adept at identifying the different sounds, and he was sure he heard the squelch of the suckers of a couple of Water Nixies, followed by the sharp snap of a Mud Snapper and the splish-splash of some baby eels. Soon the heat of the sun had burned off the last remnants of the mist, and the clear blue sky promised a swelteringly hot day.

Aunt Zelda gazed up at the bright blue. There was something tense about her that caught Septimus’s attention. He looked at Aunt Zelda. Her lined round face, which was framed by her crinkly and somewhat disheveled gray hair, had an anxious look to it, and her deep blue witch’s eyes glittered as she focused on something high in the sky. Suddenly she heaved herself up from the bridge and grabbed Septimus by the hand.

“Don’t look up,” she said in a low voice. “Don’t run. Just walk slowly back inside with me.”

Inside the cottage, Aunt Zelda quietly closed the heavy front door and leaned against it. She was pale and her eyes had a desolate expression.

“Jenna’s right,” Aunt Zelda whispered, almost to herself. “The Dragon Boat...she’ll have to leave.”

“Why? What—what did you see?” asked Septimus, although he had

guessed the answer.

“Simon. He’s up there. Like a vulture. Waiting.”

Septimus took a deep breath to try and quell the knotted feeling that had suddenly appeared in his stomach. “Don’t worry, Aunt Zelda,” he told her. “The Dragon Boat will be safe at the Castle. I’ll take her back there.”

Although he had no idea how.

TAKEOFF

M*errin* watched the Dragon Boat through his eyeglass. He had found the eyeglass half buried in a Brownie burrow during one of his many lone expeditions on the Marshes, and it was his little secret from Aunt Zelda. Merrin liked having secrets from Aunt Zelda, although they did not usually last long, as she invariably found them out. But he was sure that this secret was one that he had managed to keep—by means of burying the eyeglass under a slab of rock on the grassy knoll beside the Hundred-Foot Pit. Merrin knew that as long as Aunt Zelda did not see him using the eyeglass he would be safe, for there was no way she could get across the sinking bog that surrounded the pit—only Merrin was light and agile enough to jump over the hidden stepping-stones that lay just beneath the surface of the bog.

Merrin had guessed, rightly, that the eyeglass had once belonged to his old Master, DomDaniel. There was a **Darkenesse** about it that made Merrin

feel comfortable and reminded him of old times. They may not have been happy times, but at least they were interesting and he was not stuck out on a smelly old Marsh with only a load of cabbages and an interfering old witch for company. He raised the eyeglass to his eye, careful not to let the sun glint off it and give his position away, and he smiled to himself to think it was he who was still alive on the Marsh and DomDaniel who was now nothing more than a pile of bones, picked clean by the Marsh Brownies. Serves him right, thought Merrin gleefully. That old **Necromancer** shouldn't have been so nasty to his faithful Apprentice.

It was now late in the afternoon and the high spring tide—for it had been a new moon the day before—was filling up the channels of the Marsh. Merrin's grassy knoll was now completely surrounded by black, peaty marsh water. The Marsh was quiet in the sleepy late afternoon heat and Merrin lay idly on the knoll. He had been observing the comings and goings between the cottage and the Dragon Boat all afternoon and could not make any sense of it. Aunt Zelda, who was usually so bossy, seemed to be at a loss, dolefully hanging around the Dragon Boat, while the Princess girl and the pig boy had busied themselves raising the mast and talking to Aunt Zelda. The Septimus Heap boy had been on the boat for ages, which really irritated Merrin, as he was never allowed on. Merrin tried to see what Septimus was doing, but as far as he could tell he was just looking at the tiller while the pig boy was standing beside the Mott, talking to him. Stupid boys, thought Merrin.

“Come on, Sep,” Nicko was saying. “You've flown her before so you can do it again. Easy-peasy.”

“But I don't know what I did, Nik. I mean, I didn't do anything. The boat did it.” Septimus was still staring at the tiller—he was afraid to put his hand on the tiller, a massive, curved piece of mahogany, as the last time he had done that, the Dragon Boat had come alive and set off to sea.

“Well, you're wearing the Dragon Ring this time, and you weren't before, so it should be even easier,” Nicko pointed out. “I don't see what you're bothered about, Sep. Boats are a piece of cake.”

Septimus looked at his Dragon Ring. He loved the ring, but right now he wished he did not have it—why was it *him* who had ended up as Dragon Master? Why couldn't it have been Nicko, who knew all about boats?

“Come on, Septimus.” Aunt Zelda's voice came over the side of the boat. “Sometimes there are things we just have to do. I don't want to let the Dragon Boat go, and you don't want to take her away from me. But *I* have to let her

go and *you* have to take her—that’s the way it is. She must be where she wants to be, and she must be safe. It’s for the best.”

Septimus looked up from the tiller. “But what will you do without her?”

“I will get Wolf Boy’s hands better and keep an eye on that misguided lad who’s lurking out by the Hundred-Foot Pit and thinks I can’t see him and that wretched **Darke** eyeglass he’s found.”

“409’s staying here? With that awful Apprentice boy?”

“Wolf Boy is too ill to travel, Septimus. But Merrin will not be here much longer—I intend to take him back to his mother soon.”

“His mother? He’s got a *mother*?” Septimus looked amazed.

Aunt Zelda smiled. “Yes, I think even Merrin has a mother. And I suspect she may be your ex-landlady.”

“*What?*”

“Where you stayed in the Port.”

“One of the witches? Oh, that makes sense. I bet it’s that really nasty one, Veronica. Come to think of it, she looked a bit like him.”

Aunt Zelda shook her head. “Believe it or not, I think it’s Nurse Meredith.”

“Oh, yuck. All those dead babies. She’s *worse* than a witch. So when are you going to take him to the Doll House?”

“As soon as I can leave Wolf Boy for a day, when his fever has gone. The burns will take longer to heal, there’s a lot of **Darkeness** in them. They’ll need quite a bit more fresh Marsh Bane.”

Septimus looked worried. “He will be all right, won’t he?”

“Yes. He will. I’ll bring him back when he’s better.”

“You’ll come to the Castle?” Septimus was surprised.

“Well, there’s nothing to keep me here now,” Aunt Zelda said briskly. “And Keepers have been known to pay the Castle the odd visit. I’m sure

Marcia would like to have me to stay, after all the weeks she spent here.”

Septimus grinned at the thought of Aunt Zelda in Marcia’s rooms.

“That’s better,” said Aunt Zelda, noticing Septimus’s smile.

Ten minutes later Septimus had said good-bye to Wolf Boy and promised that he would see him again soon. Wolf Boy had given him a weak smile. “Not if I see you first,” he’d said, and then closed his eyes and fallen asleep. Septimus had tiptoed out of the cottage, buttoning Spit Fyre firmly into a dragon-proof bag that Aunt Zelda had found for him. The small dragon had been fast asleep all day, but the last thing he wanted was Spit Fyre waking up and making a nuisance of himself while he was trying to fly the Dragon Boat.

Now Spit Fyre was safely stowed in a locker beside the tiller, and Septimus, Jenna and Nicko were on the Dragon Boat, ready to leave. Aunt Zelda was anxiously eyeing a small gray cloud hovering high in the sky just above the cottage. She had seen the cloud drift toward them as they were preparing the Dragon Boat and had thought it strange at the time, as the cloud was coming from the northeast and Aunt Zelda was sure that the wind was a westerly. Now she was worried, for the cloud had not moved for the last half hour, which was not normal cloud behavior.

But the Dragon Boat was ready. It was time to leave.

“Jenna,” said Aunt Zelda. “I have something for you.” She reached up on tiptoe and passed something to Jenna’s outstretched hand. “It’s the key to the Queen’s Room. In the Palace. You—you may need it.”

It was a heavy gold key with a round emerald set into the top that reminded Jenna of the dragon’s eyes. Jenna was confused. She had explored every part of the Palace since she had moved there with Sarah and Silas, but she had never seen the Queen’s Room.

“But—where is the Queen’s Room?” she asked.

“Er, I can’t say, Jenna. But you will find it when The Time Is Right. You can be certain of that.”

“When...when will that be, Aunt Zelda?” asked Jenna.

“When you become the Young Queen,” said Aunt Zelda, somewhat

unhelpfully.

“Er...okay. Well, thank you. It’s a beautiful key.”

Aunt Zelda stepped back from the boat. “Off you go now,” she said rather too brightly. “No more hanging around.” She gave another glance at the cloud, which was casting a small shadow over the prow.

“Take her back along the Mott, as far from the bridge as you can,” Aunt Zelda called out. “She’ll need a run up to get into the air.”

“Okay, Aunt Zelda,” yelled the Dragon Master.

“Remember to head north, away from the sun.”

“Yes, Aunt Zelda.”

“And don’t go too fast, for goodness’ sake—unless you have to.”

“No, Aunt Zelda.”

“Don’t fly *all* the way to the Castle or you’ll tire her. Make sure you land when you get to the river.”

“Don’t worry, we will, Aunt Zelda.”

“And—”

“Aunt Zelda, we’ll be *fine*. Really.”

“Yes. Sorry. I know you will.” Aunt Zelda stepped away from the boat and gazed at the brilliant gold hull and the iridescent green shimmer of the dragon’s head and tail, drinking it all in so that she could remember exactly how the dragon looked in the empty days to come.

Septimus took a deep breath and looked at Nicko. “Ready?” he asked.

Nicko grinned at him. “Aye, aye, cap’n.”

“Is the dragon ready, Jen?”

Jenna was up at the prow with her arms around the dragon’s neck. She whispered something to the dragon and then gave Septimus a thumbs-up sign. Septimus’s heart was pounding; there was no putting it off anymore—it was

time for takeoff. He nervously placed his right hand on the tiller.

The dragon turned her head and fastened her emerald-green eyes on the small figure holding the tiller. She recognized the one who had released her from her prison under the ground. He looked a little different now. He no longer wore his red hat, which she had rather liked, and he was bigger—more solid somehow—and had a stronger air of **Magyk** about him. But he was still the same boy, still a little scared and still wanting to do what was best. The dragon approved. She would take him where he wished to go.

Septimus looked into the dragon's eyes, unaware that he had passed her test. His hand felt clammy as he clutched the tiller, and he wondered what he should do.

“She wants to know where you are taking her,” Jenna suddenly called out.

“Tell her, tell her I am taking her where she wishes to go. I am taking her to the Castle,” Septimus replied.

The dragon nodded. Slowly her head turned until her shimmering green eyes were gazing at Aunt Zelda; then the powerful neck dipped, down and down until the dragon's head rested on the grass at Aunt Zelda's feet. Aunt Zelda knelt and put her arms around the great green and gold head.

“Good-bye, my lady,” whispered Aunt Zelda with tears in her eyes. “We will meet again.”

Aunt Zelda retreated to the cottage door and the Dragon Boat began to move. The tide was at its height and the Mott was full to the brim with dark brown brackish water. The Dragon Boat was floating free, and with much creaking and groaning the huge creature backed away from the bridge, squeezing between the grassy banks along the straight stretch of water that ran in front of the Keepers Cottage. At the first bend in the Mott, the Dragon Boat could go no farther and stopped. Before her was only a short run for takeoff. The dragon eyed it doubtfully—she had never flown from such a confined space before. When she had sailed the seven seas with Hotep-Ra, she had taken off in the middle of wide, empty oceans, usually because her Master had become bored with long days at sea and had wanted a change of pace. She had never done anything like this before.

With some difficulty the dragon squeezed her folded wings out from the confines of the banks of the Mott and lifted them up until they were raised high above her mast. The great, green, leathery folds which had lain at her

side through two hot summers and one freezing winter were stiff and dry, and as the dragon began to open them, a terrible creaking and groaning noise, followed by an ominous crackling, filled the air. Septimus, Nicko and Jenna clasped their hands to their ears and watched the leathery folds of the dragon's wings painfully open like two great hands stretching after a long and heavy sleep. All three held their breath, afraid that the dragon skin between the fingers of the wings might split, but as the folds became smooth and the sun shone on the shining green scales, they could see that all was well and that once again the Dragon Boat proudly held her wings aloft.

She was ready to go.

The dragon took a deep breath. Her crew felt her shudder and the great wings began to move, churning the hot air around them and blowing their hair into their eyes. The golden boat inched forward. The wings beat powerfully and slowly, dipping right down to the ground and swooping high up into the air, gathering strength, and then with a stomach-churning lurch the Dragon Boat suddenly shot forward.

"Stop!" yelled Aunt Zelda at the top of her voice. No one heard.

With wings beating furiously, head outstretched, muscles in the great green neck tensed, the golden boat shot down the Mott in a spume of water, and, at the very last moment possible—accompanied by a loud crack and the sound of splintering wood—she lifted up into the air, taking most of the Mott bridge with her.

Steep and fast, the Dragon Boat climbed into the summer sky. As the remains of the Mott bridge fell away and landed close to the Hundred-Foot Pit, much to Merrin's shock, she wheeled around and headed across the Marram Marshes toward the river.

The Dragon Boat was at long last completing her journey to the Castle.

AIRBORNE

Head in her mouth, Aunt Zelda watched the Dragon Boat climbing into the sky—it was an incredible sight. Although Aunt Zelda had seen the boat fly once before, when the dragon had done battle with DomDaniel’s ship, the *Vengeance*, she had only caught glimpses in flashes of lightning. Now the boat sailed into the bright summer evening sky, sunlight glinting on her golden hull, greens and blues shimmering from her massive wings. The sight of the Dragon Boat, which she had looked after for so very many years, now flying free high above her took Aunt Zelda’s breath away and tied her stomach up in knots.

But there was another, nastier, reason why Aunt Zelda’s stomach was carefully tying itself into a particularly complicated knot. For, as the Dragon Boat had begun her run along the Mott, the suspicious gray cloud had suddenly shot forward, and a blindingly bright ball of light had come roaring out of it, aimed at the boat. Aunt Zelda had screamed, “Stop!” but no one had heard her, and it was far too late for the Dragon Boat to stop anyway.

Aunt Zelda picked up the splintered remains of a plank from the bridge—the only piece to have fallen on her side of the Mott. Her worst fears were confirmed, the plank was charred and still hot to the touch—it had been hit by a **Thunderflash**.

Aunt Zelda stared into the sky, holding her breath with fear. The Dragon Boat was still easy to see, for she did not fly fast; she was built for long-haul flight, slow and steady, saving her energy. She sailed majestically above the Marram Marshes, wings beating rhythmically, head held high—and behind her scuttled the small dark cloud. Aunt Zelda's knees suddenly felt very strange. She sank to the ground and started biting her nails, something she had not done since waiting for her Witch Graduation results.

Onboard the Dragon Boat everyone had just about got their breath back after the takeoff. In fact, in the terror of the takeoff none of them had noticed the **Thunderflash**, or had any idea Simon Heap was now trailing them. Jenna was up in the prow; Septimus held the tiller and Nicko, who was not comfortable with any kind of boat taking to the air, had only just opened his eyes. He stared up at the dragon's wings, which were beating steadily. They were blowing surprisingly strong gusts of air through the boat which, combined with the up and down motion, made him feel as though the boat was at sea, rather than a thousand feet in the air. Nicko began to relax and look about him—and something caught his eye.

“There's a weird cloud behind us, Sep,” said Nicko.

Septimus, who hardly dared look anywhere except straight ahead of him, caught the concern in Nicko's voice and made himself turn around. A dark gray cloud was flying toward them in a deliberate, distinctly uncloudlike fashion.

“Simon!” muttered Septimus.

“Oh, *pigs*,” said Nicko, squinting back into the sun, which was low in the sky. “Do you really think so?”

“It's a **Darke** cloud. I thought I felt something just now, but I told myself it was just because I was feeling scared about flying. It's the same sort of feeling really.”

“What's he going to do then, Sep?”

“I dunno,” Septimus replied, glancing behind him again. “But I don’t suppose he’s come just to say ‘hello, that’s a nice boat you’ve got there.’”

“Hmm,” muttered Nicko. “Perhaps we ought to go a bit faster.”

“Not sure how to do that. I could ask Jenna...” But without Septimus uttering a word, the dragon began to beat her wings more rapidly, and the great gusts of wind passing their faces grew into a gale.

But the cloud easily kept up with them, following the Dragon Boat as surely as if someone had tied it on with a piece of string.

“There he is!” Nicko suddenly yelled above the noise of the wings.

Septimus spun around in time to see Simon fly out from the cloud, and in a moment he was hovering behind them, easily keeping pace. Septimus stared back at his brother; he looked different somehow—what was it? And then he realized. Over his right eye, the eye that 409 had hit with the stone from his catapult, Simon wore an eye patch. Good old 409, thought Septimus. He smiled.

“I’ll take that smile off your stupid face if you don’t land that—that ridiculous *mutant*,” Simon yelled at Septimus.

“What’d he say, Nik?” yelled Septimus.

“Dunno. Can’t hear. Load of rubbish, I expect,” Nicko shouted back.

“Hand over the Queenling and I’ll let you both go!” shouted Simon.

“He’s still yelling,” said Nicko.

“Yeah. Keep an eye on him, Nik. Watch out for him reaching for a **Thunderflash.**”

“He wouldn’t—not up here.”

“He *would*.”

“If you don’t bring that contraption down to land right now you will leave me no choice!” Simon screamed.

Neither Septimus nor Nicko had noticed that Jenna had joined them in the stern of the Dragon Boat. She looked angry.

“I have had enough of him chasing me.” She raised her voice above the whooshing noise of the wings as they swept down, the wind blowing her hair across her face and into her eyes. “I *really* have.” From her tunic pocket Jenna drew out the **Enlarging Glass** that she had picked up from the Camera Obscura.

“What’s that, Jen?” said Septimus and Nicko at once.

“I’ll show you. Watch!” Jenna held out the **Glass** so that the sun’s rays were focused into a bright spot of light; then Jenna slowly moved the spot until it rested on Simon’s face. For a moment there was no reaction, then all at once Simon’s hand flew up to his face. He yelled and shot away, looking around to see what had burned him. Jenna tried to follow him with the light, but Simon ducked and weaved this way and that, searching for the **Darke** forces that were chasing him—for Simon had felt the **Darkeness** from the **Glass**.

He soon worked out where it was coming from. “You!” yelled Simon furiously as he saw Jenna holding the **Enlarging Glass**. Shaking with rage, Simon took a **Thunderflash** from his belt. “*That* will be the last thing you ever do,” he screeched.

This time they heard him—and seconds later they also heard the **Thunderflash**. A loud rumble shook the air as a brilliant ball of white light flew from Simon’s outstretched hand and roared toward the Dragon Boat. Instinctively Jenna, Nicko and Septimus threw themselves onto the deck, although they knew that when the **Thunderflash** struck it would make no difference where they were. As they hit the deck, a terrifying thud knocked the boat sideways—the dragon reared her head in shock and the boat slewed over, tilting the deck to a crazy angle and sending the crew rolling to the opposite side. A fearsome noise of ripping cloth and crunching bones echoed around them, and then the thing they had all been dreading happened—the Dragon Boat began to fall.

Jenna forced herself to look up. A plume of black smoke trailed from the dragon’s right wing, which hung limp and broken at her side, and the smell of burned flesh filled the air. The remaining good wing flapped frantically, trying to right the boat and stop the freefall to the Marsh below. Jenna clung to the side of the boat, willing the dragon to stay aloft. She saw the dragon painfully spread the injured wing out until, although it hung limp and broken, it was now horizontal and could act like a stabilizer. Slowly the deck tilted back to a small incline rather than a steep mountainside, but they were still falling.

Leaving the boys at the tiller, Jenna inched her way up the sloping deck until she was back at the dragon's neck.

Simon's laugh echoed eerily around the boat. Although he had not quite scored the direct hit he had hoped for—due to the irritating fact that he could see through only one eye—he had wounded the dragon, and his next shot would finish the job. Simon took his third and last **Thunderflash** from his belt.

“Now!” Jenna whispered to the dragon.

The dragon's tail twitched. As Simon flew in close, it suddenly flashed in the sunlight; the golden barb whipped through the air and hit him full on, hurling him into the sky. Like a baseball sailing out of the ballpark, Simon arched up, up into the blue in a perfect curve, until, at the peak of his parabola, gravity reclaimed him, and he began his descent, describing an equally perfect curve all the way down to the Hundred-Foot Pit.

Merrin was in the middle of a shouting match with Aunt Zelda when Simon Heap shot past him and entered the pit with the most enormous splash. Being soaked in filthy bog water did not improve Merrin's mood one bit. He was fed up with Aunt Zelda telling him what to do—what business was it of hers if he had an eyeglass? Wasn't he allowed *anything* of his own? She was as bad as DomDaniel. No, she was *worse*. At least DomDaniel had let him keep things—well, things that no one else had wanted.

The argument had erupted in the middle of Simon throwing his last **Thunderflash**. As the tremendous roar shook the cottage, Aunt Zelda had looked away in despair, and a glint of sun by the Hundred-Foot Pit had caught her eye. She had seen Merrin gleefully watching the battle through his **Eyeglass**. The **Darke Eyeglass** was bad enough, but what had really got to Aunt Zelda was the expression on Merrin's face—he looked happier than she had ever seen him before. Happy, thought Aunt Zelda, at the fact that the three people she loved most in the world were quite possibly about to fall to their deaths.

“Put that wretched **Eyeglass** away!” Aunt Zelda had yelled angrily.

Merrin had jumped with surprise and then pointedly ignored her. He was not going to miss the best thing he had seen in years.

“I will not have that **Darke** thing here any longer!” Aunt Zelda carried on. “You will throw it in the pit *right now!*”

Goaded, Merrin had yelled back, “No, I won’t!” and missed seeing the swipe of the dragon’s tail. But neither Merrin nor Aunt Zelda missed the gigantic splash Simon Heap made as he fell to earth and disappeared into the black depths of the Hundred-Foot Pit.

Simon Heap shot all the way down to the bottom of the pit, where he desperately fought his way out of a forest of clinging strands of Marsh Bane. Fifty-five seconds later he emerged, gasping for breath and covered in decayed slugs. Merrin was nearly sick with the stench of it, but something drew him toward Simon; the boy offered him a hand and pulled him from the pit. Simon lay in a spluttering, slimy heap on the bright green grass of the knoll and coughed up a few slugs. Merrin sat beside him, staring at this stranger who had arrived out of the blue. Maybe he was a Sign. A savior. A way out of being told what to do by Aunt Zelda. A way out of eating cabbage every day. He glanced up guiltily at the thought of Aunt Zelda, but she had rushed into the cottage and was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly Simon sat up, coughed up a bucketful of marsh water and noticed Merrin for the first time.

“Where’d you get that?” he demanded.

“What?” asked Merrin in injured tones. Why, Merrin wondered, did everyone always talk to him as though he had done something wrong?

“That **Eyeglass.**”

“Nowhere. I—I mean I found it. It’s mine.”

Simon looked at the boy, sizing him up. An unusual lad, he thought. Could be useful. But what was he doing here, out on the Marsh in the middle of nowhere?

“You live with the old witch, then?” Simon asked.

“No,” Merrin said sulkily, as though Simon had accused him of something really bad.

“Course you do. Where else would you live in the middle of this dump?”

“Yeah...” Merrin allowed himself a smile. “It is a dump, isn’t it? Stupid cottage full of poxy little potions. She’s got no idea what the real stuff is like.”

Simon looked at Merrin with narrowed eyes. “And you do?” he asked in a low voice.

“Yeah. I was Apprentice to the best **Necromancer** there has ever been. He trusted me with everything. *Everything.*”

Simon looked surprised. So this must be DomDaniel’s old Apprentice. Somehow he had survived being **Consumed**—there must be something more to the boy than met the eye. An idea began to form in Simon’s mind. “You must miss him terribly,” he said sympathetically.

“Yeah,” muttered Merrin, persuading himself that he did indeed miss DomDaniel. “Yeah, I do.”

Simon looked Merrin up and down. He wasn’t ideal, but he was someone he could do business with. And he wanted to get his hands on that **Eyeglass**. “D’you want a job?” asked Simon.

“A job?” asked Merrin, taken aback.

“Yes. You know, similar to what you did before.”

“How similar?” asked Merrin suspiciously.

“How do I know,” said Simon, somewhat exasperated, “seeing as I don’t know exactly what you did before? Are you going to take the job or not?”

“Merrin!” Aunt Zelda’s angry shout suddenly pierced the air. “Merrin, get away from that *evil man*—come back here right now!” Then, with more pressing things to do, she rushed into the cottage.

Merrin watched Aunt Zelda’s angry patchwork figure disappear. How dare that old witch yell at him like that? What made her think he was going to do what she told him?

“Well,” said Simon impatiently, “are you going to take the job?”

“Yes,” said Merrin, “I’ll take it.”

“Shake on it,” said Simon. Merrin took Simon’s outstretched hand and before he knew what was happening, his arm felt as if it was being pulled

from its socket.

“Aah!” Merrin yelled in pain as his feet left the ground and Simon pulled him roughly aloft. With some difficulty Simon managed to gain just enough height to take him over the roof of Keeper’s Cottage—although Merrin’s dangling feet caught in the thatch and one of the boy’s boots fell off. Merrin looked down at the roof in horror, already regretting his snap decision. “Help!” he yelled.

His voice drifted down the chimney and did no more than enter Wolf Boy’s fevered dreams. Aunt Zelda heard nothing. She was too busy to notice that the boy she had saved from being **Consumed**, the boy she had carefully nursed back to health, had left her and gone back to where he had come from.

LANDING



T*he Dragon Boat* was rapidly losing altitude. Septimus had just managed to avoid crashing into a small island overrun with chickens—and that had taken the Dragon Boat’s last ounce of strength. Now her head hung low, her eyes were dull and her one good wing was trembling with exhaustion.

“Tell her it’s not far now. I can see the river,” Septimus called to Jenna, who was murmuring a constant stream of encouraging words to the dragon. “Tell her if she can just keep going for a few more minutes...”

“We’re awful close to the ground, Sep,” muttered Nicko, peering over the side of the boat. They were skimming over a large area of bright green—which was a sure sign of the sinking Quake Ooze. “P’raps we ought to look for somewhere to crash-land.”

“Like where?” snapped Septimus.

“I dunno. A flat bit I s’pose.”

“A nice flat bit of Quake Ooze, you mean? With a load of Brownies in it?”

“All right, Sep. No need to get snappy.”

Septimus's eyes were fixed on the river. "I just—I just want to get her back safe. *Whoaaaaaa!*" The boat gave a terrifying lurch. "Come on. Come on," Septimus muttered under his breath. "You can do it. Yes...yes, you *can*."

Nicko willed the dragon on. He felt helpless, and feeling helpless on a boat was the worst thing in the world for Nicko.

Suddenly the deck tilted down ominously. "We're not going to make it, Nik," Septimus said flatly.

"Yeah, maybe not. Can you crash-land her?"

"Can't say I've tried recently. This is *scary*."

"I know."

The Dragon Boat dropped again and Septimus felt as though he had left his stomach behind.

"Going down, Sep," Nicko said grimly.

"Yep. Down we—hey, hang on...what's that—oh, that's all we need."

A small white cloud had appeared over the Marsh and was racing toward them.

"Simon doesn't give up, does he?" said Nicko. "And I don't suppose he's come to give us a hand. Oh, pigs—he's *fast*."

No more than a few moments later the cloud was upon them, and a thick white mist had enveloped the boat.

"Can you see him, Sep?" Nicko's voice came through the cloud.

"No—where is he?" Septimus hung on to the tiller and stared grimly ahead, seeing nothing but impenetrable white and bracing himself for the crack of a **ThunderFlash** or the splash of the Quake Ooze.

Suddenly Jenna's voice came excitedly through the mist. "The dragon says she's being lifted up. She's being carried by the cloud."

As Jenna spoke, Septimus felt the whole boat relax. The shuddering with every beat of the dragon's wing disappeared, and the terrifying creakings and groanings that had accompanied the dragon's frantic attempts to stay airborne

quieted. The only sound they could hear was the faint whoosh of air as the Dragon Boat was carried along.

“It’s not Simon, is it, Sep?” Nicko whispered, somewhat overawed by the cloud.

“No—it’s...well, I don’t know what it is. It’s weird,” Septimus replied.

“Um—wonder where we’re going?” said Nicko, spooked by the strange atmosphere of the cloud. It reminded him of something or someone, but he could not think what—or who.

Septimus was a little apprehensive too. His feeling of relief had been replaced by a sense of unease. He did not like the control of the Dragon Boat being taken out of his hands. He moved the tiller from side to side—it swung loosely, uselessly, and had no effect on the boat now.

Again Jenna’s voice drifted through the mist. “Stop messing about!” she yelled.

“*What?*” Septimus yelled back.

“The dragon says stop messing about with the tiller; we’re going to land,” came Jenna’s answering shout.

“*Where?*” Septimus and Nicko both shouted.

“On the river, silly. Where else?” yelled Jenna.

Septimus felt the boat dip and tip forward. He held the tiller tightly, unsure of what else to do—and suddenly he could smell the river. They were coming in to land and he could see nothing. Suppose they hit a boat? Or came in too steeply and sank? If only the cloud would go away and let him see where they were going. As if reading his mind, the mist rolled up into a small white cloud and shot off, back across the Marshes where it had come from.

Septimus paid no attention to where the cloud had gone; his gaze was fixed on the dark green water of the river, which was rapidly coming up to meet them. They were going too fast. Far too fast.

“Slow down!” he yelled at the dragon.

At the last moment, just before they hit the water, the dragon stretched out

her wings as best she could, reared her head up and dropped her tail. She hit the water with a crash, bounced up and down and aquaplaned at full speed past a group of elderly fishermen who were known for their tall fishing tales. That night at the Old Trout Tavern they were not completely surprised when no one believed their latest story. By the end of the evening even *they* did not believe it.

The Dragon Boat finally slowed about half a mile up the river, just before a bend. She settled into the water, raised her good wing and spread it to catch the wind, but her broken wing trailed uselessly alongside and began to turn her in a circle, until Nicko stuck an oar over the other side for balance.

Septimus sat down wearily by the tiller and Jenna came to join him.

“That was great, Sep.”

“Thanks, Jen.”

“That cloud...” said Jenna. “Did it stop us from crashing?”

Septimus nodded.

“It was weird,” said Nicko. “It smelled funny. Reminded me of something.”

“Aunt Zelda’s cottage,” said Jenna happily.

“What? Where?”

“No—the *cloud*. It smelled of boiled cabbage.”

At Keeper’s Cottage Wolf Boy had woken from a deep sleep, and for the first time since he had held Sleuth, his hands did not hurt. He struggled to sit up, trying to remember where he was. Slowly it all came back to him; he remembered 412 saying good-bye and he remembered the cottage, but he most definitely did not remember the enormous glass flask that was blocking the front doorway. Wolf Boy had never seen anything like it. Beside the flask was a huge cork stopper, and beside the cork stopper stood Aunt Zelda, anxiously peering around the flask out at the deepening evening sky. The flask was about the same size as Aunt Zelda and about the same shape too.

Aunt Zelda noticed that Wolf Boy had woken up; she went and sat down

beside him with a sigh.

Wolf Boy gazed at her, bleary-eyed. “412 okay?” he mumbled.

“We can but hope,” said Aunt Zelda, keeping an eye on the flask. “Ah... here it comes!” As she spoke, a few tendrils of white mist wafted through the open door and into the flask. Soon the tendrils had become a long stream, pouring through the door and tumbling into the flask. Aunt Zelda jumped up and ran over to the massive flask, watching the mist stream into it and whirl around at high speed.

For some minutes the mist flowed in, filling the flask to the top. When the last tendril of mist had returned to the flask, Aunt Zelda drew a small bottle from one of her many patchwork pockets. Standing on tiptoe, she reached up and dripped one drop of a brilliant white liquid into the mouth of the flask. The mist swirled into a frantic whirlpool and swirled itself into a small, white, marshmallow-like blob.

“Good.” Aunt Zelda sighed. “It’s **Cloud Concentrate** again.” She picked up the huge cork stopper with both hands and shoved it into the mouth of the flask. Then, with the ball of **Cloud Concentrate** rolling around like a solitary marble, she pushed the giant flask across the floor, opened a large door concealed behind bookshelves at the end of the room and maneuvered the flask into a cupboard.

Aunt Zelda closed the cupboard door with a quiet click and went outside. Slowly she walked to the end of the island and looked out across the expanse of the Marshes, searching for any trace of the Dragon Boat. She saw nothing—there was no clue, no sign of what had happened to her. Aunt Zelda shook her head and hoped for the best, for that was all she could do, and retraced her steps to the Cottage. Now she was ready to deal with Simon Heap. Ready to send him on his **Darke** way and get that wretched boy Merrin out of his clutches before it was too late.

But as Aunt Zelda stepped onto the path she tripped over a solitary brown boot. She picked up the boot, saw straw from the thatch stuck in its eyelets—and she knew that, for Merrin, it was already too late.

36

RETURN

In the early hours of the next morning, while the weary Dragon Master dozed at the tiller, the Dragon Boat sailed around Raven's Rock and negotiated the tight left turn where the Moat branched off from the river. The Dragon Boat progressed purposefully along the Moat, watched only by some incurious gulls and Una Brakket.

The housekeeper, who was not sleeping well these days, had just woken from a bad dream that, as usual, had had something to do with Marcia Overstrand—although she could not quite remember what. She was sitting at the window feeling relieved that she had woken up, but when Una saw the Dragon Boat sail by, her spirits sank. She must still be dreaming, she thought. She peered out to see if Marcia was on the boat and sure enough, there was that irritating boy who was her Apprentice, so Marcia could not be far away. The housekeeper sighed and wished her dream would end, preferably with Marcia Overstrand disappearing forever. She sat and watched the Dragon Boat sail around the bend that led to the boatyard and waited for Marcia to appear.

The boatyard was deserted as the Dragon Boat drew up to the pontoon. Nicko jumped from the prow with a thick azure-blue rope in his hand, planning to secure her to a large post as she came to a halt. But the Dragon Boat appeared to have other ideas.

“Whoa!” yelled Nicko, running to keep pace with the boat's progress along the pontoon. “Stop her, Sep. She's overrunning!”

Septimus was wide awake now. “She won't stop, Nik! Jen, tell her to stop.”

There was a splash as Nicko was forced to let go of the rope to avoid

being dragged into the water. Septimus started to panic. How do you stop a boat, especially one that appeared to have a mind of her own?

Jenna called back to Septimus, “She says she’s not there yet, Sep.”



“Not where?” Septimus yelled as the Dragon Boat carried on toward a deserted cutting at the far end of the boatyard, a dead end that was known as the Cut.

“Not where she will be safe!” Jenna replied. “Hang on, Sep. She’s going in here!” The Dragon Boat made a wide arc out into the Moat and then turned so that she was facing straight into the Cut. Nicko caught up and ran alongside them. Now, ahead of the Dragon Boat was the dead end of the Cut—the unyielding Castle Wall—and Nicko knew that the Dragon Boat was traveling too fast to stop. They were going to hit the wall.

Helplessly he yelled, “Stop! Stop her, Sep!” But Septimus could do nothing; the Dragon Boat was ignoring the Dragon Master. At the prow, Jenna saw the great mass of wall rear up before them, threw herself onto the deck and waited for the inevitable crash.

“Wo...ho!” Jenna heard Nicko’s yell of astonishment and felt the air suddenly chill and darken. A smell of underground dampness hit her nostrils and, as she dared to look up, the Dragon Boat came to a halt—inside the Castle wall, in a vast, vaulted lapis lazuli cavern.

Jenna picked herself up from the deck and whistled under her breath. “You can open your eyes now, Sep,” she said. “The Dragon Boat’s come home.”

On the other side of the boatyard, a candle flared to life in the window of the small ramshackle hut. Jannit Maarten was suddenly awake. A moment later the door to Jannit’s shack opened, and the flickering flame disappeared as her candle dropped from her hand. “What the—what in the name of Neptune is *that*?” Jannit gasped. She set off across the yard like a fox after a rabbit, leaping over the boats and the boatyard clutter, and a few moments later she was standing next to Nicko. Lost for words, Jannit surveyed an incredible new dimension to her beloved boatyard. Granted, it was a little ostentatious for Jannit’s simple tastes. She herself would never dream of lining such a gigantic boathouse in lapis lazuli of all things, and she most certainly would not have gone to the trouble of drawing all those funny little pictures over it; and as for the gold inlay around the door—well that was just plain silly. But Jannit could see that it was a truly astounding space—and within it lay an incredible boat. Jannit, who was not given to emotion, found herself a little overcome and had to sit down suddenly on an upturned dinghy.

“Nicko,” Jannit said faintly. “Is—is this something to do with you? Did you find this?”

“No, the—the Dragon Boat found it. She *knew*....” Nicko ran out of words. He could not get the image out of his head: the Dragon Boat, head held high, heading fast—too fast—along the Cut. And then, as he stared in horror at the thick Castle Wall looming before her, Nicko had seen a brilliant flash from a gold disk set high up in the wall that he had never noticed before. The dragon had breathed a ribbon of fire from her nostrils, and as the flames touched the gold, the seemingly solid stones had melted before her and the stunning lapis lazuli cavern had been revealed. Nicko had watched the Dragon Boat glide serenely inside and come to a gentle halt. It was the most wonderful thing that he had ever seen. He only wished Jannit could have seen it too.

Septimus and Jenna clambered out of the Dragon Boat and walked

carefully along the marble walkways on either side of the Dragon House. They joined Nicko and Jannit outside, and silently all four watched the Dragon Boat settle herself, like a swan on her nest, into the safety of the Dragon House.

“You know,” said Jannit, after a while, “once, when I was a girl, I read about something like this. I was a bit of a tomboy and my aunt gave me a wonderful book. Now, what was it called? Oh, yes, I remember—*A Hundred Strange and Curious Tales for Bored Boys*. Got me interested in boats, that did. But of course, it can’t be the boat I read about...”

“Well,” Septimus said quickly, “that was just a story.”

Jannit shot him a glance, remembering that he was Marcia’s Apprentice. “Yes,” she said quickly, “of course.”

Jenna and Septimus left Nicko and Jannit sitting with the Dragon Boat and set off for the Wizard Tower. Septimus had checked inside the dragon-proof bag and saw to his relief that Spit Fyre was still fast asleep, and so, carefully carrying the sleeping dragon, they walked wearily through the deserted streets. The new moon had set and it was dark, but Jenna and Septimus felt safe at night in the streets of the Castle, unlike those of the Port; they knew the twists and turns, the alleys to avoid and the shortcuts to take. As they neared Wizard Way, the glow from the torches lit up the night, and they slipped down a narrow path. Soon Septimus pushed open the old wooden side gate that led into the courtyard of the Tower.

They had decided that Jenna would spend the rest of the night at the Wizard Tower and go back to the Palace in the morning. Jenna followed Septimus up the steep marble steps; he muttered the password and the heavy silver doors swung silently open.

Noiselessly the pair crossed the Great Hall. Jenna glanced down to see the words WELCOME, PRINCESS AND APPRENTICE, UPON YOUR SAFE RETURN, WELCOME, SPIT FYRE flickering in subdued nighttime colors across the floor. The inside of the Tower felt as strange as always to Jenna; the strong smell of **Magyk** in the air made her feel slightly giddy, and although she was aware of being surrounded by **Magykal** sounds she could not hear them properly—it was as if they were just out of reach. Jenna picked her way across the floor, which felt as though she were walking across sand, and followed Septimus onto the silver spiral stairs. As the steps began to move upward, both she and Septimus

wearily sat down for the long journey to the top of the Tower.

The spiral stairs were in nighttime mode, which meant they traveled slowly and silently. Jenna dozily rested her head against Septimus's shoulder and counted the floors as they went up. A dim bluish-purple haze lit each floor and the gentle sound of snoring drifted from one or two of the older Wizards' rooms. As they approached the twentieth floor Jenna and Septimus stood, ready to step off. Suddenly Jenna grabbed hold of his arm.

"Look..." she whispered.

"What's *he* doing here?" muttered Septimus. Silently, he and Jenna stepped onto the landing and tiptoed toward Marcia's massive purple front door. A thin figure wearing brown robes edged with the blue flashes of a sub-Wizard and an oddly shaped plaid hat with earflaps tied under his chin was sitting on a small wooden chair outside the door, his head drooping as he slept.

"Who is it?" whispered Jenna.

"Catchpole," hissed Septimus.

The figure suddenly snapped awake. "Yes? Yes?" he said, looking around, confused. He caught sight of Septimus. "What do you want, 412?" he barked. Septimus jumped to attention. He couldn't help it; it was, for an awful moment, as if he were back in the Young Army again being shouted at by the disgusting Catchpole.

Suddenly Catchpole remembered where he was and—with a feeling of horror—who Septimus now was. "Ah...er, excuse me, Apprentice. I wasn't thinking. Very sorry. No offense meant."

Septimus still looked shocked, so Jenna said politely, "We're staying here tonight, would you let us in, please?" Catchpole peered into the gloom. His eyesight was not good (which was one of the many reasons he had been no good as a Deputy Hunter) and he had not realized anyone was with Septimus. When he saw who she was he jumped up, sending the chair clattering to the ground.

"Oh, goodness. It's...so sorry, Princess, I didn't see you."

"Don't worry, Catchpole," Jenna said with a smile, pleased at the effect she was having. "Just let us past, will you?"

“No. Sorry. Under orders to let no one through the door. Security measures. Sorry. Really terribly, terribly sorry about that,” Catchpole said anxiously.

“Why?” asked Jenna.

“I’m just following orders, Princess.” Catchpole looked wretched.

Septimus had had enough. “Oh, buzz off, Catchpole,” he said. “We’re going in whether you like it or not.” He stepped forward and the heavy purple door recognized the Apprentice. It swung open and Jenna followed Septimus into Marcia’s rooms, leaving Catchpole wringing his hands in despair.

It was pitch-black inside. “Why wouldn’t Catchpole let us in?” Jenna whispered. “You don’t think something awful has happened, do you?” Septimus stood quietly for a moment while the glow from his Dragon Ring grew brighter. He was listening hard.

“No,” he said. “I can’t feel any **Darke** stuff. Well, no more than the usual **Shadow**. And I can hear...yes, I’m sure I can hear Marcia breathing. Listen.”

“I can’t hear a thing, Sep,” Jenna whispered.

“No? Oh, well, I suppose not. I’m learning to **Hear Human Breath from Beyond**. It’s how Dad found you, you know. And how Marcia found me under the snow. I’m not that good yet, but I can easily hear Marcia.”

“Oh. But how—how do you know it’s not the **Shadow** breathing?”

“Easy-peasy. The **Shadow** doesn’t breathe, silly. It’s not alive. And it’s certainly not human.”

Hearing that did not make Jenna feel any better. “It’s a bit dark in here, Sep,” she said.

Septimus touched a candle beside the great stone fireplace. It flared to life, casting dancing shadows across the wall and illuminating the **ShadowSafe**, which lurked in the corner like a gigantic spider awaiting its prey. Jenna shivered. The **ShadowSafe** was creepy; there was something about it that reminded her of the Observatory.

“You cold, Jen?” asked Septimus. He clicked his fingers and some small kindling sticks jumped into the fireplace and set fire to themselves. Then a

couple of big logs heaved themselves out of the log basket, thumped down on top of the kindling and obligingly burst into flames. Soon the warm firelight filled the room and Jenna began to feel less spooked.

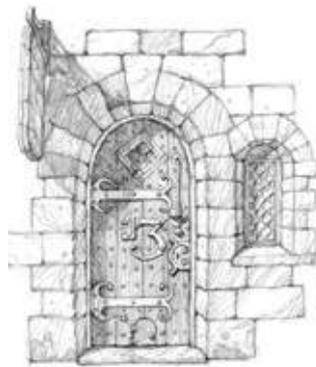
“Come on,” said Septimus, “you can have the visiting Wizards’ room. It’s really nice. I’ll show you.” But Jenna hung back. She thought of the **Shadow** upstairs waiting beside Marcia.

“Thanks, Sep,” she said. “But I’d rather stay down here by the fire.”

Septimus glanced at Jenna’s pale face. Being with all that **Darke** stuff at Simon’s place had not done her any good, he thought. “Okay, Jen,” he said. “I’ll stay with you.”

Sometime later, a tall figure stood in the doorway and saw two forms asleep under a pile of her best purple blankets. Marcia lingered for a moment and smiled. That irritating ex-Message Rat had been right. They were safe. Well, of course she had known it all along, but even so, it was good to see them back again.

Marcia tiptoed away. The **Shadow** lingered and cast a malevolent glance at the two sleeping figures, its eyes briefly flaring a dull yellow, and then it turned and followed Marcia back up the chilly stone stairs.

IN SEARCH OF DRAXX

What on earth is that?” Marcia demanded crossly, quickly forgetting how relieved she had been the night before to see Septimus and Jenna back safely. But Marcia was not feeling her best. She had woken to see the **Shadow** lounging on her pillow. This was not unusual, for over the past few months the **Shadow** had been growing more visible, especially first thing in the morning. But it had always been silent—until that moment. What had actually woken Marcia was the sound of a low, sepulchral voice calling her name over and over. “Marcia...Marcia...Marcia...”

In a fit of anger, Marcia had thrown one of her best purple python shoes at the ghastly **Thing**, but the shoe had, of course, gone straight through it. The shoe had shot across the room and smashed a small glass pot that Alther had given Marcia when, as his Apprentice, she had finally mastered a particularly difficult **Projection**. The broken pot had upset Marcia more than she expected, and she had stormed downstairs in a bad temper. She had had quite enough of the **Shadow**, she decided as she threw open the kitchen door and yelled at the coffeepot to *get a move on will you*. After breakfast she decided she would go straight down to old Weasal and insist on getting the **Stopper**—the very last piece of the **ShadowSafe**—immediately.

“Septimus,” said Marcia in a loud voice.

Septimus sat up with a start and for a moment could not remember where he was. Marcia soon reminded him. “The Wizard Tower,” she said, folding her arms crossly, “is a place of **Magyk**. Not a menagerie.”

“What?” asked Septimus.

“Look at my best blankets—*full* of holes. I don’t know where you found that giant moth, but you can take it straight back.”

“What giant moth?” asked Septimus, wondering if he’d missed something.

“Huh?” mumbled Jenna, emerging from under the pile of blankets.

“Oh, hello, Jenna,” said Marcia. “Nice to see you back. The rat said—well, that wretched rat said a lot of things, most of it rubbish as far as I could tell—but he did say that you made it to the MidSummer Visit. Well done.”

“Thank you,” said Jenna sleepily. She sat up and stuck her foot through a large hole in the blanket. She wiggled her toes as if surprised to see them and suddenly something green pounced. “Ouch!” she yelled.

“Spit Fyre!” gasped Septimus, taken aback. Aunt Zelda had told him that the dragon would grow in sudden spurts but he had not expected this. Spit Fyre had eaten his way out of the dragon-proof bag and was now the size of a small dog. Septimus grabbed hold of the dragon and pulled him off Jenna’s foot. “You all right, Jen?” he asked.

“Yes. I think so—still got ten toes,” Jenna rubbed her foot, which was a little scratched from the dragon’s claws. “Sep,” she said, looking at Spit Fyre, whose small green tongue was flicking over Septimus’s hand, hoping for breakfast, “he wasn’t as big as that last night, was he?”

“No,” muttered Septimus. He could tell this was going to be trouble and he hardly dared look at Marcia. He knew what she would say. And, sure enough, she said it.

“I told you, Septimus. *No pets*. No parrots, no iguanas, no tortoises, no—”

“But—but Spit Fyre is not a pet. He’s a **Magykal** tool. Like the practice rabbit in the courtyard.”

“Septimus, a dragon is nothing like a practice rabbit. You have no idea of

the trouble—”

As if to prove Marcia right, Spit Fyre wriggled out of Septimus’s grasp and made a beeline for Marcia’s feet. He had spotted the purple python shoes. Something in Spit Fyre’s ancient dragon memory had just told him that dragons and snakes were enemies—and a nice purple snake would make a good snack before breakfast too. It did not occur to the two-day-old dragon that Marcia’s shoes were only the skin of a snake, or that the feet inside them belonged to an irritable and powerful Wizard who had a particular fondness for her shoes and no fondness whatsoever for baby dragons. A streak of glistening green shot across the floor, latched itself onto Marcia’s right foot and started chewing.

“Ow!” yelled Marcia, frantically shaking her foot. But Spit Fyre had learned his lesson since Septimus had shaken him off his finger two days earlier. He hung on tight and sank his sharp little dragon teeth into the snakeskin.

“**Teeth Releath!**” Marcia spluttered with some difficulty. Spit Fyre dug his teeth in harder.

“**Teese Release!**” Marcia yelled. Spit Fyre hung on and gave the python skin a good shake.

“**Teeth Release!**” Marcia shouted, getting it right at last. Spit Fyre let go of the purple python shoe, and, as if purple snakeskin was now of no interest to him at all, the dragon sauntered back to Septimus’s side, sat down and regarded Marcia with a baleful expression.

Marcia collapsed onto a chair nursing her foot and gazing at her ruined shoe. Septimus and Jenna held their breath. What would she say?

“I suppose, Septimus,” said Marcia after a long pause, “I suppose that—that *pest* has **Imprinted** you?”

“Um. Yes,” admitted Septimus.

“I thought so.” She sighed heavily. “It’s not as if I don’t have enough to worry about, Septimus—do you know how big they get?”

“I’m sorry,” muttered Septimus. “I promise I’ll look after him. Really I will. I’ll feed him and housebreak him and exercise him and—and everything.” She looked unimpressed.

“I didn’t mean to get one,” said Septimus gloomily. “He hatched from Jenna’s rock.”

“Did he?” Marcia calmed down a little. “Did he really? A Human Hatching...well, well, that’s quite something. Anyway, he will have to stay in your room for the time being. I’m not having him messing up any more things.” And—although Marcia did not want to tell Septimus—she did not want the impressionable dragon tainted by any contact with the **Shadow**. If this was to be Septimus’s companion then it must be kept as free from **Darke Magyk** as possible.

Marcia insisted on hearing all the details of Jenna’s escape from Simon, and when she was told about the flight of the Dragon Boat to the Castle, she looked just a little triumphant. “So I am now the Keeper,” she muttered.

Septimus was surprised. “I don’t think so,” he said. “I’m sure Aunt Zelda is still the Keeper...”

“Nonsense,” Marcia retorted. “How can she be? Stuck miles away out on those Marshes. The Dragon Boat is here at the Castle—and quite right, too. She’s a sensible boat, that dragon. Well, this Keeper won’t let her down. Catchpole!”

Catchpole pushed the door open nervously. “You called, Madam Marcia?” He gulped.

“Yes. Take thirteen Wizards down to the boatyard at once. They are to guard the Dragon Boat with their lives. Got that?”

“Thirteen Wizards...Dragon Boat...um, guard with lives. Er, yes. Thank you Madam Marcia. Will that be all?”

“I should think that is quite enough for you to manage at one time, Catchpole.”

“Oh. Yes. Thank you, Madam Marcia.”

“Oh—and Catchpole!”

Catchpole stopped his anxious retreat. “Er...yes, Madam Marcia?”

“When you’ve done that you may join us for breakfast.”

Catchpole's face fell. "Oh," he said. And then, remembering his manners, "Oh, thank you, Madam Marcia. Thanks so much."

Breakfast was something of an ordeal for Catchpole. He sat awkwardly at the table, unsure of how to behave with Jenna and Septimus, let alone Marcia, who terrified him.

"I said keep the *Wizards* out, Catchpole, not my Apprentice. Can't you tell the difference?" Marcia told him crossly, while the stove let the coffee boil over for the second time that week. The stove was never at its best in the morning, and it always felt tense and anxious at breakfast. It was not helped by the fact that the coffeepot was upset at being shouted at and was not concentrating on the job at hand. To top it all off, there was a dragon chewing one of its feet. There was a loud hiss as the coffee hit the stove's hot plate and spilled onto the floor.

"**Clean,**" snapped Marcia. A cloth leaped off the sink and quickly mopped up the mess.

Catchpole ate very little breakfast. He sat twisting his plaid hat in his hands, looking anxiously at Spit Fyre, who was in the corner by the stove, loudly gulping down great mouthfuls of porridge.

After breakfast—which for Spit Fyre was two roast chickens, three loaves of bread, a bucket of porridge, a tablecloth, a gallon of water and Catchpole's hat—Septimus, Jenna and Catchpole sat at the table and listened to the sounds of Marcia taking the dragon upstairs, pushing it into Septimus's room and barricading the door. There was an awkward silence around the table. Catchpole sat holding a pair of damp, detachable earflaps from his hat, which Spit Fyre had coughed up shortly after he had snatched the hat from Catchpole's grasp and swallowed it.

Jenna stood up. "Excuse me," she said, "but I think I'd better get back to Mum and Dad now. You coming too, Sep?"

"Maybe later, Jen. I'll see what Marcia wants me to do first."

"I'll tell you what I want you to do," said Marcia, coming back into the kitchen, somewhat disheveled. "You are to go straight down to the Manuscriptorium and get a copy of *The Draxx Dragon Training Manual*. You want the original Wizard Fireproof Edition—don't let them put you off with

the cheap paper one, it won't last five minutes."

"It's all right," said Septimus airily. "I've got this." He waved his copy of *How to Survive Dragon Fostering: A Practykal Guide*.

"That rubbish!" Marcia snorted. "Where on earth did you get that?"

"Aunt Zelda gave it to me," muttered Septimus, "and she said I should get ___"

"—*The Winged Lizard's Almanac of the Early Years*," Marcia finished his sentence for him. "That's a load of rubbish too. Anyway, you won't find any of those as they were printed on some very flammable paper. It has to be *Draxx*, Septimus, nothing else will do."

To the accompaniment of some ominous thumps coming from Septimus's bedroom, Jenna and Septimus made a hasty exit from the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's rooms and set off in search of *Draxx*.

Jenna and Septimus walked along Wizard Way, half expecting a black horse and rider to appear again, but all seemed perfectly normal. It was midmorning by now, the sun shone down between a few drifting white clouds and the Way was busy with clerks on important errands—or looking as if they were—and shoppers browsing through the stacks of books and parchments laid out on tables outside the shops. "What's up with Marcia?" asked Jenna as they neared the Manuscriptorium. "She's even more grumpy than usual."

"I know," said Septimus unhappily. "I think the **Shadow** is beginning to take her over—I wish there was something I could do."

"Look, Sep," said Jenna, concerned, "maybe you should stay with us at the Palace for a while."

"Thanks, Jen," replied Septimus, "but I can't leave Marcia alone with that awful **Shadow** following her around. She needs me."

Jenna smiled—she knew Septimus would say that. "Well, if it gets too horrible with Marcia, you must come straight to the Palace and tell Mum, promise?"

"Promise." Septimus gave her a hug. "Bye, Jen. Say hello to Mum and Dad from me. Tell them I'll come and see them later." He watched Jenna

carry on up the Way toward the Palace until she had safely reached the gate. Then he pushed open the Manuscriptorium door with its familiar *ping* and walked into the dingy front office.

“Wotcha, Sep!” a cheery voice came from under the desk.

“Hello, Beetle.” Septimus grinned.

“What can I do you for, oh wise Apprentice?” Beetle’s head appeared above the edge of the desk. “Hey—you couldn’t do me a quick **Find Spell**, could you? I’ve lost Old Foxy’s best pen. He’s back there having a blue fit.”

“Well, I shouldn’t really—oh, here, use my **Magnet**.” Septimus took a small red magnet out of his Apprentice belt and handed it to Beetle. “Hold that with the open end pointing to where you think the pen might be and then think hard about the pen. You need to be quite close, though—the **Magnet**’s not very strong. I’ll be getting a better one when I’ve finished my **FindersSeekers** Project.”

“Thanks, Sep.” Beetle took the **Magnet** and disappeared back under the desk. A few moments later he emerged triumphantly with a slim black pen stuck on the end of it. “Saved my bacon, Sep. Thanks.” Beetle gave Septimus back his **Magnet**. “You come down for anything special? Can I get you anything?”

“Er, I need *The Draxx Dragon Training Manual*. If you’ve got one.”

“Wizard Waterproof, Wizard Fireproof, Wizard Advanced? Talking print or moving pictures? Deluxe or Economy Edition? Green or red cover? New or used? Big or—”

“Wizard Fireproof,” interrupted Septimus. “Please.”

Beetle sucked his teeth. “Hmm. Tricky. Don’t know if we’ve got that one.”

“But you said—”

“Well, of course in theory we’ve got ’em. But in practice we haven’t. The *Draxx* is very rare, Sep. Most of ’em got eaten pretty quick. Or burned. Except for the Wizard Fireproof, I s’pose.” Then, seeing Septimus’s look of disappointment, Beetle whispered, “Here, seeing as it’s you, I’ll let you into the Wild Book and **Charm** Store. That’s where it will be if we have one. You

can have a look for yourself. Follow me.”

Septimus squeezed past the large desk, and, glancing around to check no one had seen them, Beetle unlocked a tall narrow door concealed in the wooden paneling that lined the outer office. Beetle pushed the door open—which Septimus noticed was lined with heavy planks—and put his finger to his lips. “Gotta keep the noise down, Sep. Not meant to be in here. Don’t make any sudden movements, okay?”

Septimus nodded and followed Beetle into the Wild Book and **Charm** Store. Beetle closed the door behind them, and Septimus caught his breath—he felt as if he were back in the Forest, surrounded by wolverines all over again. The Wild Book and **Charm** Store was dimly lit and feral-smelling. It consisted of two long lines of towering parallel shelves fronted with iron bars, behind which the Wild Books were crowded together. As Septimus cautiously followed Beetle along the narrow aisle he was followed by a chorus of low growls, scratchings and rustlings, as the books jostled behind the rusty bars.

“Excuse the mess,” whispered Beetle, scooping up an assorted pile of ripped and teeth-marked **Charms** which had lumps of fur stuck to them and were covered in what looked to Septimus like bloodstains. “Had a bit of a punch-up last night between the **Charms** from an Ahriman Aardvark Enchantment Guide and a Wolverine Hex Pamphlet. Some idiot who doesn’t know their alphabet put them together. Not a pretty sight. Now let me see... Dinosaurs...Drosophila—no, that’s too far. Aha, Dragons should be here if we’ve got any. You have a look and see what you can find. I’ll just go and check no one’s looking for me up front. Don’t want anyone to get suspicious.” With that, Beetle scuttled off, leaving Septimus surrounded by fur, feathers and scales.

Holding his nose tightly, partly to keep out the smell, but also because he felt a huge sneeze coming on, Septimus peered into the gloom hoping to see something with *Draxx* written on it. The books did not like being stared at. They shifted about and one or two of the larger, more hairy ones emitted low, threatening growls. But was no sign of the *Draxx*, or anything to do with dragons at all.

Septimus was looking through the bars at a scaly book with no name on it when Beetle tapped him on his shoulder.

“Arrgh!” yelped Septimus.

“Shhh,” hissed Beetle. “Your brother’s here.”

“What’s Nicko want? Did he say?”

“Not Nicko. Simon.”

THE HERMETIC CHAMBER



Simon!” *breathed Septimus.* “What’s *he* doing here—again?” “He’s seeing Foxy’s dad. As usual.” Beetle sniffed disapprovingly. “Thick as thieves, those two are. Here, come with me.” Beetle grabbed hold of Septimus’s sleeve and pulled him along to the very end of the caged rows. Beetle knelt down beside an air vent and immediately jumped back up again, unnerved by a loud hiss from the *Zombie Snake Anti-Venom Formulae*. “Eurgh, I hate snakes. Gave me a shock, that did. Here, Sep, you don’t mind snakes—you go there. You’ll hear what’s going on better anyway.”

“Hear what, Beetle?” asked Septimus, squeezing in between him and the *Zombie Snake Anti-Venom Formulae*.

Beetle pointed to an air vent in the wall. “The Hermetic Chamber is through there,” he explained. “You know—Old Foxy’s room where they do all the secret stuff. I’m meant to keep the air vent sealed up but, well it gets pretty whiffy in here sometimes and you need a bit of a breeze going through. Listen, Sep, you can hear *everything*.”

Septimus knelt down beside Beetle and suddenly Simon’s voice came through as clearly as if he were standing next to him. He sounded irritated. “Look, Hugh, I’m telling you, there’s something wrong with this **Flyte Charm**. It’s totally unpredictable; frankly, I’m lucky to be here in one piece. I nearly dropped my new assistant in the Quake Ooze—mind you, that would have served the ungrateful little tyke right. I offer him the chance of a lifetime and he changes his mind mid-**Flyte**.”

“You’re not meant to carry passengers.” Septimus heard the Chief

Hermetic Scribe's disapproving voice. "The Art of **Flyte** is not a taxi service."

"Oh, don't be so prissy, Hugh. Sort it out, will you? I'm sure you can do something. Just beef it up a bit."

"*Beef it up a bit?*" Hugh Fox's incredulous tones drifted through the air vent. "This is the Lost Art of **Flyte**—the most arcane Art of all—and you come in here and tell me to *beef it up*. This **Charm** is the oldest I have ever seen; look at the gold—taken from the golden threads spun by the Spiders of Aurum, no less—so pure and soft that you hardly dare touch it."

"Oh for goodness' sake, Hugh." Simon sounded exasperated. "However wonderful the wretched thing may be, it's no good if it nearly kills the person using it. Anyway, I'm not so sure that it really is the **Flyte Charm**—it doesn't do half of what you told me it would."

Hugh Fox spluttered his reply. "I can assure you, Simon, that this is the real thing. I have been researching this for years and it was exactly where I expected it to be—**Concealed** with a **Darke Unseen** within the cover of this book." Septimus heard Hugh Fox thump something emphatically. "You have to show the **Charm** some respect, Simon, not *beef it up*."

"Look, Fox." Simon's voice sounded threatening. "I'd advise you to show *me* some respect. This is the Big Day. Everything's very nearly in place. If all goes well you'll have a new ExtraOrdinary Wizard to deal with. A *proper* one. And, even if I do say so myself, a decent Apprentice—yours truly, no less—not some Young Army boy who can't tell a cracked spell from an old sock."

"I've told you before, Simon," Hugh Fox said dourly, "I don't get involved in politics. If you ask me we've had enough ExtraOrdinary Wizard changes. There's nothing wrong with the one we've got. The lad's all right too."

Simon's voice became ice-cold. "I wouldn't say any more if I were you, Fox. Don't want to find yourself **Consumed**, do you?"

"What?" gasped Hugh Fox, sounding terrified.

"You heard. Just get that **Charm** sorted. This is serious. I'll be back in an hour and I expect it to be working."

"I'll see what I can do," said Hugh Fox sullenly.

“Just *do* it, Fox. Anyway, you’ll be pleased to know it’s my last trip. I have the final piece—see?”

There was a gasp from the Chief Hermetic Scribe as something hollow was tapped and Simon laughed.

“Don’t do that,” said Hugh Fox. “I don’t care who that was, it’s not respectful.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Simon snarled. “Anyway, you’ll find out who it was—*is*—soon enough. Now open the door, will you?”

There was a loud hiss and then silence.

“Jumped-up little—” The remainder of the Chief Hermetic Scribe’s opinion of Septimus’s eldest brother was drowned out by the loud thump of a large book being slammed shut.

“Did you hear that?” Septimus whispered to Beetle as they got up and picked their way back between the Wild Books and **Charms** stacks. “What does he mean, *new* ExtraOrdinary Wizard?”

“Look, Sep,” said Beetle as they reached the door to the outer office. “Everyone here thinks he’s a loony. We get lots of those. Think they’re going to rule the world with a few **Darke Spells**.”

“Maybe he is,” said Septimus.

Beetle did not reply. Safely back in the front office, he turned to Septimus and said, “Tell you what, I’ll go and get Old Foxy out of the way for a few minutes. Then you can nip in and get the **Flyte Charm**. That’ll cramp his style a bit. How about that?”

Beetle disappeared into the gloom of the Manuscriptorium. In a moment he was back, frantically beckoning to Septimus. “C’mon, Sep. Quick, we’re in luck. Old Foxy’s having one of his turns—he’s gone to lie down. Follow me.”

Septimus was a familiar figure in the Manuscriptorium, and none of the scribes even looked up as he followed Beetle to the passage that led to the Chief Hermetic Scribe’s Chamber. The passage was narrow and pitch-black, for it turned back on itself seven times to avoid any direct line of flight from the Chamber. At the end of the passage Beetle and Septimus found

themselves in a small plain-white room lit by a single candle. The room was circular in order to avoid any rogue spells or charms getting lodged in the corners and was sparsely furnished. A large round table took up most of the space, and an old-looking glass, taller than Septimus, was propped up against the wall. But Septimus noticed none of this when he walked in behind Beetle—his eyes were immediately fixed on what lay upon the table. Not on the **Flyte Charm**, which was still attached to Simon’s belt and carelessly thrown down upon the table, but upon the thick book that lay beside it.

“That’s Marcia’s book!” Septimus gasped.

“Shh!” whispered Beetle.

“But it is,” Septimus whispered excitedly. “She had it with her when DomDaniel tricked her into coming back to the Castle in the Big Freeze. DomDaniel took it and she hasn’t seen it since. She’s been looking for it everywhere.” He picked up the book. “Look—this is it, *The Undoing of the Darkenese*.”

Beetle looked confused. “So how come Foxy’s got it?” he asked.

“Well, he won’t have it for much longer,” declared Septimus. “Marcia will be straight down to get her book back when I tell her where it is.”

Beetle made a mental note to make himself scarce the moment he saw Marcia anywhere near the Manuscriptorium.

“Just get the **Charm** Sep, and let’s get out of here,” said Beetle, worried that Hugh Fox might suddenly reappear.

The **Flyte Charm** was a simple gold arrow. It was smaller than Septimus had expected and more delicate, with intricate patterns wrought from the gold. Its flights were made of white gold—they were curiously bent and misshapen, and Septimus wondered if this was why Simon had been having trouble. He reached out to pick it up and there was a sudden movement below his outstretched hand. Simon’s belt twisted away, **Transformed** into a small red snake with three black stars along the back of its head, and coiled itself tightly around the **Flyte Charm**. It hissed and reared up, preparing to strike.

“Aargh!” Beetle yelled in horror then immediately clapped his hand over his mouth to stifle the shout. But it was too late—someone in the Manuscriptorium had heard him.

“Hello-ooo...” A hesitant voice came from the seven-turn passage. “Is there anybody there?”

“Sep,” said Beetle urgently. “Sep—we’ve got to get out of here. Come on.”

“Coo-eee,” came the voice again.

“It’s all right, Partridge,” Beetle called out. “The ExtraOrdinary’s Apprentice took a wrong turn. I’m just bringing him out now.”

“Oh. Good. Was a bit worried there, Beetle. Mr. Fox told me to keep an eye on the Chamber.”

“No problem, Partridge. Be out in a moment. No need to come in,” Beetle called out cheerily, and then in a low voice, “*Sep, just get a move on, will you?*” Septimus was still eyeing the snake, unwilling to let the **Flyte Charm** go.

“Oh, hello, Mr. Fox, sir.” The high-pitched voice of Partridge suddenly echoed around the Chamber. Septimus and Beetle stared at each other in panic.

“What are you doing? Get out of my way, Partridge,” came the irritated tones of the Chief Hermetic Scribe.

“Oops...er, sorry, sir,” squeaked Partridge, “was that your foot?”

“Yes, it is my foot, Partridge. Just get off it, will you?”

“Yes. Yes, of course I will, Mr. Fox, sir. Sorry. Sorry.”

“For goodness’ sake get back to your desk and stop saying sorry.”

“Sorry. I mean, yes, Mr. Fox. If I can just squeeze past please, if you don’t mind, Mr. Fox. Sorry.”

“*Oh, give me patience...*”

In the time it took for Partridge to untangle himself from Hugh Fox, apologize yet again and flee to the safety of his desk, Beetle had pulled a large brass lever that was set into the wall. A low hiss filled the room and this time it wasn’t the snake. Underneath the table a concealed round trapdoor rose slowly from the floor and a chill breath of air came into the room.

“Get down there, Sep, now!” Beetle said urgently. Septimus cast a regretful glance at the snake, which was still tightly coiled around the **Flyte Charm** and hissing even more angrily, having mistaken the sound of the trapdoor for a rival snake. But with the tread of Hugh Fox’s brisk footsteps coming closer, Septimus picked up Marcia’s book and slipped through the trapdoor, closely followed by Beetle.

IN THE ICE TUNNELS



The trapdoor closed above them with a quiet hiss and settled into its seal. Septimus shivered. It was icy cold underneath the Hermetic Chamber—and pitch-black. Septimus’s Dragon Ring began to glow with its usual warm yellow light.

“You’ve got some pretty good stuff, haven’t you, Sep?”

Beetle said admiringly. “But this is a better light for down here.”

Beetle snapped open a small tin. Inside was a flat stone that gave off a bright blue light, making the white walls surrounding them glisten and sparkle.

Septimus looked around, expecting to find that they were in some kind of cellar. He was surprised to see that they were actually standing in the middle of a long white tunnel, which stretched on either side of them for as far as he

could see.

“This is the first place Old Foxy is going to look,” Beetle whispered, glancing up at the trapdoor anxiously. “We better get going.” Beetle took down from the wall a large board with two metal strips running down either side of it. Beetle put the board on the white floor of the tunnel, sat down on it and smiled. “Jump aboard, Sep.” Septimus went to do just that—suddenly his feet shot out from under him and he landed with a thud.

“Ouch,” he gasped. “It’s as slippery as ice. What is this stuff, Beetle?”

“Ice,” said Beetle. “C’mon, get up, Sep.”

“Ice? But it’s the middle of summer. Where are we, Beetle?”

“In the Ice Tunnels of course,” Beetle told him. “Where did you think we were?”

“I dunno. In a secret room under the Chamber I s’pose. *Ice tunnels*—what are they?”

“I thought you knew about the Ice Tunnels. Being the Number One Apprentice and all that. C’mon, Sep, get on the sled.”

There was hardly any room left for Septimus. He squeezed in behind Beetle and then realized he had left *The Undoing of the Darknesse* on the ice. “Hang on, Beetle, there’s no room for Marcia’s book.”

“Well, sit on it then,” Beetle told him, somewhat exasperated. “And hurry up. Old Foxy will be shoving his pointy nose down here any minute now.”

Septimus got up, plonked the book down on the sled and sat on it. Septimus felt uneasy; he didn’t like the Ice Tunnels at all. A chill wind was blowing, and as it swept by, Septimus could hear the sound of wailing and crying. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

“Right,” said Beetle cheerily. “Hold on tight, we’re off.” The sled shot off like a rocket, nearly hurling Septimus to the ground, but they had not even reached the first bend when the unmistakable sound of a hiss filled the tunnel—the trapdoor was opening. Beetle swerved into the wall and snapped his light tin shut. Septimus shoved his hand in his pocket to douse the light from the Dragon Ring, and they sat stock-still in the icy darkness, holding their breath. Suddenly a beam of light cut through the dark, shining down from the

open trapdoor, and the Chief Hermetic Scribe hung his head from the opening looking like a bizarre novelty lampshade. His pointed features peered to the left and to the right, and then his voice reverberated along the tunnel, sounding deeper and more impressive than it really was.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Partridge. I can’t see Beetle anywhere. Why on earth would he want to go down there—it’s not Inspection Day. And why would he take the book? It’s no good you trying to shift the blame when it is entirely your responsibility...” The rest of Hugh Fox’s tirade was cut off by the hiss of the trapdoor closing.

“Let’s get out of here!” Septimus muttered under his breath.

Beetle snapped open his light tin and the sled shot off along the tunnel.

They traveled fast and the little sled took the wide bends with practiced ease. After a few minutes Beetle slowed the sled down; Septimus relaxed his white-knuckled grip on the sides and glanced behind him.

“No point in rushing, Sep,” said Beetle. “No one will be after us—we’ve got the only **Charmed** sled.”

“You sure?” asked Septimus, still looking back.

“‘Course I’m sure. It is my sled after all. I’m the only one who does the inspections.”

“But what do you inspect, Beetle?” Septimus asked, as the sled trundled itself up a steady incline. “And why?”

“Dunno *why*, Sep. Nobody tells me *why*. Just come down every week and have a whiz around on the sled and look out for any cracks in the ice, thawing, disturbance—you know, stuff like that—and check all the trapdoors are **Sealed**.”

“What, there are *more* trapdoors?” asked Septimus.

“Yeah, loads. All the old houses have ’em down in the cellars. Head down, and don’t breathe in whatever you do—here comes Hilda.” Septimus ducked just as a thin white streak of wailing mist swept toward them, spiraling along the glistening walls. The **Ice Wraith** passed over the sled, swirling around Beetle and Septimus as they hurtled along, chilling them to the bone. As Septimus hunched down, he felt his hair crackle with ice; the air

in his nose and mouth froze solid, and for a terrible moment he thought he would suffocate. And then suddenly the **Wraith** was gone, wailing and curling along the walls on her endless tour of the Ice Tunnels.

“Phew,” Beetle breathed out heavily as he accelerated the sled up a steep incline. “Okay, she’s gone now. She won’t be back for an hour or so. Usually takes her that long to do the rounds. We’ll easily be at the Wizard Tower by then.”

“This goes to the Wizard Tower?” gasped Septimus, struggling to get his breath back.

“The Ice Tunnels go everywhere, Sep. Well, they go under all the really old bits of the Castle. They join up the Wizard Tower, the Palace, lots of the shops down Wizard Way and the old houses down by the Moat. Oops, tight corner coming up.”

“Aargh! Not so *fast*, Beetle. But how come they’re still iced-up in the middle of summer? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, I think it happened ages ago after something went wrong with something or other,” said Beetle vaguely. “No one wants to get rid of the ice now because they don’t want what’s underneath it getting out.”

“What is underneath, Beetle?”

“I dunno. Hold tight.” Beetle swerved to avoid two pale figures in ragged gray robes, and Septimus nearly fell off.

“Sorry, Sep,” said Beetle, righting the sled and carrying on. “I hate going through ghosts, especially those two. They keep asking me the way out. Drives me nuts.”

The sled trundled on, the runners traveling effortlessly over the smooth ice; it traveled as easily up the gentle inclines in the tunnel as it did down. Septimus had become used to the chill winds and the occasional lost ghost and was almost enjoying the journey when Beetle slammed the sled to a sudden halt and snapped his light tin shut. Ahead of them, a yellow beam of light shone down like a spotlight from the roof of the tunnel.

“What’s that?” whispered Septimus.

“Someone’s **UnSealed** a trap,” whispered Beetle.

“Who?” asked Septimus, his heart beating fast.

“It’s the Van Klampff trap,” said Beetle under his breath.

“Look—” gasped Septimus. “Someone’s coming down.”

A pair of feet wearing ice skates dangled through the trapdoor. Septimus thought it must be Una Brakket, for the rotund Weasal Van Klampff never would have fitted through the trapdoor. For a brief moment the skates dangled uncertainly in the spotlight; then a familiar figure dropped down and landed on the ice like a cat. Crouched, as if waiting to pounce, Simon Heap peered into the dark.

“Who’s there?” Simon called out a little uncertainly, his eyes not yet adjusted to the gloom.

“Simon!” Septimus gasped.

“Someone call my name?” Simon’s voice echoed eerily in the tunnel.
“Who are you?”

“Beetle—get us out of here!” came Septimus’s urgent whisper.

There was nothing Beetle wanted to do more. He slewed the sled around and skidded away in a spray of ice.

“Hey!” came Simon’s shout as, with a feeling of incomprehension, he recognized the hated green tunic of Marcia’s Apprentice. “What are *you* doing down here, brat?”

“He’s after us, Beetle!” yelled Septimus, looking over his shoulder as Simon, an expert ice-skater, picked up speed and hurtled after them in pursuit.

“We’ll outrun him, Sep,” said Beetle confidently, steering the sled around another corner and straight through the two ghosts he had avoided earlier.

“Excuse me...the way out, please...could you tell us...the way out the way out the way out...?” echoed through the tunnel.

“We lose him yet?” Beetle yelled.

“No!” Septimus yelled back.

“Right then, here we go!” Beetle shot off down a smaller tunnel, slammed

the sled to a halt and jumped off. In a moment he had shoved Septimus and the sled through an open door in the ice wall and pushed it shut. Breathing hard, Beetle slithered to the icy floor. “Service hatch.” He grinned. “He won’t have a clue.”

Septimus rolled off the sled and lay on the ground, staring up at the ceiling of what was a small space carved out of solid ice. The door was also a block of ice and now that it was closed Septimus could see no sign of it. He guessed that it was the same on the other side. “Beetle,” he said, “you’re amazing.”

“Think nothing of it, Sep. Want a **SizzleStik**?”

“A what?”

“They’re nice and hot. I keep some here just in case I get really cold.” Beetle fished out a small box from behind a couple of shovels and a blanket. He opened it and looked in. “There’s banana and haddock and...er...beetroot flavor. Sorry, Sep, I seem to have eaten all the good ones.”

“Beetroot flavor *what*, Beetle?”

“Chewy thing. Which d’you want?”

“Banana, please.”

“You mean the banana and haddock?”

“Oh, yes, please. Aunt Zelda used to do a great banana and haddock pie. Lovely.”

“Really? You can have all of them if you like, Sep.”

Ten minutes later, Beetle cautiously pulled open the ice door and peered out. The only sign of Simon was two sets of ice-skate tracks—one set going down the tunnel past the service hatch, the other returning, but to Beetle’s relief there was no sign of Simon having stopped and investigated the hideaway. Soon Beetle and Septimus were on the sled, retracing their tracks back to the main tunnel.

“Tell you what, Sep,” said Beetle. “We’ll take the quick way to the Wizard Tower. Wasn’t going to go that way as it’s a bit up and down, but I

reckon the sooner we're out of here, the better. Okay?"

"You bet, Beetle."

A few minutes and numerous turns later, Beetle stopped the sled and pointed out a sign carved into the ice. Picked out in black ice were the words *TO THE WIZARD TOWER*, written in an old-fashioned script, and an ornate arrow pointing down a much smaller and narrower ice tunnel that disappeared into blackness.

"Right," said Beetle. "You're gonna have to hold on tight now, Sep. This is where it gets hairy."

The sled took the tight turn into the Wizard Tower tunnel. It waited for a moment as though gathering its courage, and then, to Septimus's horror, the ice below seemed to fall away and they dropped like a stone.

"Woo-hooooo!" Beetle's excited shout streamed out behind him as the sled plummeted down an almost vertical slope, hit the ice at the bottom, flew up an equally steep incline, then shot off the top and landed with a jarring bump as the slope leveled off. Septimus was just getting his breath back when Beetle took a tight corner to the left and immediately slammed the sled through an even tighter bend to the right—at which point Septimus and the sled parted company. Beetle skidded to a halt in a shower of ice, spun the sled around in a 180-degree turn and came back slowly to find Septimus.

"Pretty good, huh?" Beetle grinned. "You should see my triple turns—they're the best."

"Not just now, thanks, Beetle," said Septimus, painfully hauling himself up off the ice.

"Yeah. Okay. Well, we're here anyway. Taxi service to your door, Sep. Not bad, eh?" Beetle pointed to a tall arch, which was, of course, solid ice. Above the arch two ornate letters were carved into the ice—*W.T.*

"There y'are. That's it," said Beetle.

"Oh..." said Septimus, eyeing the arch doubtfully. He picked up *The Undoing of the Darknesse*. "Come on then, Beetle."

"What—me?" Beetle sounded surprised.

“Well, you can’t go back, can you? What are you going to tell Foxy?”

“Oh, bother. I hadn’t thought of that.” Beetle got off the sled and tied it up to a silver ring set into the ice. “You have to tie ’em up, otherwise they wander off,” Beetle explained, seeing Septimus’s surprised glance at the ring. “Everyone had their own sled in the old days, Sep—and the Wizard Tower sled was something special, so they say. But seeing as this is the last **Charmed** sled, I don’t want it disappearing.”

“No,” agreed Septimus. “You coming then, Beetle?”

Reluctantly, Beetle followed Septimus through the ice arch. Sitting at the bottom of a flight of ice steps was an almost transparent figure wearing the purple robes of an ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He was fast asleep.

Septimus stopped short and Beetle slid into him, sending Septimus skidding into the ghost.

“Oo...aargh...” moaned the ghost, waking up with a start. “Who goes there?”

“It’s—it’s me,” stuttered Septimus. “I’m the Apprentice.”

“Apprentice? Which one?” asked the ghost suspiciously.

“Apprentice to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard,” Septimus told him.

“No, you’re not. You’re nothing like my Apprentice.”

Septimus wondered how to break the news to the old Wizard on the steps. “Look, I’m sorry to have to tell you this,” he said gently, “but you’re not the ExtraOrdinary Wizard anymore. You’re a ghost. You’re—well, you’re dead.”

“Hee hee. Got you there, boy. Of *course* I’m dead. Wouldn’t be sitting here bored out of my mind if I were alive. What’s your name, sonny?”

“Septimus Heap.”

“Really? Well, well, well. You’d better go on up.”

“And my friend too?”

“May as well. Off you both go. Turn left at the top and say the password. You’ll find yourself in the broom cupboard just off the Great Hall.”

“Thank you very much.” Septimus smiled.

The old ExtraOrdinary Wizard settled himself down and closed his eyes.
“My pleasure,” he said, “and good luck, son. You’re going to need it.”

BEETLE IN THE TOWER



S*eptimus pushed open the broom cupboard door and warily peered out. He waited until a small group of Ordinary Wizards discussing the weather had wandered past, and then he and Beetle crept out. As Marcia's Apprentice, Septimus knew that he had every right to be in the Wizard Tower broom cupboard if he wanted to be, but he didn't want a gaggle of curious Wizards discussing endless reasons why the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's Apprentice might choose to be there.*

"Come on, Beetle," said Septimus.

Beetle did not reply. He was rooted to the spot, staring at the multicolored floor. "It wrote my name!" His voice slid from its usual gruff tones into an excited high-pitched squeak. "The floor wrote my name—it said, WELCOME, BEETLE. That is so weird."

"Oh, it always does that," said Septimus airily, forgetting how amazed he had been when it had first happened to him.

"And now it says, WELCOME, PRINCESS. Is *she* coming here, Sep? Is she really?" Beetle had often seen Jenna walking along Wizard Way but he never dreamed of actually meeting her.

"Who, Jenna? I shouldn't think so, Beetle. She only just went home."

The Tower's silver doors had begun to swing open and to Beetle's astonishment there stood Jenna, silhouetted against the bright sunlight. For a moment Septimus was surprised too, not to see Jenna—who now had the password to the Tower and could come and go as she pleased—but at the hot summer day outside. He had forgotten that outside the Ice Tunnels, the sky was blue and the sun was shining.

“Hello, Sep,” said Jenna. “Can you go and see Mum? I told her you were back safely but she says she wants to see you with her own eyes.”

“Course I will, Jen. But I've got some stuff to do first. Simon is here.”

“Simon—is here?”

“Well, not *here*. He's—he's down there.” Septimus pointed downward.

Jenna looked puzzled. “What, under the floor?”

Septimus lowered his voice. “There are Ice Tunnels under the Castle, Jen. He's in them. *Skating*.”

Jenna burst out laughing. “Don't be daft, Sep. It's summer. There's no ice in summer.”

“Shh,” hushed Septimus. “We don't want anyone else to hear.” He smiled at the Wizards, who were retracing their footsteps. “Good morning, Pascalle. Good morning, Thomasinn. Good morning, good morning.”

“Good morning, Apprentice,” came the chorused reply.

Septimus waited until the Wizards had wandered out into the sunshine. “And that's not all, Jen,” he said. “It's true, Simon has got the **Flyte Charm**—I've seen it. He left it in the Hermetic Chamber. I would have got it too, but his belt **Transformed** into a snake and—”

“Ice tunnels...the Hermetic Chamber...a *snake*?” Jenna said, her eyes widening in disbelief. “Sep, what on earth have you been doing? You only went to get a copy of *Draxx*.”

“Yes, well I met Beetle and things just sort of...happened.”

Beetle shifted about self-consciously. He felt like a fish out of water standing in the Wizard Tower next to the Princess. Not that she had noticed

him of course. And his best friend, Sep, was suddenly a different person, no longer someone you could muck about with and squirt **FizzFroot** out of your nose at.

“Oh, hello, Beetle,” said Jenna, much to Beetle’s amazement.

“Wha—h-how d’you know my name?” stammered Beetle.

“I read it on the floor.” Jenna grinned. “I figured it was you. You look just like Sep said.”

“S-Sep told you about me?” Beetle went red.

“Course he did. You’re his best friend.”

“Oh...” Beetle couldn’t think of anything to say. He followed Septimus and Jenna as they wandered to the stairs and nearly fell off in surprise when the silver spiral started turning. By the time they reached the top, Beetle felt extremely dizzy. Give me the Ice Tunnels any day, he thought, as he staggered off after Septimus and Jenna. And then Beetle had to swallow hard—he had just seen the massive purple door that led to Marcia’s rooms and he couldn’t believe it—here he was on the top landing of the Wizard Tower outside the ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s Rooms. No one, not even Old Foxy, got to the *top landing*. If they needed to see the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, they were always met in the Great Hall. They never came upstairs.

Catchpole was dozing quietly on his chair. Septimus stepped past him and, as usual, the heavy purple door recognized the Apprentice. It swung open and Septimus gave Beetle a friendly push across the threshold. “Come on, Beetle.” He grinned. “It’s not *that* smart in here.”

It certainly wasn’t. Marcia’s normally neatly tended room was in chaos. A swath of broken furniture was strewn across the floor, topped off with assorted smashed pots, plates and vases.

Beetle said nothing. For all he knew the ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s place always looked like this, and he had heard a few stories about the way Wizards lived from his uncle who did house clearances over at the Ramblings.

“What has happened?” gasped Jenna.

Septimus gulped. Something was missing; something that had dominated the room for almost a year was gone. And then Septimus realized that it was

still there—but in pieces. “The **ShadowSafe**,” he gasped. “It’s been ripped apart. And—and where’s Marcia?”

“Maybe the **Shadow** got her, Sep...” Jenna whispered. Suddenly she grabbed Septimus’s arm. “Look—” she gasped, pointing to something moving under a pile of purple curtains that had been torn down from the window. “The—the **Shadow**. It’s under there.”

“Quick, let’s get out of here,” said Septimus. But as Septimus, Jenna and Beetle backed toward the door, the thing under the purple curtains rushed toward them, tripped over a pile of torn velvet cushions and crashed into an occasional table, sending it smashing to the floor. Then a long green tail swept out and upended the last unbroken vase.

“Oh, Spit Fyre, you *bad* dragon,” Septimus gasped with a mixture of dismay and relief, “what have you done?”

On hearing his name, Spit Fyre emerged from under the curtains. The dragon, which was now the size of a small pony, galumphed across the room to greet Septimus, tail swishing from side to side with excitement at seeing his **Imprintor**.

“Sit, Spit Fyre. Sit!” said Septimus, with no effect whatsoever. Spit Fyre rubbed his head against Septimus’s tunic and banged his tail on the floor with a reverberating *thump* that sent soot cascading down from the chimney.

“Is this your new pet, Septimus?” A familiar voice came from the pile of soot. Alther picked himself up from the grate and floated out of the fireplace. “I’m amazed you’ve managed to persuade Marcia to let you have a dragon here. I take my hat off to you—or I would if I had one. Ah, hello, Princess. And the lad from the Manuscriptorium too.”

“Hello, Alther,” said Jenna, thankful that Alther had, as he so often did, turned up just when they needed him. Beetle, lost for words, just managed a faint smile.

Septimus said nothing. He was busy tussling with Spit Fyre over a piece of the **ShadowSafe**, which the dragon was determined to chew. Septimus wrested a long black bar from Spit Fyre’s grasp, but the dragon snatched it back and swept its tail right through Alther’s knees.

Alther did not like being **Passed Through**. It always made him feel sick. “You really ought to get a copy of *Draxx*,” he said, somewhat tetchily.

“I *know*,” Septimus replied, distracted. He and Spit Fyre had reached a compromise. The dragon had one half of the bar, and Septimus had the other, which he was staring at with a shocked expression.

“Alther,” said Septimus, “there’s something in the middle of this—it looks like a bone.”

THE Placement



Spit Fyre was snoring loudly beside the fireplace. Alther had tried to get the dragon back to Septimus’s room, but Spit Fyre’s last growth spurt meant that there was no way he could fit up the stairs. Luckily, Septimus had found the half-chewed remains of *How to Survive Dragon Fostering: A Prackykal Guide* and had managed to decipher a soggy **Sleep Suggestion**, which to his amazement had worked.

Jenna, Septimus and Beetle were now in the middle of a grisly task. They were collecting the smashed **ShadowSafe** and removing from each piece an assortment of bones—human bones.

“I thought we did some weird stuff at Number Thirteen, Sep, but this is something else. D’you do stuff like this every day?” Beetle was painstakingly taking apart some curved pieces, which had been at the top of the **ShadowSafe**, and were turning out to contain a full set of rib bones.

“No, not *every* day,” Septimus replied with a grimace as he extricated a long thin bone from a narrow section that had formed one of the corners. “But this *is* the last Thursday of the month, Beetle, so what do you expect?”

Beetle handed yet another rib to Jenna, who was laying out the bones on the floor. “You do this every last Thursday—” He caught Septimus’s smile. “Oh, ha ha, Sep. Nearly got me there. I make that fourteen now, ma’am.”

“Jenna,” corrected Jenna. “Call me Jenna, Beetle.”

“Oh. Sorry...Jenna. Well, that’s fourteen ribs so far and there are still some more in here. Look how neatly they’ve been fixed inside. They’re so well hidden that you’d never know. Not in a million years. Ah, here comes another one—fifteen.”

“Mm, lovely. Thanks, Beetle.”

“Anytime, ma’am—Jenna.”

Jenna surveyed the gruesome collection, carefully laid out like a bizarre jigsaw puzzle. There, on Marcia’s best Chinese rug, the shape of a human skeleton was slowly forming, as Septimus and Beetle handed her a succession of bones.

“How much have you got there now, Jen?” Septimus asked after a while.

“Well,”—Jenna tried to remember what she knew from her Human Anatomy lessons at school—“there’s almost two arms, and, um, eight fingers, no thumbs yet—I don’t think so anyway. There are lots of little bones but I don’t know where they go, maybe in the wrist...there’s one whole leg still missing and no skull yet, thank goodness.”

“Aha,” Septimus said grimly as he pulled out a long thin section from under the upturned sofa. “I think leg number two is in here.”

“This is so weird,” muttered Beetle, as he handed Jenna a succession of small bones. She placed them carefully where she thought they belonged, then she stood up and surveyed her creation. She now had what looked like a full skeleton minus the head. Alther floated next to her, shimmering slightly and looking more transparent than usual. Jenna knew that was a sure sign that Alther was worried.

“What is it, Uncle Alther?” Jenna asked.

“I think, Princess, that this is a **Placement**. It’s obviously an incomplete **Placement**, but what I’d like to know is exactly how incomplete it is.”

“I suppose we could count the bones,” said Jenna. “And then, if we knew how many there are in a skeleton, we’d know.”

“But we don’t know how many there are in a skeleton,” said Septimus. “Well, I don’t know, that’s for sure.”

“Neither do I,” said Jenna.

“Two hundred and six,” said Beetle.

“Beetle—you’re amazing. Are you sure?” asked Septimus.

“Yep. I counted them once. It was part of the test that I had to take to get the job at the Manuscriptorium. I had one minute to look at the skeleton in the cupboard. Then they muddled it up and I had to put it back together—and count the bones. I counted two hundred, and Old Foxy told me to add six to that because there are three tiny bones in each ear that you can’t see. So it’s two hundred and six.”

“Well, *you* ought to be doing this then, Beetle,” said Jenna. “You’d be much better at it than me.”

“Eurgh, no thanks.” Beetle shuddered. “Don’t like bones. They set my teeth on edge.”

Jenna looked so disappointed that Beetle immediately relented. “Well, all right then,” he offered. “I’ll count them if you really want me to.” Beetle started his gruesome count. Five counts later he sat back on his heels and said with relief, “Finished. That comes out the same as the last one. All the bones are there. Except for the skull, of course.”

“Which will complete the **Placement**,” said Alther.

“But why a **Placement** with a human skeleton?” asked Septimus. “Aren’t they usually done with rats’ or snakes’ skeletons?”

“Usually,” agreed Alther. “But this looks horribly like a **Personal Placement**—and those are lethal.”

“Scuse me,” mumbled Beetle. “But what *is* a **Placement**?”

“I’m glad you asked that, Beetle,” said Jenna. “Because I have no idea either.” Beetle blushed.

“It’s a **Darke** device,” muttered Alther, floating above the skeleton, examining it closely. “A **Placement** is a way of gaining access to somewhere that would be impossible to get into any other way. The Wizard—and it usually is a Wizard, as these things can be dangerous—will, by some devious means, get the bones of a creature taken over the threshold of the place he wishes to enter. The person who you wish to **Affect** must carry them in willingly—you can’t just chuck them in through the window. They must be taken in piecemeal, and when the last bone, always the skull, crosses the threshold, the creature reassembles itself and then does whatever task it has been sent to do. It is virtually unstoppable. But a **Personal Placement**—which has to be human bones—is one of the nastiest **Darke** devices of all. One touch from the **Placement** and the **Intended** is dead—and worse than that, they then spend a year and a day in **Turmoil**. At least when I became a ghost all I had to do was sit in that ghastly Throne Room for a year and a day...but to be in **Turmoil** for so long...that’s terrible...terrible.” Alther shook his head.

Septimus felt sick. “The **Intended** is Marcia, isn’t it, Alther?” he whispered.

“I would say so, Apprentice. You know, I just don’t understand how Weasal could do this—”

“Do what, Alther?” The purple door suddenly swung open and to everyone’s surprise, Marcia breezed in, her **Shadow** slipping in behind her. Marcia was carrying what looked like a large hatbox. “Aagh!” she yelled. “That wretched, *wretched* dragon. Oh, I don’t believe it.”

“Marcia,” Alther said very calmly, “you have a **Placement** in here. I need to know what is in that box.”

“What are you going on about, Alther? Septimus, take that pest of a dragon down to the courtyard. He’s not staying inside a moment longer!”

But Septimus did not reply. He ran at Marcia, pushing her back toward the door. “Get out, Marcia. You’ve got to get out of here.”

“Septimus, what are you doing?” said Marcia, pushing Septimus away. Septimus gave Marcia a violent shove and the final piece of the **ShadowSafe**—the large round **Stopper**—fell to the floor and smashed. Everyone stared in

horror as a white skull bounced from the shards and rolled toward the bones lying on the floor. It took no more than a few seconds for the head to be reunited with the body.

The **Placement** was **Complete**.

Identify



The skeleton stood up uncertainly, swaying slightly as if it were trying to get its balance—then suddenly, like a ghastly puppet, it lurched forward and headed straight for Marcia.

Marcia was pale but composed. Slowly she backed away from the skeleton, thinking fast.

Alther watched the **Shadow** follow Marcia, and he didn't like what he saw one bit. The **Shadow** was no longer the hunched and formless creature that Alther had watched follow Marcia around her rooms for the past year. It was now an almost solid being—it stood up straight and tall, its dim yellow eyes shining with excitement as it hovered by Marcia's shoulder. **Waiting.**

“Ellis Crackle!” gasped Alther. The **Shadow** looked up at the mention of its name.

“Are you trying to be funny, Alther?” snapped Marcia.

“Your **Shadow**, Marcia. It's Ellis Crackle.”

“Right now, Alther, I don't care who that **Shadow** is.” Marcia stepped back over a shredded cushion; her movement was mirrored by the advancing skeleton, which made an unpleasant clicking noise with each step toward her. Marcia took another step back. The skeleton took another step forward.

“For heaven’s sake, Alther, this is serious,” said Marcia. There was an undercurrent of panic in her voice.

“I know,” said Alther quietly. “There is only one way out of this.”

Marcia stepped back again. The skeleton stepped forward.

“You have to **Identify**,” said Alther, floating a few feet off the floor and keeping pace with Marcia.

“Alther, I can’t. I don’t know who it is.”

But Jenna knew who it was. All the time she had been piecing the skeleton together, she had been thinking things through. “It’s DomDaniel,” she said. “It has to be.”

Marcia glanced at Jenna, taking her eyes off the advancing bones for a moment. “Jenna—what do you mean?” she asked.

Jenna looked steadfastly at Marcia and not at the bones—she could hardly bear to look at the same grinning skull and the empty eyes that had followed her around the Observatory. “I mean—I mean *it’s DomDaniel*. Simon had his skull but not his bones. But he told me he had found all of the bones on the Marsh. I wondered where they were...”

“Are you sure, Princess?” asked Alther quietly.

“Yes,” said Jenna. “Yes, yes. I’m sure.”

Marcia was dithering, muttering to herself. “But then it might *not* be him...it might be a bluff...in fact I’ll bet it *is* a bluff...that’s the sort of thing he’d do, **Place** some poor sailor from that ghastly ship...but then maybe it’s a double bluff and it really *is* him...it’s the kind of thing he’d love to do himself...Oh, *Alther*.”

“You must trust Jenna. **Identify** it, Marcia. *Now*,” said Alther in a low, careful voice, instructing Marcia as though she were still his Apprentice.

The skeleton was almost within reach of Marcia, and it began to raise its right arm toward her. All color drained from her face. Marcia whispered, “If the **Identify** is wrong, Alther, then—then I—I’m finished.”

“Marcia, you have nothing to lose. If it *touches* you, you’re finished.”

The bones took a big step forward.

Marcia took a corresponding step back and could go no farther; she had reached the door. She snapped her fingers and there was a loud *clunk*—two silver bars slid out of the wall and **Barred** the door. A quiet whirring noise followed, as the thick purple door **SafetyLocked** itself. Marcia smiled grimly; at least the rest of the Wizard Tower was protected from the havoc a successful **Placement** would wreak. She leaned against the door for support and began what she had to do. A purple haze of powerful **Magyk** began to flicker around the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, lighting up her deep-green eyes and shimmering across her long purple cloak.

Suddenly the skeleton lunged toward her—Marcia raised her hand and shouted, **“I Identify!”**

The skeleton stopped in its tracks. It regarded Marcia with as much of a taunting stare as an empty skull could manage, folded its arms and stood tapping its foot impatiently. *Go on*, it seemed to be saying, *surprise me, why don't you?*

Marcia was nonplussed. “Alther, it knows what I’m going to say and it’s not even bothered,” she said urgently. “Jenna must be wrong.”

“It’s bluffing,” said Alther, sounding much more confident than he felt.

Unconvinced, Marcia flashed Alther a weak smile. “Look after Septimus, Alther,” she said. “I’ll be back in a year and a day to check up on you.”

“Yes. I will. Now do it.”

Marcia raised her arm and pointed at the skeleton. She took a deep breath and said in a low, singsong voice,

“Hand on heart,

Eye to eye,

I you Identify

As...”

Marcia's voice faltered. She looked fondly at Septimus, Jenna, Alther and even Beetle, for what was quite possibly the last time she would see them as a living being.

“...DomDaniel!”

A terrible shriek filled the air.

Jenna gasped in horror, convinced that the shriek had come from Marcia. Like a wailing banshee, the shriek continued, howling and yowling around the room. Unable to bear it, Beetle threw himself to the floor and shoved a cushion over his head. Jenna stuffed her fingers in her ears, but Septimus listened. He listened and he watched, with open ears and eyes, for he wanted to hear the sound of the most powerful **Magyk** he had ever seen, he wanted to know what it felt like—but most of all, he wanted to be part of it.

Septimus took a step toward Marcia.

Wrapping her **Magykal** purple cloak tightly around her for protection, Marcia was pressed back against the unyielding door. In front of her was the skeleton, its arms outstretched, reaching to seize the Akhu Amulet from Marcia's neck. Septimus watched the purple haze around Marcia grow darker and deeper and the shapes of Marcia and the skeleton grow dim within it.

Alther shook his head, worried by the continuing shriek. Something was wrong. The **Identify** was not working as it should.

Septimus reached the edge of the purple haze.

“No!” shouted Alther, trying to make himself heard above the terrible shriek. “Keep back, Septimus. This is dangerous **Magyk**.”

Septimus ignored him. The shriek rose to an unbearable pitch and Septimus walked into the **Magyk**. He entered a thick silence where everything was slow and still, and he knew that Marcia had seen him. Her lips moved but no sound came, and she raised her hand as if to stop him from coming any nearer.

Septimus stood inside the **Magyk**, trying to understand what was happening. Now he could see the unmistakable shape of DomDaniel

appearing around the bones—he recognized the **Necromancer**'s short cylindrical hat, his straggly hair and his long black cloak—and his fat hands still reaching for the Amulet. Marcia had got the **Identify** right, so why wasn't it working? And then he realized why—Marcia was outnumbered.

Septimus now saw what Alther had seen; the **Shadow** was no longer just an indistinct form, but a wild-looking young man with yellow eyes, his teeth bared in a rictus smile. Ellis Crackle, one-time Apprentice to DomDaniel, stood next to Marcia, countermanding the **Identify**.

Wading as if underwater, Septimus moved through the **Magykal** haze toward Marcia. He saw Ellis Crackle reach out to push him away, and he knew that it was Apprentice against Apprentice. Septimus raised his hand; they met palm to palm and Septimus felt the coldness of the **Shadow**'s touch. He looked Ellis Crackle in the eye and Ellis Crackle returned his gaze, yellow to green. Septimus concentrated hard, and slowly but surely he **Transfixed** the hapless Ellis Crackle.

Suddenly Alther, Jenna and Beetle saw Ellis Crackle shoot out from the swirling purple mist; in a wraith of black smoke, the **Shadow** spun and tumbled around the room, desperately searching for a way out. There was nothing Alther wanted to see more than the **Shadow** leaving Marcia, and so he did something he did not often do—he **Caused** a thing to happen. A rush of air blew open the biggest window in the room, and the **Shadow** of Ellis Crackle flew out and vaporized in the clear summer air.

The brightness of the light surprised Jenna after the darkness inside the room, and it took her a few moments to notice that, silhouetted against the sun, there was someone—human—outside the window. Balancing precariously on a surprisingly large wooden platform that stuck out from the windowsill was Simon Heap.

Alther **Caused** the window to slam shut, but Simon pushed it open and leaped into the room. Jenna shrank back and Beetle, who had just emerged from underneath his cushion, put a protective arm around her. But this time it was not Jenna who Simon was interested in—it was the skeleton.

With the departure of Ellis Crackle, the haze of **Magyk** was clearing, revealing three figures, one of which, arm still outstretched toward Marcia's throat, was disintegrating fast.

Simon ran toward the decomposing form. "I'm here, Master!" he shouted. "Your new Apprentice is here!"

So eager was Simon to claim his place as DomDaniel's Apprentice that at first he did not stop to consider that Marcia was still alive, which meant something had gone badly wrong with the **Placement**. But as he reached the last **Magykal** strands of purple, Simon stopped, an expression of dismay dawning on his face.

DomDaniel did not look good. Indeed, DomDaniel looked worse than Simon had ever seen him before, and that included the time when Simon had first encountered the muddy set of bones clambering out of the ditch. At least Brownie-picked bones were relatively clean and tidy. They did not melt and soften into a disgusting liquid mass, and they did not make a revolting squelching noise, either.

"Y-your new Apprentice is here...M-Master," Simon stammered, suddenly aware of Marcia and Septimus right there in front of him. Marcia was clutching Septimus's arm tightly, and their faces were ashen and wore identical expressions of revulsion mixed with relief as they watched DomDaniel sink and begin to pool across the floor. The **Identify** was finally working.

Simon began to understand that all was not well.

A low, unearthly laugh filled the room. "You're no Apprentice of mine, you fool. I ask you to dispose of the Queenling—a simple task—and what happens? Not only does she escape from you three times, but she comes back here and *messes around with my bones*. Puts me together on the carpet like some child's jigsaw puzzle, in fact. And it is all *your* fault, you wretched Heap. Not that you ever *were* going to be my Apprentice—you were nothing more than a delivery boy. My Apprentice has been here all the time—**Shadowing...Shadowing...Shadowing...**" DomDaniel's voice faded away. A foul black mess spread out and collected around Simon's boots.

"You double-crossing fiend!" Simon yelled. "After all I've done for you and your revolting bones. You promised me!" Like a child kicking through a pile of fallen leaves, Simon kicked his way through the pool of sludge that was all that remained of DomDaniel, spraying it across the room.

"Don't do that!" shouted Marcia. "Get out, Simon—or do I have to make you go?"

Simon backed away. "Don't worry, I'm going. I wouldn't want to stay here with all these *impostors*." He broke off and stared angrily at Septimus. "But you will not get rid of me that easily. I was promised the Apprenticeship.

And I will have it. I *will*.”

Simon ran to the window, pulled it open and scrambled onto the broad ledge outside. He stood for a moment, gathering his courage, then he threw himself off, scarcely caring whether the **Flyte Charm** would work—all his plans were gone, destroyed. But as Simon fell through the air, the **Flyte Charm** kicked in, and as he soared unsteadily over the Wizard Tower Courtyard (to the amazement of a group of Ordinary Wizards returning from a shopping trip) he knew that there was only one thing left for him—revenge.

Back in Marcia’s room, the two thick silver bars slid back with a *clunk* and **UnBarred** the huge purple door, while the quiet whirring of the lock **UnLocked** it—and a faint tapping noise could be heard.

“Excuse me,” came the tentative voice of Catchpole on the other side of the door, “er—are you all right in there? Need any help?”

43

FirstFlyte



Marcia was sitting on Catchpole's chair on the landing, clutching *The Undoing of the Darknesse*. The purple door to her rooms was **Barred** yet again, but this time everyone, except for Spit Fyre, was on the other side of it, listening to the **Deep Clean, Repair** and **Anti-Darke** spells that were in progress inside Marcia's rooms. Marcia, worried by a large splotch of DomDaniel that Simon had kicked over the young dragon, had left Spit Fyre for the **Anti-Darke** spell to sort out.

Catchpole felt rather like the host at an awkward party. Warily, he tried to make polite conversation. "Would this be a five-minute **Clean**, Madam Marcia?" he asked, trying to remember the **Cleaning** Schedules he had learned the previous week.

"Five minutes," Marcia snorted derisively. "It will take more than five minutes to get rid of all that **Darke** slime sprayed around the place. Not to mention the havoc wrought by a certain dragon. No, it's an infinite spell."

"Infinite. My goodness." Catchpole was lost for words. He had a vision of spending the rest of his life marooned on the landing trying to make polite conversation with Marcia Overstrand. It was not a relaxing thought.

"An **Infinite** spell will take as long as it takes," Marcia informed him. "It will not stop until the job is finished. Something that perhaps you could learn from, Catchpole—as I seem to remember that the section on **Infinite** spells is

on the very last page of the **Cleaning** Schedules.”

“Oh. Ah, yes. I do remember now, come to think of it, Madam Marcia,” Catchpole gulped nervously, but Marcia did not seem interested. She had more pressing things on her mind.

“Alther, I want you to go and get Weasal and his ghastly housekeeper. I want them brought here right now. I shall be interested to hear what they have to say for themselves.”

“Nothing would give me more pleasure, but I was **Returned** from the house.” Alther shook his head dismally. “Marcia, I am so sorry for giving you such bad advice. I can’t believe that after all Otto Van Klampff did for me, his son could turn out so wrong.”

“I don’t blame you, Alther,” said Marcia. “I blame Una Brakket. And Hugh Fox. You warned me about Hugh Fox, and I wouldn’t listen.”

“You were affected by the **Shadow**,” Alther replied. “You were not yourself.”

“And I didn’t listen to Septimus when Simon took Jenna, either,” said Marcia. “All the signs were there but I wouldn’t see them.”

“*Couldn’t* see them, Marcia, not wouldn’t,” replied Alther. “It’s a terrible thing to be **Shadowed**.”

Marcia stood up suddenly, and Catchpole leaped to catch the chair as it tumbled backward.

“Well Alther, the **Shadow’s** gone, and I see things clearly now. And even when I was being **Shadowed**, I knew well enough to keep an eye on the place where my **ShadowSafe** was being made. And one thing I know for sure is that although Simon must have been delivering those bones all through the year, he did not bring them through the front door of Weasal’s house. None of my Watchers ever saw him—”

“Your Watchers?” asked Alther. “What Watchers?”

“The ex-Young Army Lads. The ones from the Resettlement Home. There are a few nice boys who want to be Wizards—”

“Nice!” snorted Septimus. “They were horrible. Every time I went there

they called me names.”

“Well, I told them to make it realistic. I didn’t want anyone to get suspicious. They were very good. Out on the pier day and night in all weathers, quite dedicated, they were. They’ll make good Wizards when they’re older.”

A sudden thought struck Septimus. “He went through the Ice Tunnels, didn’t he? He’s been doing that all the time.”

“Shh!” Marcia looked shocked. “Not in front of—Catchpole, get down to Snake Slipway and bring Weasal Van Klampff and Una Brakket here. Put them in the Strong Room just off the Great Hall until I am ready to see them. Then you can go and get Hugh Fox and do the same. Understand?”

Catchpole bowed and headed for the spiral stairs, grateful to be spared any further duties as party host.

A few minutes later a soft whirring sound announced that the door was **UnBarring**. It swung open and everyone stepped into an immaculate room, **Repaired, Cleaned** and free of any lingering **Darkeness**. Even Marcia looked pleased—for a brief moment—until she saw Spit Fyre sitting on her best Chinese carpet. “It’s fledged,” cried Marcia in disbelief, “all over my best carpet. Wretched creature!”

Spit Fyre looked unconcerned; he was busy unfolding his wings for the first time. The soft down that covered them had fallen off, leaving a thick dusting of green fuzz on Marcia’s carpet. Now Spit Fyre had an irresistible urge to open his wings and fly—and Marcia knew enough about dragons to know that there could be no stopping him.

“We’ll have to get him out onto the launch pad,” said Marcia. “I’m not having him trying his **FirstFlyte** in here.”

“What launch pad?” asked Septimus, confused.

“Oh, the old one outside the dragon window,” Marcia said, waving her hand at the window that Simon had **Caused** to open.

“Ah...” said Septimus, realizing at last why there was a small carving of a flying dragon in the stone lintel above the window.

“Don’t worry,” said Marcia, “it’s quite safe. All Extra-sOrdinaries have to keep the launch pad maintained—you never know when you might need it—although unfortunately it does give idiots like Simon Heap somewhere to land.”

Spit Fyre was enticed out onto the launch pad with a box of biscuits that Septimus found under the sink. They were a little damp and soggy but that did not seem to trouble the dragon. He sat contentedly on the wooden platform, chewing his way through the biscuits and surveying the whole Castle, which was laid out below him like a massive Counter-Foot board.

Inside the Wizard Tower a discussion was going on.

“Now, Septimus,” said Marcia. “I don’t want you doing anything complicated on your **FirstFlyte**. You are to fly around the Tower once and land in the courtyard. Do you want a Navigator?”

“A w-what?” asked Septimus, looking out the window and feeling his legs turning to jelly.

“*Draxx*, rule 16b, subsection viii states that: *a Navigator may only be used if he or she has participated in the **FirstFlyte***. So if you want a Navigator, it’s now or never.”

“It’s no good asking me, Sep,” said Beetle apologetically, as he tried to help Marcia push the dragon’s tail out the window. “I’m indentured to the Manuscriptorium for five more years. Only get one day off a fortnight—if I’m lucky. Don’t think I could fit in being a Navigator. Though I s’pose I might not have a job after all this...”

“Of course you’ll have a job,” Marcia told Beetle. “Which is more than can be said for Hugh Fox.”

“Thank you,” Beetle stammered.

“I’ll do it, Sep,” offered Jenna. “I’ll be your Navigator. I mean, if you want one, that is.”

“Would you really, Jen?” asked Septimus, brightening a little at the thought that at least he’d have some company when he was hundreds of feet above the ground.

“Yes, of course I would. I’d be honored to.”

Out on the launch pad, Spit Fyre finished the last biscuit and then, to avoid wasting any crumbs, the dragon gulped down the box as well. He sniffed the evening air. The thrill of electricity that all dragons get just before their **FirstFlyte** ran through him. He snorted loudly and smashed his tail down in anticipation. Marcia and Beetle leaped back just in time.

“You’d better hurry up and get on, Septimus,” said Marcia. “You don’t want him taking off without you—we don’t want the Castle to be plagued with a riderless dragon for years to come.”

Septimus forced himself to climb out the window onto the launch pad. You can do it, he told himself. You’ve been up a three hundred-foot tree, walked across a rickety bridge at the top of a witches’ house and flown a boat. You are *not* afraid of heights. Definitely not. But whatever Septimus told himself, his legs appeared to take no notice and still felt as if they were made of jelly that has been left outside on a hot summer’s day.

“C’mon, Sep,” said Jenna, scrambling up behind him onto the launch pad. She put her arm around his shoulders and guided him along the wide wooden platform. Septimus swayed for a moment as he felt the wind that blew around the top of the Wizard Tower ruffle his hair. “You’re okay,” whispered Jenna. “Look, Spit Fyre is waiting for you to get on.”

Septimus had no idea how he managed it but a few seconds later he was sitting on the dragon’s neck, in a dip just in front of the shoulders. It seemed to be the natural place to sit and he felt surprisingly secure. The dragon’s scales, although smooth, had slightly rough edges that stopped him from slipping, and the broad spines running like a mane down the back of Spit Fyre’s muscular neck fitted perfectly into Septimus’s hands.

Jenna was less comfortable. “Budge up a bit, Sep,” she said. “I’m right by the wings here.” Septimus wriggled forward as much as he dared and Jenna dropped down into the space behind him.

“Right,” said Alther, floating beside them. “Three things to remember. First—takeoff. When he jumps he’s going to drop like a stone. But, trust me, it will only be for a second or two. That’s how **FirstFlyte** always starts. Then you’ll be off. Second—steering. Kick left for left turn, right for right. Two kicks left for down, two kicks right for up. Or you can just tell him. He’s a bright dragon, he’ll understand. Third—I’m right here with you. You’ll be just fine.”

Septimus nodded, anxious to start.

Marcia and Beetle looked out apprehensively. “Ready?” asked Marcia.

Septimus made a thumbs-up sign.

“Go!” yelled Marcia. “Go! Come on, Beetle, push!”

Together, Marcia and Beetle gave the dragon a hefty shove. Unfortunately, they had no effect whatsoever—Spit Fyre still sat firmly on the launch pad.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake!” spluttered Marcia, giving the dragon another push. “Get *going*, you lazy lump!”

Like a high diver who is regretting his decision to climb to the topmost board, and knows there is only one way down, Spit Fyre shuffled forward and curled his toes around the edge of the launch pad. Hesitantly, the dragon peered out over the precipitous drop and gazed at the courtyard far, far below. Septimus closed his eyes and clung on tight. Behind her Jenna felt the fledgling wings twitch, but nothing happened.

“Look, you daft dragon, don’t think you can come shuffling back in here, because you most certainly cannot!” Marcia shouted. “And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll get going right now!” Using all their strength, Marcia and Beetle heaved the rest of the dragon’s tail onto the launch pad.

Spit Fyre’s look of uncertainty changed to panic. Marcia may not have been a real dragon mother but she had many of the qualities that dragon mothers were renowned for, and Spit Fyre was finding it hard to tell the difference.

“Do as you’re told and *fly!*” Marcia yelled, and slammed the window closed.

Spit Fyre did as he was told. He threw himself off the launch pad—and dropped like a stone. Down, down, down, past the nineteenth, eighteenth, seventeenth floors. Past the sixteenth, fifteenth, fourteenth they plummeted. At the thirteenth floor Spit Fyre realized what he had to do. At the twelfth he worked out how to do it. At the eleventh his wings were stuck. At the eighth floor he finally unfurled them and at the heart-stopping seventh floor Spit Fyre spread his wings into a huge green canopy, caught the air and glided up in a beautiful curve until he was once again level with the top of the Wizard Tower. Peering out from the Tower, Marcia’s white face broke into a wide smile and Beetle whooped a cheer.

“Oh, thank goodness,” muttered Alther, almost transparent with fear, swooping up to join the dragon and his shocked passengers. “All right?” Alther yelled, keeping pace with some difficulty—now that Spit Fyre had found his wings the dragon was reveling in the sensation of flying, and he was *fast*.

Septimus nodded.

“Once around the Tower, and land him in the courtyard,” Alther shouted.

Septimus shook his head. In the distance he could see the uncoordinated black shape that was Simon Heap. Simon had just cleared the rooftops of the line of houses that abutted the boatyard wall and was dropping down to the other side.

“Go, Spit Fyre. Go get him,” shouted Septimus.

LAST Flyte



Down in *Jannit's boatyard*, work was beginning on the Dragon Boat. Jannit had towed her out of the Dragon House, turned her around and was about to reverse her back in so that she could face out onto the world. It was something that Jenna had asked Nicko to do the previous night, telling him that the dragon herself had requested it. Nicko, who still had trouble with the idea that the Dragon Boat was also a living creature, did not see why it mattered which way the boat faced, but Jenna had been insistent.

From her small tugboat, Jannit surveyed the Dragon Boat with a critical eye. She and Nicko carefully splinted the broken wing and fixed it to the hull, but the wing was badly smashed and a strange green fluid was oozing from it and dripping into the water. The dragon herself did not look well. Her scales were dull, her eyes were heavy and her head and tail drooped feebly. "She doesn't look good," Jannit called up to Rupert Gringe who, with Nicko, was on the deck of the Dragon Boat, directing operations.

Rupert nodded. "Don't see what we can do," he grunted. "If you ask me what she needs is some hocus-pocus rubbish."

Three Wizards, chosen by Jannit as the least bothersome from the thirteen that Marcia had sent to guard the boat, made disapproving noises. Hocus-pocus indeed.

Nicko said nothing. He didn't like the way Rupert had said it, but he thought he was probably right. What could an ordinary boatyard hope to do for a living, breathing Dragon Boat?

“What the—” Rupert suddenly exclaimed, catching sight of a movement far above him. “Some idiot’s thrown himself off a roof. No he hasn’t—Busted Barnacles, he—he’s *flying!*”

With a sinking feeling, Nicko looked up. “Simon,” he muttered. “It’s Simon.”

“What—your Simon?”

“He’s not *my* Simon,” said Nicko indignantly. “Quick, Rupert—he’s dangerous. Get the Dragon Boat back inside.”

But Rupert Gringe seemed mesmerized by the black figure that had dropped down over the Castle walls and was flapping about like a wounded crow, flying slowly toward them.

“It *is*. It’s Simon blasted Heap.” Rupert shook his fist and yelled up into the air. “Get out of here, Heap. Or do I have to come and make you?”

“Rupert,” hissed Nicko. “Don’t upset him.”

“Upset him? I’ll upset him all right.” Rupert raised his voice in Simon’s direction. “Heap! Stop prancing about up there like a girl at the MidWinter Feast. Come down here and fight like a man.”

“Rupert, *don’t*,” pleaded Nicko. “Just get out of the way. He’s got a **Thunderflash.**”

“Oh, yes, and my aunt Gertie’s the Queen of Sheba. Good, he’s coming over. Come on then, Heap. Don’t be shy. Ha!”

Simon Heap was having a good deal of trouble with the **Flyte Charm**. It was only once he was airborne and on his way to the Wizard Tower that Simon had realized that the Chief Hermetic Scribe had done nothing whatsoever to sort out the **Charm**. He had not dared turn back and insist that Hugh Fox repair it, for he could not possibly be late for his appointment with DomDaniel and the beginning of his new Apprenticeship. Little did Simon know that even if he had returned, Hugh Fox would not have been able to fix the **Flyte Charm**—for all the codes and encryptions had been in *The Book, The Undoing of the Darkenese*.

Simon had only just made it over the Castle walls and he was using all his willpower to stay airborne. The Dragon Boat was in his sight and this time

Simon knew that he would not miss—third time lucky, he muttered to himself, or third time *unlucky* if you happened to be a mutant mix of a boat and a dragon. As Simon flew awkwardly across the boatyard he took his very last remaining **Thunderflash** from his belt. He had had a recent run on **Thunderflashes** and Merrin had been worse than useless at preparing the new ones—but that didn't matter. The boat was a sitting duck; this time there was no way he could miss. That would teach the oaf Rupert to yell at him. He'd get two birds with one stone—even better.

Simon primed the **Thunderflash**.

A yell followed by two loud splashes rang through the air. Nicko had pushed Rupert Gringe into the Moat and jumped in after him. Cursing the fact that he had lost his chance to get even with Rupert Gringe, Simon hurled the **Thunderflash**. It flew off with a roar, rumbling and rolling through the air. With a surprising turn of speed, the three Wizards also hurled themselves into the Moat.

The **Thunderflash** hit the Dragon Boat square on the stern, passed through the golden wood of the hull like a knife through butter and came to rest on the bottom of the Moat where it exploded, sending a spout of water shooting into the sky. In a seething mass of bubbles and steam, the Dragon Boat slowly disappeared under the water and sank to the bed of the Moat.

Jannit Maarten stood open-mouthed on the tugboat, horrified at what had happened. No one, but no one, messed with any of the boats under Jannit's care. She picked up the nearest weapon that came to hand, a large hammer, and hurled it up at Simon. Jannit had a powerful swing to her arm and the hammer flew through the air, only narrowly missing Simon. It flew on, curving upward, and an oncoming dragon on its **FirstFlyte** just managed to avoid its first airborne missile (but not its last), thanks to a timely shout from its Navigator.

Simon had just caught sight of Spit Fyre. He could not believe his eyes—or rather his eye, as Simon was still wearing his eye patch after Wolf Boy's direct hit. What was it about this imposter brother of his? Why did he always turn up like a bad penny, just when he least wanted to see him? And what was he doing on a *dragon*?

Simon's success with the Dragon Boat had made him cocky. Even with no **Thunderflashes** left and a dodgy **Flyte Charm** to contend with, Simon felt invincible. It was easy; he'd push one off the dragon, then he'd push the other one off the dragon and that would be that. Good-bye upstart Apprentice and

little Miss Princess.

Simon hurled himself through the air, aiming first for Septimus.

The Navigator saw him coming and yelled, “Down, Sep, down!” Septimus kicked the dragon twice on the left and Spit Fyre began to drop toward a spiky forest of masts below.

“Turn right!” yelled the Navigator. “Land on the pontoon!”

Septimus kicked once on the right followed by two kicks on the left and Spit Fyre headed down toward the pontoon, where Jannit was bringing the tugboat alongside with three Wizards in tow.

Simon was not to be put off. He threw himself toward Septimus, only to discover that the **Flyte Charm** had developed an alarming bias to the right, and he was now heading straight for Spit Fyre’s nose. A dragon’s nose is a sensitive spot, especially on a young dragon, and Spit Fyre did not take kindly to being hit hard on it. Instinctively the dragon opened his mouth to take a large bite out of Simon, only to be overtaken by the most enormous sneeze.

“Aaah...aaah...*tchooo!*” Like a cork from an enthusiastically shaken bottle of fizz, a huge slug of warm dragon dribble slammed into Simon and sent him cartwheeling through the air. Dragon dribble is a corrosive substance; it hit Simon on the stomach, winded him and, in a few seconds, ate its way through his cloak, his tunic and the red belt with the three black stars of DomDaniel. Simon was on his third somersault when the **Flyte Charm** parted company with his belt and tumbled to the ground, landing in a toolbox that Jannit had been using earlier.

Simon fell out of the sky.

Without thinking, Septimus shouted his very first dragon order—“Save him!”

Spit Fyre knew what to do. He dropped like a stone, shot forward and caught Simon only seconds before he hit the ground. Then he landed with a jarring crash on the pontoon at the spot where the Dragon Boat’s wing had been laid out only a few minutes earlier. The Navigator fell off with a bump and stood up angrily.

“What on earth did you do that for, Sep?” she demanded, jumping away from Simon, who was sprawled across Spit Fyre’s back.

Septimus did not reply. He was staring at Simon.

“He—he’s not dead, is he?” Septimus asked Jannit, who had pulled Simon off Spit Fyre and was trying to get some response from him.

Simon lay white and still on the pontoon, his black robes full of holes from the acidic dragon dribble, his fair, curly Heap hair matted with sweat and his eyes closed. Jannit knelt down and put her ear to his chest.

“No,” she murmured. “I can hear a heartbeat. He’s just unconscious.” At the sound of Jannit’s voice, Simon’s eyes flickered and he groaned. “Here, you lot,” Jannit yelled at the Wizards, “come and make yourselves useful for a change.”

Three dripping Wizards duly arrived at Jannit’s side. “Help me get him over to the lock-up,” Jannit told them.

Jenna and Septimus watched Jannit and the three Wizards each take an arm or a leg and carry Simon across the boatyard to the lock-up—a tiny windowless brick building beside the Castle wall that boasted a thick iron door complete with three heavy, well-oiled bolts.

“I still don’t know why you did that, Sep,” Jenna said grumpily.

“Did what?” asked Septimus, stroking Spit Fyre’s bruised nose.

“Saved Simon.”

Septimus looked up at Jenna, confused by her angry tone of voice. “But what else could I have done, Jen?” he asked.

“Let him fall. *I* would have.” Jenna kicked a pebble angrily into the Moat.

Septimus shook his head. “But he’s my brother,” he said sadly.

THE LOOKOUT TOWER

Nicko had insisted on wearing the mask—there was no way he was going to let Rupert dive down to the Dragon Boat without him. Jannit had taken some persuading, however, as Nicko had not used the mask before. Jannit had invented what she called the inspection mask so that she could check her boats below the waterline. The oval slab of glass was edged with soft leather so that it fitted closely to the face and tied around the back of the head with a leather strap. The glass was tough and thick. It was a deep greenish color, which did not make for great visibility, but it was better than trying to keep your eyes open in the silt-laden water of the Moat.

Nicko was a good swimmer. When the boys were younger, Silas had often taken them out of the Castle to a sandy spot just past the One Way Bridge, which was where Nicko had learned to swim. But Nicko had never swum underwater before, and now, as he and Rupert struggled to lift the Dragon Boat's unwieldy head off the mud at the bottom of the Moat, Nicko was desperate to take a breath.

Rupert made a thumbs-up sign and together he and Nicko swam to the surface, bringing the dragon's head once more into the air. Jannit was waiting with a large canvas sling, which she quickly slipped under the head to take the weight.

“Well done, boys,” said Jannit, gently bringing the limp head and neck down to rest on the side of the Cut, where she had laid her one and only Persian rug for the dragon’s head to lie on.

Jenna watched. Septimus had taken Spit Fyre back to the Wizard Tower, but Jenna had refused to go with him. So Septimus—unwilling to fly without his Navigator—had walked Spit Fyre through the streets, much to the great interest of everyone he met.

Jenna knelt beside the muddy head of the dragon, searching for signs of life—but there were none. The head lay motionless and the eyes were tightly closed under heavy green lids. Carefully, Jenna brushed the mud from the golden ears, and, with the hem of her dress, cleaned the silt from the dragon’s smooth, scaly eyelids. She talked to the dragon as she always did, but there was no response. Only silence.

Jannit squatted down and looked at the head with a professional eye. There was no obvious sign of damage, but then what did she know? Was this a boat or a living creature? If it was living, could it breathe underwater? And if it couldn’t, had the creature drowned—or been killed by the **Thunderflash**? Jannit Maarten shook her head. She was out of her depth here.

“Is she...dead?” Jenna whispered.

“I-I don’t know, my lady,” Jannit replied, a little ill at ease having the Princess kneeling beside her, covered in mud and with tears rolling down her face. “But we will have her out of the water in no time, once the boys get the sling underneath her hull. We will see what needs to be done, and then we will do it. We can make her hull as good as new.”

“But can you make her open her eyes?” asked Jenna.

“Ah...that I couldn’t say,” replied Jannit, who never promised anything she was not sure about.

But suddenly there was something that Jenna was sure about. She did not know how she knew, but she knew it was true—the dragon was dying and only Aunt Zelda could save her.

Jenna stood up. “There’s something I have to do,” she said. “Will you stay with her until I get back?”

Jannit nodded and Jenna was off, tearing across the boatyard. She flew through the dank tunnel and out the other side, into the sunlit streets of the Castle. She hurtled up the nearest flight of steps, which took her to the ledge on the inside of the Castle walls, and headed for the East Gate Lookout Tower. This was her last chance, she thought, as she sped along the broad ledge, oblivious to the sheer drop on one side. The dry stone of the ledge was well worn and smooth under her feet, and once or twice in her haste she very nearly slipped and fell. Slow down, Jenna told herself—you will be no good to the Dragon Boat if you fall.

The Castle wall twisted and turned along the higgledypiggledy houses that clustered around it. Jenna kept her eyes firmly fixed on the Lookout Tower, which rose from the Wall some distance away and looked toward the Forest. She kept up a steady pace and before long found herself standing at the foot of the tower, hot, flustered and out of breath.

Jenna took a few moments to get her breath back, breathing in the sour smell of some overflowing garbage bins lined up beside the small wooden door which led into the tower. A faded notice hung on the door:

CUSTOMER OFFICE

MESSAGE RAT SERVICE

CHARTERED, CONFIDENTIAL, LONG-DISTANCE RATS AVAILABLE

OPEN ALL HOURS

Under the notice hung a much newer sign:

CLOSED

Jenna was not to be put off—she gave the wooden door a shove and almost fell into a small dark room.

“Can’t you read? We’re *closed*,” a grumpy voice greeted her from somewhere in the gloom.

“The notice says OPEN ALL HOURS,” Jenna pointed out.

“And the other notice says CLOSED,” the voice retorted. “And closed is what we are. You can come back tomorrow. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m about to lock up.”

“I don’t care,” said Jenna. “I want a Message Rat and I want one *now*. It’s urgent. It’s a matter of life and death.”

“Oh they all say that,” said the rat dismissively, picking up a briefcase and making for the door. Jenna stepped in front of the rat, a rather portly brown creature. The rat glanced up and for the first time he saw properly who he had been talking to. He swallowed hard. “Oh,” he said. “I. Um. I didn’t realize it was you, Your Majesty. Very sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter. Just send the message, will you?” With Jenna still barring the door, the rat returned to his desk and opened his briefcase, looking through a list of names and shaking his head.

“Your Majesty,” the rat said regretfully, “there is nothing I would like to do more, but all the Message Rats are unavailable. That’s why I’ve closed up. The soonest I can get one for you will be tomorrow morning—”

“It will be too late tomorrow morning,” Jenna interrupted.

The elderly rat looked worried. “I’m so sorry, Your Majesty. We’ve had a very difficult time recently what with the epidemic down by the sewer pipe which took out some of my best young rats, and now half of my staff are on holiday. And then we’ve had so many long-distance call-outs I’ve lost count —”

“I’ll have a Secret Rat then,” said Jenna. “Is Stanley available?”

The rat looked studiously blank. “Secret Rat?” he asked. “I’m very sorry, but there is no such thing.”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” snapped Jenna exasperated. “Of course there is. *I* should know.”

The rat was stubborn. “I really don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “Now I must be getting along, Your Majesty. I could send a Message Rat along to the Palace first thing tomorrow if that would be of any help?”

Jenna's patience was at an end. "Look," she said sternly, "I want a Secret Rat and I want one *now*. That's an order. And if I don't get one, there won't be a Secret Rat Service anymore. Let alone a Message Rat Service. Got that?"

The rat gulped and shuffled his papers. "I-I'll just make a quick call," he said. Then, to Jenna's surprise he leaned out a small window beside his desk and yelled, "Stanley! Hey, Stanley! Get your tail down here. Pronto!"

A few moments later Stanley appeared at the window. "Keep your fur on, Humphrey, what's so important?" And then, catching sight of Jenna, he said, "Oh."

"Special request for you, Stanley," said the rat somewhat apologetically.

"Ah," said Stanley, sounding less than enthusiastic.

Jenna lost no time. "Stanley," she said, "I want you to take an urgent message to Aunt Zelda. She *has* to come here as soon as she can. She is my only hope for—"

In a familiar gesture, Stanley raised his paw. "No," he said firmly.

"What?" said Jenna. Even Humphrey looked shocked.

"I am sorry," said Stanley, stepping through the window onto the desk. "I am unavailable tonight."

"No, you're not," said Humphrey.

"Yes, I am," retorted Stanley. "Dawnie has asked me over for supper. I understand that she and her sister have had a falling-out. I have learned my lesson. In the past I have put my job first and Dawnie second. But no longer."

"But—" protested Jenna.

"I know what you're going to say, Your Majesty, and I am very sorry—but tonight Dawnie comes first, even if I do lose my job. Now if you'll excuse me, I want to pick up some flowers from the florist's garbage bin before it gets emptied." With that Stanley gave a small bow and walked past Jenna, head held high. Dumbfounded, Jenna held the door open for him and watched the rat jump down from the ledge and disappear over a roof.

"Well," said Humphrey, "I really don't know what to say..."

“No,” said Jenna. “Neither do I. It was my last hope. But I don’t suppose Aunt Zelda could have got here in time anyway. I don’t think there is much time left. Good night.”

“Good night, Your Majesty,” said Humphrey, as Jenna quietly closed the door and made her way back to the boatyard.

THE LOCK-UP

Inside the lock-up Simon Heap opened his eyes and groaned. For a moment he thought he must be in Dungeon Number One, but then he realized that there was a small chink of light coming through a tiny barred window and he relaxed. Dungeon Number One was **Sealed** in darkness, and although wherever he was now smelled pretty bad, it smelled nowhere near as bad as the dungeon. Simon had once been shown Dungeon Number One by the Supreme Custodian, and he had never forgotten it.

Very slowly, Simon sat up. His head hurt and his stomach felt horribly bruised, but as far as he could tell there were no bones broken. He was a little confused by the huge holes in his tunic until, in a flash, it all came back to him. The dragon...the brat...and the **Flyte Charm**—gone. Simon groaned again. He was a failure. A terrible failure. Not only had Marcia never asked

him to be her Apprentice, but it now turned out that DomDaniel had never wanted him either—and after all Simon had done for him too. Picking up those horrible slimy bones of his, taking endless trips to the Manuscriptorium with them, having to deal with that snooty Hugh Fox who had always looked down his long pointy nose at him, and worst of all, making those bleak trips along the Ice Tunnels to deliver the bones to that ghastly woman, Una Brakket, and making sure that old Weasal never saw him. Sometimes he had even ended up helping her put the wretched bones into the **Amalgam** so that she could get off to her country dancing in time. What a fool he had been. And then, to top it all, his imposter brother turns up on a *dragon*. The boy was what—only eleven—and there he was, not only the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice, he now had his own blasted dragon. How did he *do* it?

Simon sat on the floor of the lock-up in a cloud of self-pity. No one wanted him. Nothing ever went right for him. Life stunk and it just wasn't fair.

After a while a familiar feeling of anger stole over Simon. He stood and began to look around his prison. He'd show them they couldn't tame Simon Heap—he'd be out of here in no time. Angrily, Simon pushed the door, but to no effect, except he heard some frightened whispering.

“He's trying to get *out*...”

“What shall we do?”

“Is he very dangerous?”

“Oh, don't be such a baby, Brian.”

“Stop bickering you two. The ExtraOrdinary will be here soon.”

Simon smiled broadly. Well, let her come, but he would not be there to meet her. For Simon Heap had just realized where he was.

Many years ago, Jannit had expanded her boatyard to take in the derelict old Castle Customs Quay. The brick lock-up, which had been used for drunken sailors and suspicious characters landing at the Castle, was the only part of the old Customs House left standing, and Jannit had kept it to store her more valuable tools in. It still had its heavy iron door with three massive bolts on the outside and the huge brass key in the lock. Simon was willing to bet it also still had its trapdoor leading into the Ice Tunnels.

Simon knelt and quickly set to work shifting the hundreds of years of accumulated dirt from the floor. Luckily, Jannit had thoughtfully provided him with a rather good shovel, and it did not take Simon long before the shovel hit metal about a foot beneath the surface.

The **Sealed** trapdoor easily swung open in Simon's practiced hands. A cold gust of air blew up to meet him, and Simon slipped through the trapdoor, down into the familiar chill of the Ice Tunnels.

The full complement of thirteen Wizards—for Jannit had speedily retrieved the other ten from the fishing jetty outside the boatyard—were dutifully encircling the lock-up when Marcia marched into the boatyard, accompanied by Sarah and Silas Heap.

Sarah and Silas had insisted on seeing their eldest son. Unable to believe what Marcia had told them, they had decided to confront him. "At least," Sarah had said, "he will have to sit and listen to us this time. He won't be able to run off like he usually does."

Jannit escorted the party to the lock-up, her small wiry figure somewhat dwarfed by Marcia in her purple silk robes, which billowed out around her in the summer evening breeze.

"Here we are, Madam Marcia," said Jannit as they stopped outside the circle of Wizards. "He's in there. We put him in a couple of hours ago and he should have come around by now. Had a nasty bump on the head from that dragon he attacked."

"Oh, dear," said Sarah anxiously, "I do wish he wouldn't do these silly things."

"I'm sure we all wish that, Sarah," said Marcia sternly. "But unfortunately he has progressed rather further than the silly stage now. Evil-minded-scheming stage is more what I would call it."

"Oh, Silas," wailed Sarah. "What *are* we to do?"

"We'll have a talk with him, Sarah," said Silas soothingly, "and see what he has to say. Now stop worrying; there's nothing we can do. Simon is grown-up now."

The two Wizards standing by the door stood back respectfully for the ExtraOrdinary Wizard to walk through. Jannit shot the bolts, turned her heavy brass key in the lock and pulled open the thick iron door.

“Simon!” said Sarah, rushing into the lock-up before anyone could stop her. “Simon...*Simon?*”

“Did *you* know about this?” Marcia demanded as Jannit Maarten stared uncomprehendingly at the shiny metal trapdoor in the middle of the dirt floor of the lock-up.

“No,” said Jannit curtly. She didn’t like the way Marcia was talking to her, and she certainly did not like having yet another thing in her boatyard that she knew nothing about.

“What—what *is* it?” asked Sarah, clinging to Silas for support, distraught that once again Simon had run away.

“It’s nothing,” said Marcia briskly. “Nothing that you need to know about anyway. I want this trapdoor **Sealed**—now. Where’s Alther?”

Alther Mella wafted over to Marcia.

“Alther, are there any Ancients left who have walked the tunnels? I want each and every trapdoor guarded until all **Seals** are checked.”

“The only suitable Ancient who is not completely gaga is on the Wizard Tower trap, Marcia,” said Alther. “I never went down to the tunnels myself. No one ever did in those days.”

“No one should in these days either, Alther. Except for the Inspection Clerk. That Hugh Fox has a lot of questions to answer.” Marcia thought for a moment. “Alther, please would you take a Wizard down to the Manuscriptorium and bring some **SealingWax** back? At least we can get this trapdoor **Sealed**.”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Jannit, “the Port barge has arrived. I’m expecting a delivery.” With that Jannit was off to the pontoon to meet a long narrow boat piled high with boxes and baskets.

Jenna—who had no wish to go anywhere near Simon Heap—was back with the Dragon Boat, gently stroking her head and murmuring words of encouragement in her ear, looking desperately for a sign of life, while Nicko

and Rupert struggled to place two huge canvas slings underneath the damaged hull. As the Port barge drew up to the pontoon, Jenna glanced up and saw Jannit catch the rope and secure the barge to a couple of large bollards. Then, to her horror, she saw something else or, rather, *someone* else—the dark stranger from the Port.

The tall man stood poised on the deck, watchful and waiting to jump ashore. His long dark hair was held in a silver headband and his red silk tunic looked crumpled and travel stained. Jenna froze. She ducked down behind the Dragon Boat's head and heard the stranger's low, slightly accented voice ask Jannit, "Excuse me, ma'am, but I understand that the Princess is to be found hereabouts. Would this be so?"

"And who might you be?" Jannit asked suspiciously.

The stranger was evasive. "Just someone seeking the Princess," he replied. Suddenly his eye caught the activity over at the lock-up. "Would that be the ExtraOrdinary Wizard over there, ma'am?" he asked.

"It might be," said Jannit, busying herself with a knot.

"Excuse me, I must go and see him."

"*Her*," corrected Jannit, unheard as the stranger strode off.

"Excuse me," the stranger raised his voice as he approached the group by the lock-up. "I wonder if I might speak to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard?"

Marcia turned around and the stranger looked confused. He stopped for a moment and fumbled in his tunic pocket, looking for something. "Alther?" he said. "Alther, is that *you*?"

Marcia did not answer. She looked white.

"Aha, found them." With an air of triumph, the stranger drew out a small pair of gold spectacles from his pocket and carefully put them on. His expression changed to one of amazement.

"Marcia Overstrand," he said. "ExtraOrdinary Wizard! Well, well, well."

"Milo?" asked Marcia faintly. "Milo Banda? It *is* you, isn't it?"

The stranger appeared a little overcome. He nodded wordlessly and to

Jenna's horror, Marcia enveloped him in a huge hug. "Where have you been all this time?" she asked. "We thought you must be dead."

As Marcia let go of the stranger, a loud yell came from the Cut—Nicko had just dropped one of the canvas slings in the water.

For the first time Marcia saw the terrible state of the Dragon Boat. "Jannit!" she yelled. "Jannit—what has happened?"

Jannit was in no mood to reply. She was determined to raise the Dragon Boat before nightfall, and she had had enough Wizards messing about in her boatyard to last her a lifetime. Warily she said, "Go get another sling, will you Nicko? Then we'll try again."

Jenna had been watching Marcia greet the dark stranger with mounting disbelief. Now, as Marcia set off across the boatyard toward the Dragon Boat, bringing the stranger with her, Jenna leapt to her feet. Before anyone could stop her, she headed for the tunnel that led out of the boatyard.

THE QUEEN'S ROOM



Jenna tore through the alleys and passageways, heading for the Palace. In her hand she clutched the gold key that Aunt Zelda had given her, the key to the Queen's Room. Too bad she had no idea where the Queen's Room might be, and too bad there would probably be nothing there to save the Dragon Boat. But it was the only chance she had, for Marcia was obviously in league with the stranger and could not be trusted.

Now Jenna knew how Septimus had felt when Marcia would not believe that Simon had kidnapped her. She hurtled around a corner and ran straight into Spit Fyre. "Ouch!"

"Jen!" said Septimus, surprised. "I thought you'd be down with the Dragon Boat. I was coming to see you. And then Spit Fyre wouldn't stay in the courtyard. Well, he ate most of the Dragon Kennel that the sub-Wizards were making for him and—" Septimus broke off, noticing Jenna's distraught expression. "Hey, Jen, what's the matter?"

"Oh, Sep, the dragon—she's dying. And now the stranger from the Port—he's *here*. He's come to get me!"

“What?”

“And what’s worse, Marcia knows him! She was really pleased to see him. She *hugged* him.”

Septimus was shocked. Marcia never hugged anyone. Ever.

“Sep, come with me. I’m going to the Palace. I’m going to find the Queen’s Room. Maybe, just maybe, there’ll be something there to save the Dragon Boat. A-a potion or something...I don’t know.”

“Okay, it’s worth a try. Come on, Spit Fyre. This way. No, *this* way. Hang on, Jen, you don’t know where the Queen’s Room is.”

“I know, but Aunt Zelda said I would find it when The Time Is Right. So maybe The Time Is Right now.”

Jenna and Septimus made good progress until they were halfway down Wizard Way, when Septimus dropped behind to attend to Spit Fyre, who had just given Septimus an embarrassing moment. Jenna stopped to see what was keeping Septimus and saw him staring at a large pile of dragon droppings in the middle of Wizard Way, wondering what to do. He decided the best thing to do was to ignore it and keep going.

“Hey, you with the dragon!” a voice shouted after him. Septimus turned to see a thin, earnest-looking man in a striped homespun tunic chasing after him with a sack and a shovel. The man caught up with him and presented the two items to Septimus. “Wizard Way Conservation Society...Street Fouling Enforcement Officer,” he puffed. “It is an offense to foul the Way. Please clean up your animal’s mess and take it with you.”

Septimus looked doubtfully at the large sack that the man had thrust into his hand. “Okay,” he said, “but I don’t think it’s all going to fit in there.”

Septimus got busy with his shovel while Jenna impatiently held the sack open for him.

The sun was setting, and Billy Pot was wheeling away his Contraption at the end of a particularly trying day—the lawn lizards had been acting up again. His face brightened when he saw Jenna, Septimus and Spit Fyre coming across the lawn. Billy Pot had once smelled dragon droppings on his Lizard

Keeping Diploma course and had never forgotten it—in fact most people, once they had smelled dragon droppings, never forgot it. “Excuse me, young sir,” said Billy Pot, running up to Septimus. “Please forgive me for being so presumptuous, but I wonder...well, I wonder if you would consider parting with the contents of your sack. I would be eternally grateful. There’s nothing like strategically placed dragon droppings to keep the lizards in order. And I’m that desperate; ever since that horse ran over the Contraption they have been uncontrollable and—”

“Yes,” said Septimus. “Take it. Please.”

“You see, sir, I have dreamed of getting my hands on some. Dreamed of it, I have. But where can you find a dragon nowadays? It’s a nightmare for a Lizard Keeper like myself. Nightmare.” Billy Pot shook his head sorrowfully. “But of course if you don’t want to part with it, I quite understand.”

“No—please, *please* take it,” said Septimus. He thrust the bulging sack at Billy Pot, who smiled for the first time that day.

As Jenna, Septimus and Spit Fyre reached the Palace door, Godric’s thin voice drifted through the evening air. “Ah, good evening, Princess. How nice to see you. And good evening, Apprentice. How is the **Transforming** going? Have you managed the **Transubstantiate Triple** yet?”

“Nearly,” said Septimus, dragging Spit Fyre behind him.

“Good lad,” said Godric, and immediately went back to sleep.

In the turret at the east end of the Palace, Spit Fyre sat fretfully whining and scratching the bottom step of a flight of spiral stairs. Septimus had tied the dragon to a convenient ring in the wall and told him to *stay*.

“I’m sure it’s up here,” said Jenna, concentrating hard on the key to the Queen’s Room as she led the way up the stairs. As she reached the small landing at the top of the turret, Jenna let out a triumphant whoop. “Yes! Hey, Sep, look at that—I’ve found it!”

“Where?” Septimus looked at Jenna, perplexed.

Jenna shot Septimus a quizzical look. “Very funny, Sep,” she said. “You don’t think it might be that gold door with all those patterns on it, and the big

keyhole in the middle with an emerald set above it—just like the key?”

“What gold door?” asked Septimus.

Suddenly Jenna understood, and a thrill of excitement went through her. “You can’t see it, can you?” she whispered.

“No,” replied Septimus, a little overawed. “I can’t. All I can see is a blank wall with lumps of plaster falling off it.”

“Well, it *is* here, Sep. I can see it. I really can. I’m going to put the key in the lock now,” said Jenna, hesitantly. “Will you wait here for me?”

“Of course I will.”

“This is weird. I’ll try the key then, shall I?”

“Yes. Go on, Jen. Oh, hang on—did you say the lock was in the middle of the door?”

“Yes, why?” Jenna looked concerned.

“Well, make sure you jump out of the way as soon as you’ve turned the key. The door will come down like a drawbridge—it’ll squash you flat if you don’t.”

“Will it? How do you know?”

“Oh, I just know these things, Jen,” said Septimus airily.

“Silly boy,” said Jenna fondly.

Septimus stepped back and had the strangest experience of watching Jenna push the key forward until the end of it disappeared. Suddenly she leaped back and smiled at him. Septimus smiled as well; then he watched her walk forward and vanish through the solid wall.

The golden door closed silently behind Jenna, and she found herself in a small and surprisingly cozy room. A fire was burning in the grate and a comfortable chair was placed beside it. Sitting in the chair, gazing at the fire, was a young woman wearing a heavy red silk tunic, with a gold cloak wrapped around her shoulders. Her long dark hair was banded by a gold circlet like the one that

Jenna herself wore. At Jenna's sudden arrival, the young woman sprang to her feet, her violet eyes shining with excitement. She took a swift step forward, and in her eagerness to reach Jenna, she passed through the chair as though it was not there.

But Jenna saw nothing, which maybe was just as well. For as the ghost of the Queen stood before her, gazing at the daughter she had last seen as a day-old baby, Jenna would have found it hard to ignore the large bloodstain that was spread across the left-hand side of her mother's cloak—although she might not have noticed the jagged tear of the bullet hole, which was hidden in the folds of the dark red tunic.

The Queen stepped back to allow her daughter to wander around the Room. She watched Jenna gaze, puzzled, at the blazing fire and at the empty chair. She saw Jenna wrap her arms about herself and shiver slightly as she moved through the Room, glancing about as though she had caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye, and all the time searching desperately for something—*anything*—that would save the Dragon Boat.

Knowing that she must not **Appear** to her daughter, the Queen watched, willing Jenna to find what she had to alone. But Jenna had almost given up hope, for the Room was not the **Magykal** place she expected it would be; it was no more than an empty sitting room with a fire, a rug, a small table, a chair and—suddenly Jenna smiled—a cupboard, and not just any old cupboard either. For on the door of the cupboard was written: UNSTABLE POTIONS AND PARTIKULAR POISONS.

Jenna opened the door and walked inside.

The cupboard was as empty as the Room had been. Four intricately carved but completely bare shelves ran along the back wall, with no sign of the potion bottles, herbs or remedies, books of spells or Dragon Boat secrets that Jenna had longed to see. Desperately, she ran her hands over the shelves in case she had missed something, but there was nothing, nothing but dust. Then Jenna noticed a line of small drawers almost hidden in the dark mahogany panels under the shelves, and her hopes soared. She took hold of the small gold drawer-knob of the topmost drawer and pulled hard. The drawer slid out smoothly and Jenna smelled a musty combination of old mint chocolate and dust; she ran her hand around the inside of the drawer, but it was as empty as the shelves had been. Frantically, she pulled open each drawer in turn, but there was nothing to be found.

As Jenna reached the last drawer she felt desperate; she knew that this

was her very last chance, for there was nowhere else to look. As she tugged it open, Jenna felt something inside the drawer move as if she had pulled a lever of some kind, and at the same time she heard a soft click behind her and the cupboard door swung shut. She was plunged into darkness.

Jenna pushed the door but it did not move. With rising panic she pushed harder, but the door would not budge—and something told her that it was locked. What was she going to do? She was trapped. No one except Septimus knew where she was, and however much he wanted to, he would not be able to help her. She would be there forever, stuck in the dark...

It was then that Jenna realized that the cupboard was not as dark as it had been, that she could now see a thin strip of light under the door. Tentatively Jenna gave the door another push, and to her delight it swung open.

She stepped out onto the smooth flagstones of Aunt Zelda's cottage.

THE YOUNG QUEEN

S*eptimus sat on the dusty landing* watching the peeling plaster on the wall, wondering when Jenna was going to reappear. He tried to imagine what she was doing inside the Queen’s Room, and what was taking her so long, but he did not mind waiting. There was something Septimus had been longing to take a closer look at ever since Jannit had fished it out of her toolbox and handed it to him, saying, “Looks like something you could use, Master Septimus.” He put his hand into his tunic pocket and took out the **Flyte Charm**.

The **Charm** felt oddly familiar to him, as though he had known it somewhere before. It was a surprisingly simple **Charm**, considering the power that it possessed, and the old, yellowish gold was scratched, the flights—such as they were—battered and bent. As the arrow lay quietly in his palm, Septimus felt a tingle run through his hand, and something made him reach into his Apprentice Belt and take out his own silver winged **Charm**, the one that Marcia had given to him when she had asked him to be her Apprentice.

Septimus loved this **Charm**. With it—and a lot of concentration—he could hover about ten feet off the ground, but he could not fly. Not as Simon had done. Septimus had often dreamed of flying, and indeed had frequently woken up convinced that he could, only to be disappointed.

Sitting on the cold stone floor, with no sign of Jenna’s return, Septimus held out his open hands, one **Charm** in each. He thought they were both beautiful in different ways—in his left hand he could feel the powerful spirit of the ancient golden arrow and in his right the delicate lightness of the silver wings. As he looked at them he could sense the **Magyk** from both **Charms** running over his skin and disturbing the air around him.

And then—something shifted, something *moved*.

Suddenly the wings were sitting upright in the middle of his palm, wafting back and forth like a small butterfly warming up in the sunlight. Enthralled, Septimus watched them as they fluttered from his right hand over to his left, where they landed delicately on the **Flyte Charm**. There was a **Magykal** flash of light, and the silver and gold of the two **Charms** melded together as the wings settled down and resumed their rightful place as the **Flyte Charm**’s original flights.

Septimus picked up the completed **Flyte Charm** and held it between finger and thumb. It was hot—almost too hot—to the touch. A buzzing sensation ran through his fingers and Septimus suddenly found he had an overwhelming urge to fly. He leaped to his feet and went over the small turret window that looked out over the Palace gardens. He saw the long shadows of the midsummer evening and heard the rooks cawing in the trees, and all his dreams of flying came back to him—he imagined himself swooping across the lawns, scattering the rooks and skimming out low over the River...with some effort, Septimus shook himself out of his reverie. He was busy putting the **Flyte Charm** into his Apprentice Belt—out of temptation’s way—when Jenna stepped through the wall.

Septimus leaped to his feet. “Jen—” he began, and then stopped in astonishment as Aunt Zelda and Wolf Boy followed her onto the landing.

“Oh, Septimus,” said Aunt Zelda, as Septimus stared, open-mouthed. “It is so wonderful to see you safe...but there is no time to lose. Follow me. We must get straight to the Dragon Boat.” Aunt Zelda clattered down the narrow stairs, and Septimus heard a yell of surprise as Aunt Zelda bumped into Spit Fyre.

“Down, Spit Fyre. Yes, it’s lovely to see you too. Now get off my foot, please.”

Septimus had no need to untie Spit Fyre as the dragon had already chewed his way through the rope. They followed Aunt Zelda and Jenna out the side door at the foot of the turret and down to the Palace Gate. Aunt Zelda kept up a brisk pace. Showing a surprising knowledge of the Castle’s narrow alleyways and sideslips, she hurtled along. Oncoming pedestrians were taken aback at the sight of the large patchwork tent approaching them at full speed. They flattened themselves against the walls, and, as the tent passed by with the Princess, the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice and a feral-looking boy with bandaged hands—not to mention a dragon—in its wake, people rubbed their eyes in disbelief.

Soon Aunt Zelda and her retinue emerged from the tunnel that led under the Castle walls into the boatyard. They were met by the sound of Jannit’s voice echoing across the upturned boats. “Heave...heave...heave...”

Aunt Zelda gave a scream of dismay—for slowly, very slowly, raised by a gang of yard-hands pulling rhythmically on a rope, the dripping, mud-caked hull of the Dragon Boat was rising from the water. The green tail with its golden barb hung down while the Dragon Boat’s head was still slumped onto the side of the Cut. Nicko sat cross-legged, slowly stroking the dull green scales on the dragon’s long nose.

Rupert Gringe was on the deck of the Dragon Boat. He was caked in mud and soaking wet, having just dived into the Moat and at last fixed the huge canvas slings in place beneath the keel. With his mask pushed up out of his eyes, Rupert darted from one side to the other, constantly checking the ropes.

Horrified, Aunt Zelda ran across the boatyard, dodging between the ropes and anchors, discarded masts and stays, and sat down with a bump beside Nicko.

“Aunt Zelda?” said Nicko, not quite believing his eyes.

“Yes—it’s me, dear,” replied Aunt Zelda, breathless, reaching out to touch the dragon’s motionless head. She rested her hand there for a moment, shaking her own head in disbelief. “Jenna, Septimus—quick. Come and sit here beside me. All three of us—the Keeper, the Young Queen and the Dragon Master—must do this,” she said.

“Do what?” asked Jenna.

“The **Transubstantiate Triple**,” said Aunt Zelda, ferreting through her many patchwork pockets.

“Hey—Sep can do that,” said Jenna, excited.

“No, I can’t,” said Septimus.

“Yes, you can. Well, you nearly can. I’ve heard you tell Godric.”

“Only because when he first asked me I said no, I couldn’t, and he got really upset and started wailing. Then all the other Ancients in the Palace began wailing too. It was awful—and they wouldn’t stop. I had to go and get Marcia, and she told me to stop nitpicking and humor the old fool for goodness’ sake. But I read about it anyway, just in case Godric asked me questions. It’s the four elements, isn’t it, Aunt Zelda?”

“It is indeed, Septimus,” Aunt Zelda replied, taking an ancient-looking leather pouch from one of her pockets. “This has been handed down from Keeper to Keeper for longer than anyone can remember. We keep it in a **Locked** box called the Last Resort. Every Keeper hopes that she will not have to use it, but every Keeper knows that one day the Time will Come. There’s a prophecy written on the box—

**The Time will Come, for it must be,
When She will Fly with Two of Three
For Then must Ye full Ready be,
And Keep the Triple Close to Thee.**

“No one really knew what it meant, but when Septimus found the Dragon Ring, I realized that once again, for the first time since Hotep-Ra, we were Three—the Dragon Master, the Queen and the Keeper. And then when you and Jenna flew off with the Dragon Boat, I knew that the first part of the prophecy had happened, that the Time had Come. So I was ready for something, but when Jenna walked out of the potion cupboard, just as her dear mother used to do every MidSummer Day, I—well, I nearly inhaled my cabbage sandwich. Now let’s see what we have here...”

Aunt Zelda tipped the leather pouch and three small hammered-gold bowls, with blue enameling around their rims, fell onto Jannit's muddy rug. She gave the leather pouch a shake but nothing else fell out. She put her hand inside the pouch and felt around, but it was empty. Aunt Zelda's face fell. "There must be more than this, surely," she said. "No instructions—nothing. It's that Betty Crackle, wretched woman. She was so careless. What can we possibly do with three empty bowls?"

"I think I know what to do with them," said Septimus slowly.

Aunt Zelda looked at him with new respect. "Do you?" she asked.

Septimus nodded. "You place the bowls in front of the Being you wish to **Restore**..." he said, thinking hard. Septimus had read all he could find about the **Transubstantiate Triple**, but when he asked Marcia about the whereabouts of the **Triple Bowls**, she told him they had disappeared many hundreds of years ago.

"You do it, Septimus," said Aunt Zelda. "As Dragon Master it is only right that you should."

The dragon's eyes did not flicker as Septimus, Jenna and Aunt Zelda arranged themselves in a semicircle around her head. Nicko quietly got up and moved away, taking Wolf Boy with him. Nicko could feel strong **Magyk** in the air and he preferred to keep his distance. Wolf Boy looked scared; his eyes were open wide and his yellow teeth were bared as he watched his old Young Army comrade in his strange new role—weaving powerful **Magyk**.

"The four elements in this **Conjuration**," said Septimus in a low voice, "are Earth, Aire, Fyre and Water. But we choose only one of these to **Restore** the dragon. I think it should be Fyre."

Aunt Zelda nodded in agreement. "She has had too much of the others," she murmured.

"Jen?" asked Septimus.

Jenna nodded. "Yes," she whispered, "Fyre."

"Good," said Septimus. "Now each one of us must choose an element from the three that are left."

"Earth," said Aunt Zelda. "Good honest earth for growing cabbages."

“Water,” said Jenna. “Because she looks so beautiful on the water.”

“And I choose Aire,” said Septimus, “because I flew the Dragon Boat today. And because I can Flye.”

Aunt Zelda shot Septimus a quizzical glance, but he was too busy arranging the bowls to notice.

“Now,” he said, “we each take a bowl and place our element in it.”

Jenna scrambled up and dipped her bowl into the Moat. Aunt Zelda reached down from the pontoon and scraped up some dry earth. Septimus looked at his bowl and wondered what to do. As he looked and wondered, a purple mist appeared at the bottom of the golden bowl. Aunt Zelda gasped—she could see the signs of **Magyk** appearing around Septimus; his fair curly hair was outlined in a purple shimmering light, and the atmosphere felt charged, like the air before a thunderstorm.

Aware that Aunt Zelda and Jenna were watching him closely, Septimus gathered up all three bowls and, holding them tightly together, quickly turned them upside down. The earth and water fell straight onto the rug, but the purple mist sank slowly—its progress closely followed by one pair of green eyes, one pair of violet eyes and one pair of witch’s blue eyes—until it met the muddy mess on the rug and exploded into flame. Septimus gulped; this was the part he was dreading. He reached out to grab the flame, and a yell came from Wolf Boy, who had been watching with awe behind a boat. “412—no!” Wolf Boy cried out, feeling his hands burning all over again. But Septimus felt no pain as he gathered up the fire and placed it in the dragon’s nostrils.

Suddenly there was a huge intake of breath, and the flames were sucked into the dragon’s nose down deep within her. Moments later, the dragon reared her head, snorting, coughing and breathing out a bright tongue of orange flame, setting Jannit’s Persian rug on fire and sending Aunt Zelda, Jenna and Septimus leaping to safety. Nicko threw a bucket of water to douse the rug. The dragon opened her eyes for a brief moment and then, with a resounding crash, her great green head crashed back down onto the charred rug and lay as limp as before.

The whole boatyard fell silent. Even Jannit stopped her unloading and stood waiting uncertainly.

Jenna looked dismayed. She glanced at Septimus as if for reassurance but

Septimus was staring unhappily at the Dragon Boat, convinced that his **Transubstantiate Triple** had failed. Aunt Zelda gave a small cough and was about to say something when Marcia's voice traveled across the boatyard.

"Will someone get this blasted bucket off my foot!" A yard-hand rushed to her aid and pulled off a bucket that Marcia had inadvertently stepped into in her rush to return to the Dragon Boat. With her robes flying, Marcia continued her progress across the boatyard, and as she neared the dragon, Jenna, Aunt Zelda, and Septimus could see that she had a large green bottle in her hand.

Marcia arrived breathless at the pontoon and uncorked the bottle.

"Marcia, what are you doing?" asked Aunt Zelda crossly.

"Saving the Dragon Boat. I knew I had some somewhere. It's an ancient lizard-based **Revive**. I keep it under the floorboards in the Library."

"Put it away," Aunt Zelda demanded. "Don't let that stuff near her. It will kill her."

"Don't be ridiculous, Zelda," Marcia retorted. "It's not for you to dictate what happens to the Dragon Boat anymore. I am the Keeper now."

Jenna's and Septimus's eyes met. There was going to be trouble.

"You—" spluttered Aunt Zelda incredulously. "You—the Keeper?"

"Obviously," said Marcia. "The Dragon Boat is here now under my care. You are too far away to be able to continue with your duties as...how did you get here so *fast*?"

Aunt Zelda drew herself up to her full height—which was not much compared to Marcia, but it made Aunt Zelda feel better all the same. Her witchy blue eyes flashed triumphantly. "Keepers' secrets are not divulged to all and sundry, Marcia, and I am not at liberty to tell you how I got here. All I will say is that, as long as I live, I am the Keeper of the Dragon Boat and I shall remain so and be available to the Dragon Boat at all times. Now Marcia, this is a matter of life and death. The **Triple** will take its time and nothing, particularly an ancient lizard **Revive**, must be allowed to interfere with it. As Keeper I am telling you to take that **Revive** away. Right *now*."

For the first time that Septimus could remember, Marcia was speechless.

Very deliberately, she pushed the cork back into the **Revive** bottle and, with as much dignity as she could muster, she walked across the boatyard, studiously avoiding the bucket on her way out. It did not help her bad temper to discover that Milo Banda, plus Sarah and Silas Heap, had watched the whole episode from the shadows of the abandoned lock-up.

49

Flyte



Marcia strode across the Palace Moat, her feet echoing on the warm planks of the old wooden bridge. At her side was Milo Banda who, on the brisk walk from the boatyard to the Palace, had had the task of calming Marcia after her encounter with Aunt Zelda.

Standing at the Palace door, beside the small gold chair on which the ghost Godric sat dozing, was a sub-Wizard, a smart young woman with brilliant green eyes.

“Good evening. Welcome to the Palace.” The sub-Wizard smiled.

“Good evening, Hildegarde,” replied Marcia.

Milo Banda hung back, standing uncertainly on the threshold. Marcia noticed that he was trembling slightly and there were tears in his eyes.

“Oh,” she said softly, “I’m sorry, Milo. I didn’t think. Would you like us

to leave you alone for a few moments?”

Milo Banda nodded. He wandered off down the Long Walk, looking at the empty walls and shaking his head in dismay.

Suddenly Marcia felt weary—it had been a long day. The **Identify** had left her feeling curiously empty and, to top it all, her foot throbbed painfully from its encounter with Spit Fyre that morning. With a sigh of relief, she sat down heavily on Godric’s chair and took off her shoe. The ghost leaped off the chair in alarm and fell onto the floor in a confused heap.

“Alther,” said Marcia crossly, “I thought I told you to get rid of all the Ancients. We don’t need them now that we have the sub-Wizards on door duty.”

“Godric was very upset when I asked him to leave, so I told him he could stay. Anyway,” Alther tutted, “you should have more respect for the Ancients. You’ll be one, one day.” Alther dusted Godric off and wafted him over to a comfortable armchair in a quiet, dark corner of the hall. The old ghost immediately fell into a deep sleep and did not wake until many years later, when Jenna’s own daughter ran into him with her scooter.

It was unfortunate that when Jenna returned to the Palace, she did not notice Alther and Marcia sitting quietly in the shadows cast by the rows of flickering candles placed around the hall. The first person she saw, as he emerged from the gloom of the Long Walk, was the stranger from the Port. At the sight of Jenna he gasped and stopped in his tracks. Jenna screamed.

Marcia jumped to her feet. “Jenna—what is it?” she asked, glancing around anxiously.

Jenna did not reply. She tore out of the Palace and headed for the safety of Septimus, Nicko, Aunt Zelda and Wolf Boy, who were making slow progress across the Palace lawns while Spit Fyre insisted on chasing a lawn lizard.

“He’s here!” yelled Jenna as she reached Aunt Zelda. “That man—he’s here!”

“What man?” asked Aunt Zelda, both bemused and amused at the sight of Marcia running across the lawn toward them, wearing only one shoe.

“Jenna,” said Marcia breathlessly as she finally caught up with her. “Jenna, what’s wrong?”

“That man—the stranger at the Port. The one who grabbed Thunder, the one who followed me, the one who’s in league with Simon—you’ve asked him to *my* Palace. That’s what’s wrong!”

“But Jenna,” Marcia protested, “that man has every right to be in the Palace. He’s Milo Banda. He’s—”

“I don’t care who he is!” yelled Jenna.

“But Jenna, Jenna listen to me—he’s your father.”

Everyone stared at Marcia in shock.

“No he’s not,” stuttered Jenna. “Dad’s down at the boatyard...with Mum.”

“Yes, Silas is at the boatyard,” said Marcia gently. “And Milo is here. Milo is your own father, Jenna. He has come to see you.”

For a long time Jenna was silent. Then suddenly she said, “So, why didn’t he come to see me before—when I was little?” And she took off across the lawns and along the path that led to the back of the Palace.

“Oh dear,” said Marcia.

Silas Heap did not take kindly to the arrival of Milo Banda either, especially when Sarah insisted on arranging a celebration supper on the Palace roof to welcome him home. “I don’t see how you can celebrate when our eldest son is stuck down in those awful Ice Tunnels,” Silas had objected.

Sarah was busying herself with laying the table while Silas had plonked himself down on one of the Palace gold chairs and was staring gloomily at the darkening summer sky.

“I just don’t want to even think about Simon,” Sarah said briskly. “The Search Party will soon find him and then at least he’ll be somewhere safe and warm.”

“Safe and warm in the Castle jail is not what I wanted for him, Sarah,”

Silas muttered.

Sarah shook her head. “Silas, if you remember, yesterday we had no idea where any of the children were. We have three back today—four if you count Simon—and we should consider ourselves lucky. That’s the way I am going to look at it from now on.” She straightened the tablecloth and told the Supper Servant to go and see how the cook was getting on. “Anyway, Silas, we must make Milo Banda welcome. He is Jenna’s father after all.”

“Huh,” said Silas grumpily.

Sarah carefully put her favorite candlesticks in the middle of the long table. “We knew this might happen one day. It’s no good being funny about it.”

“I’m not being funny,” Silas protested. “I just think it’s odd that he’s turned up after all these years. I mean, where’s he been all this time? Seems downright suspicious to me. Huh.”

“Don’t keep saying ‘huh’, Silas. It makes you sound so crotchety.”

“Well, maybe I am crotchety. And I’ll keep saying ‘huh’ if I want to, Sarah. Huh.”

Supper went on late into the night. Sarah had put Milo Banda at the head of the table simply laid with a white cloth. It reminded Jenna of the morning of her tenth birthday, which now felt like another lifetime. Jenna had sat as far away from Milo Banda as she could get—at the other end of the table—but it wasn’t until she sat down that she realized she was now opposite Milo, and every time she looked up she saw him trying to smile at her or catch her eye. Jenna spent most of the meal staring at her plate or making pointed conversation with Aunt Zelda, who was sitting next to her.

As the torches burned down and midnight approached, the summer air cooled and people began to yawn. Aunt Zelda leaned over to Jenna and said in a low voice, “Your father is a good man, Jenna. You should hear what he has to say.”

“I don’t care what he has to say,” Jenna answered.

“A wise Young Queen listens first. Then she judges.”

Supper was finished. Marcia, Septimus and Spit Fyre had gone back to the Wizard Tower. Nicko was off with Silas, who wanted to show him a new colony of Counters he had found behind a pipe in the Palace attic. Sarah was tending to Wolf Boy, who had fallen asleep at the beginning of supper, and Aunt Zelda was down in the kitchens trying to get the night cook to boil a cabbage for breakfast the next morning. Alther Mella sat quietly in the shadows, musing on the events of the day.

And Jenna was listening to Milo Banda.

“You know,” Milo was saying, “your mother and I were so pleased when we knew we were going to have a child. We both hoped for a girl so that she could become Queen. Of course, I was never King; it is not the way you do things here, unlike many of the Far Countries. There, would you believe, they pass the succession down through the boy children—very strange. But I was glad not to be King, for although I was just an ordinary merchant, I loved my job. I loved the excitement of traveling and the possibility that one day I would make my own fortune. Then six months before you were due to be born, I heard of just such an opportunity. With your mother’s blessing, I chartered a ship at the Port and set off. My luck was in and before long I had a ship full of treasure to bring back to you and your mother. All went well, I had a good crew and fair winds all the way home, and I arrived in Port on the very day you were due. Everything, I thought, was perfect. But then...when we docked...” Milo’s voice faltered. “I-I remember it as though it were yesterday...a deckhand told me the news, the terrible news that was all over the Port...that my dear Cerys—your mother—had been killed. And my little daughter, too.”

“But I wasn’t killed,” whispered Jenna.

“No. I know that now. But then—I didn’t. I believed what everyone said.”

“Well, they were wrong. Why didn’t you come to the Castle and see if it was true? Why didn’t you come to find me? You ran away.”

“Yes. I suppose it seems so. But at the time I could not bear to stay. I left on the next tide and wandered wherever the winds took me—until I was captured by Deakin Lee.”

“Deakin Lee!” Jenna gasped. Even she, who was not at all interested in pirates, had heard of the dreaded Deakin Lee.

Milo risked a rueful smile in Jenna's direction. She gave him an uncertain half smile in return.

"I will never forget those seven long years in Deakin Lee's hold," he said in a low voice. "All the time I thought of the terrible thing that had happened to you and your dear mother...."

"How did you escape?" asked Jenna.

"One night, in the spring of last year, the ship came upon tumultuous waves. I've heard it said they were the swell from a **Darke** storm thousands of miles away, but they were good waves for me. Deakin Lee was washed overboard and his crew freed me. I took over the ship. Some weeks later we put in to a small port and I heard the rumor that you were alive. I could hardly believe it—I felt my life was beginning again. We set sail immediately and had fair winds all the way to the Port. We anchored offshore and raised the Yellow Duster to alert Customs, and the Chief Officer was rowed out to us the next morning. She took one look at the treasure onboard and told us we had to wait until the main bonded warehouse was free—she was a tough one, that Officer Nettles. But I am grateful to her, for had she not done so I would not have seen you that night."

Jenna remembered the scene at the warehouse. It all made sense now.

Milo continued, "When I looked up and saw you sitting on that horse, just the way your mother used to, and then I saw the circlet around your head, I knew you were my daughter. But I am sorry, Jenna, I think I frightened you that night. I wasn't thinking—I just wanted to talk to you. Jenna...Jenna?"

Jenna had spun around and was gazing into the shadows cast by the torches guttering on the Palace roof.

"Jenna?" Milo repeated.

"I can feel someone watching me," she said.

Milo shifted uncomfortably. "So can I," he said. Milo Banda and his daughter stared into the shadows but neither saw the ghost of the Queen watching her husband and daughter talk together for the first time in their lives.

Alther wafted up to the Queen. "It's good to see you venturing out of the Queen's Room at last," he said.

The Queen smiled wistfully. “I must return at once, Alther; but I could not resist seeing my dear Milo just once again—and with our daughter, too.”

“You can tell they are father and daughter,” observed Alther.

“Yes, that’s true.” The Queen nodded slowly. “There is something about the way they stand, is there not?”

“Yet she looks like you—remarkably like you.”

“I know,” sighed the Queen. “Good night, Alther.”

Alther watched the Queen drift silently past Jenna and Milo Banda, both of whom looked straight at her but saw nothing. Soon the Queen reached the turret and delicately stepped through its thick stone wall. Inside the Queen’s room the fire burned as brightly as always and the Queen sat quietly in her chair, remembering the events of the day—the day she had awaited for so many years.

Septimus, Marcia and Spit Fyre walked slowly along Wizard Way. The torches blazed in their silver posts, and Spit Fyre kept pouncing on the flickering shadows cast on the pavement. It was now after midnight and all the shops were closed and dark, but as they walked past the Manuscriptorium, Septimus thought he glimpsed a light behind the great piles of books and papers. But when he looked more carefully he could see nothing.

Marcia limped painfully up the marble steps to the Wizard Tower. Septimus settled Spit Fyre into the dragon kennel for the night.

“Make sure he can’t get out, Septimus,” Marcia told him as the great silver doors of the Tower opened for their ExtraOrdinary Wizard. “And don’t forget to double bolt the door.”

“All right,” he said, and Marcia tottered gratefully inside.

Spit Fyre settled down surprisingly easily. Septimus shot the two massive iron bolts across the door and tiptoed away to the sound of the dragon’s snores shaking the kennel.

It was a beautiful night. The Wizard Tower courtyard was deserted; the **Magykal** torches placed along the tops of the courtyard walls cast a soft purple light across the old flagstones, dim enough for Septimus to still see a

myriad of stars in the night sky.

Septimus was reluctant to go inside. He looked up at the stars and all his old dreams of flying came back to him. He knew he could resist no longer—he took out the **Flyte Charm**. The golden arrow with its new silver flights sat buzzing in his hand, and Septimus felt a thrill of **Magyk** go through him. As the flights began to flutter, Septimus felt himself lifting off the ground, up, up, until he was as high as the Great Arch. Holding the arrow between finger and thumb he pointed it toward the Palace, then he spread his arms out as he had once seen Alther do—and he flew.

He swooped down Wizard Way, low and fast just as Alther liked to, sped over the Palace Gate, and then soared up onto the Palace roof, just as he had always done in his dreams. Below him he saw Jenna and her father leaning over the battlements, talking quietly. Unsure whether to interrupt them, but longing to surprise Jenna and show her how well he could **Flye**, Septimus hovered for a moment waiting for a break in Milo’s ramblings. Then something caught his eye.

On the other side of the river, a horse galloped through the Farmlands. Riding the horse—newly stolen from outside the Grateful Turbot Tavern—was a familiar figure. Simon.

Septimus pointed the **Flyte Charm** toward the shadowy figure of his eldest brother. “**Follow,**” he whispered to the **Charm**. The next moment he found himself hurtling away from the Palace and swooping across the lawns that led to the river. Soon damp smells of the river filled his nostrils as he skimmed low across the cool nighttime water, startling a few ducks on the way. As the ducks’ angry quacking subsided, Septimus reached the far bank; he flew above the thatched roof of a lone farmhouse and hovered for a moment, searching out his brother. Sure enough, in the distance along the dusty road that wound through the Farmlands, Septimus saw a horseman spurring his horse into the night. A final, breathtaking turn of speed brought him level with Simon, and Septimus flew—unseen at first—alongside him, easily keeping pace with the sweating horse.

At last Simon became aware that all was not well. “You!” he yelled, skidding to a halt in a cloud of dust.

Septimus landed lightly in front of the horse.

“You—you’ve got my **Flyte Charm,**” Simon spluttered, seeing the golden arrow in Septimus’s hand.

“I do have the **Flyte Charm**,” Septimus agreed, neatly flying out of reach as Simon lurched forward to snatch it. “But the **Flyte Charm** is not mine. The **Flyte Charm** belongs to no one, Simon. You should know that an Ancient **Charm** is its own master.”

“Pompous prat,” Simon muttered under his breath.

“What did you say?” asked Septimus, who had heard perfectly well.

“Nothing. Get out of my way brat, and don’t think you can try any **Transfixing** rubbish this time.”

“I’m not going to,” replied Septimus, hovering in front of the horse. “I’ve just come to tell you to get out of here.”

“Which was exactly what I was doing,” Simon growled.

Septimus held his position, blocking Simon’s path. “I also came to tell you that if you ever try to harm Jenna again, you will have me to deal with. Understand?”

Simon stared at his youngest brother. Septimus returned the stare, his brilliant green eyes flashing angrily. Simon said nothing, for there was a feeling of power about Septimus that he recognized—the power of a seventh son of a seventh son.

“Understand?” Septimus repeated.

“Yeah,” muttered Simon.

“You can go now,” Septimus said coolly and dropped to the ground, standing to one side so that Simon could pass.

Simon looked down at the defenseless boy in green in the dark, deserted Farmlands, way past midnight. For a brief moment he considered how easy it would be to make Septimus disappear; no one would know what had happened. No one would ever suspect...but Simon did nothing. And then suddenly he kicked his horse into action and galloped off, yelling over his shoulder, “I wish you *had* been dead when the midwife took you away!”

Septimus flew slowly back to the Wizard Tower with Simon’s words echoing in his head.

He smiled. The last of his brothers had accepted him.

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE...

BILLY POT

Billy Pot once had a pet shop that specialized in reptiles. Billy loved lizards and snakes, and he specialized in breeding purple pythons. The biggest python that Billy Pot had ever bred lived in the backyard of Terry Tarsal's shoe shop. Terry, who did not like snakes, very reluctantly used their sloughed skin for Marcia's pointy snakeskin shoes.

When the Supreme Custodian bought a colony of snapping turtles from Billy and then ordered him to move to the Palace to look after them, Billy did not dare refuse. Billy's niece, Sandra, took over the pet shop and to Billy's great disapproval started selling fancy hamsters and fluffy rabbits. Sandra's new line in cuddly animals proved very popular, and she soon offered to buy the pet shop from Billy.

With the money Sandra had given him for the pet shop, Billy set up the lizard lodges down by the river, built the Contraption and embarked on his never-ending quest for the perfect lawn. When the Heaps moved into the Palace with Jenna, Silas asked Billy to stay on and help them get rid of the snapping turtles. Billy agreed, but the job proved impossible and he gave up after he nearly lost a finger to a particularly aggressive turtle.

UNA BRAKKET

Una Brakket was housekeeper at the Young Army Barracks when Septimus was a toddler. Una did not like boys, even subdued and scared Young Army

boys; she soon got a transfer and became housekeeper to the Hunter and his Pack. Una admired the Hunter very much indeed, although it is doubtful whether the Hunter even noticed her. He once asked her where his socks were, and Una went around in a daydream for days afterward. After that she took to hiding the Hunter's socks so that he might ask her again, but he never did.

When the Supreme Custodian fled and Jenna came back to live in the Palace as Princess, Una took advantage of Marcia and Alther's Second-Chance Scheme. She applied for a job as Palace housekeeper, which she did not get as Sarah Heap thought she was scary. The Scheme eventually referred her to Professor Weasal Van Klampff, who only took her on because he was too frightened to refuse.

However, Una's sympathies still lay with DomDaniel, and she joined the Restoration Unit, a secret network of people who wished to see him return. They met every Saturday night under the pretense of country dancing classes. It was through them that Una was put in touch with Simon Heap.

PROFESSOR WEASAL VAN KLAMPFF

Weasal Van Klampff came from a long line of Professors. Many hundreds of years ago, Professor Doris Van Klampff had worked out a secret and very complicated formula for getting rid of **Hauntings**. This included **Shadows**, such as Marcia's, and **Spectres** like the one that had **Waited** for Alther when he was Apprentice to DomDaniel. Although the Van Klampffs had great mathematical ability, they tended to be rather gullible and extremely forgetful; Weasal was no exception.

After Weasal's father, Otto, blew himself up—along with the original Van Klampff Laboratory—while mixing some volatile **Amalgam**, Weasal decided to give up experimenting and live a quiet life beside the Moat. On moving into his house on Snake Slipway, he was dismayed to find an ancient laboratory tucked away at the end of a warren of tunnels. Weasal spent many years trying to ignore the laboratory, but in the end the temptation was too great, and he decided to carry on his father's work. He perfected Otto's Amalgam so that it acted as a highly efficient screen for **Darke** energy, thus unwittingly providing an ideal hiding place for DomDaniel's bones.

Weasal Van Klampff was a trusting man and had no idea that Una Brakket belonged to the Restoration Unit.

BEETLE

Beetle was an only child. He grew up in The Ramblings—his parents had two large rooms on the floor immediately below the Heap family. One of Beetle’s earliest memories was his mother banging on the ceiling with a broom handle, yelling, “For heaven’s sake *be quiet!*” His parents refused to let Beetle have anything to do with the Heaps, which only made them more attractive, and he soon struck up a friendship with Jo-Jo Heap, who was the same age.

At the age of eleven, Beetle passed the highly competitive entrance test to the Manuscriptorium, much to his mother’s delight. He started as General Dogsboddy, and after the Inspection Clerk fell off the sled and broke his ankle, Beetle was trusted enough to take over the weekly inspections of the Ice Tunnels.

Beetle liked Septimus a lot; he reminded him of Jo-Jo, but he also shared Beetle’s interest in and his liking for weird fizzy drinks. Beetle shared Septimus’s dislike of **Darke Magyk** for, as he once said to Septimus over a mug of **FizzFroot**, “All that **Darke** stuff is depressing. When that awful old bloke came back to the Wizard Tower my hamster died, my mum got a huge boil on the end of her nose and the cat ran away. All because **Darke** stuff stuck to me at work, and then I brought it home. Horrible.”

Septimus liked Beetle a lot too. He trusted him completely.

BORIS CATCHPOLE

Ever since he could remember, Boris Catchpole had been known by his last name. His mother had tried her best to call him Boris, but by the time he had started toddling she, like everyone else, had given up and reverted to plain Catchpole—somehow Boris seemed just too familiar.

Catchpole’s ambition was to be a Hunter. He had run away from home and joined the Hunting Pack in the Badlands while DomDaniel had been preparing the assassination of the Queen. Catchpole had trained hard with the Pack, but he was not popular. He had given up cleaning his teeth as a boy and had no intention of starting again now that he did not have his mother telling him to. He had a nervous habit of clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth that made people feel snappy, and, to top it all, he was growing fast and was soon too tall to make a good Hunter.

Catchpole, true to his name, became Deputy Hunter but progressed no farther. After the overthrow of the Supreme Custodian he joined the Second-Chance Scheme and was accepted as a sub-Wizard—a new trainee Wizard post for those of more mature years or no **Magykal** background.

Catchpole's ambition was now to be a proper Wizard. At the very least he wanted to be an Ordinary Wizard, but he had decided that he would not turn down the job of ExtraOrdinary Wizard if it were offered to him. It never was.

JANNIT MAARTEN

If you asked Jannit Maarten to describe herself, she would say, “boat builder.” And that is all she would say. Jannit had little time for politics and even less time for Wizards. Whatever went on in the Castle was of no concern to Jannit, whose whole world consisted of her boatyard just outside the Castle walls. She slept soundly in her hammock at night, rose at dawn and spent all daylight hours happily building, mending, painting and scraping—and all the other hundreds of wonderfully time-consuming fiddly things that boats require.

Although Nicko found it hard to believe, Jannit had once been a little girl, but she had forgotten all about it—possibly because she had grown up on a small farm in the middle of the Farmlands and had disliked chickens, hated cows and loathed pigs. Her parents never understood why, at fourteen, Jannit had dressed as a boy and run away to sea. At nineteen she returned with a ship of her own and set up the Jannit Maarten Boatyard next to the derelict Castle Customs Quay. Jannit was entirely happy with her life and set foot outside her beloved boatyard with great reluctance.

SLEUTH

Sleuth had once been a tennis ball. It had spent two years lying in a damp ditch beside the Port Municipal Real Tennis House after someone had hit it out the window in a fit of temper; it had been seriously nibbled by mice and was slowly falling apart, until one day Simon Heap picked it up, put it in his pocket and took it back to the Observatory.

Over the next few months, Sleuth lay in a **Sealed** box, which Simon Heap carefully tended. He regularly filled and refilled the box with gases and

potions, chanted over it for long hours and encircled it with **Reverse Charms**. As Sleuth gradually became conscious, it heard incantations muttered over it at midnight and smelled the **Darke** fumes that Simon wafted through the box. It had lain there, confused but excited, waiting to see what was going to happen.

Then, one night, at the Dark of the Moon, Sleuth was let out of its box and saw the world for the first time. It liked what it saw and Simon Heap was equally pleased with his creation. Sleuth glowed brightly and seemed intelligent; it was obedient and quick to learn. Soon it followed its Master everywhere and became Simon Heap's most loyal and faithful servant.

NURSE MEREDITH

Nurse Agnes Meredith, ex-Matron Midwife, ex-baby snatcher, made her way to the Port after being released from the Castle Asylum for Deluded and Distressed Persons. She walked the streets looking for her son, Merrin, but she had no luck. Eventually she ran out of the allowance the Asylum had given her and found a job as a cleaner in a seedy lodging house in the Rope Walk, next to the Port Witch Coven.

The owner of the lodging house was a Mrs. Florrie Bundy, a large woman of short temper and long memory. Florrie had numerous ongoing feuds with her neighbors, the Port Witches, and it was a heated argument over a used teabag—which Florrie claimed had been deliberately aimed at her head—that led to her demise. Linda, who one day for want of nothing better to do had indeed thrown a teabag at Florrie's head, eventually got tired of being yelled at and placed a **Shrink Spell** on Florrie. Over the course of a few weeks the **Shrink Spell** gradually reduced Florrie to the size of a teabag herself, and one frosty morning she slipped on some ice, fell down the drain outside the backdoor and drowned.

Agnes Meredith had watched Florrie **Shrinking** with great interest. One day, when she could no longer find the diminutive landlady, Nurse Meredith took over the lodging house as though nothing had happened. She soon made it her own—hanging flock wallpaper, writing whimsical messages to stick on the walls and filling the house with dried flowers and dolls. She enjoyed the company of her dolls, and after a while she stopped looking for Merrin. At least you knew where you were with dolls, she told herself.

MAUREEN

Maureen had run away to the Port with the Chief Potato Peeler after an incident in the Palace kitchens. Maureen and the Chief Potato Peeler, Kevin, were saving up to buy their own café. When Kevin was taken on as cook on a large merchant ship on a round-the-world voyage, Maureen took the only job she could find at the time, working in the Doll House. It was not ideal but she managed to save the tips she was given by grateful guests, and at least living in the cupboard under the stairs meant she did not have to pay for lodgings. She longed for the day that Kevin would return and they would find a little place of their own down by the harbor.

PORT WITCH COVEN: VERONICA

Veronica had been in the Coven for the longest of all the witches, but she did not hold the post of Witch Mother on account of her forgetfulness and tendency to sleepwalk out of the Coven and get lost for days on end. Veronica loved rats, something she had inherited from her father, Jack, who lived out on the reed beds near the Marram Marshes. Like her father, Veronica had a large collection of caged rats in various stages of decay.

LINDA

Linda was the youngest of the witches and was, as she put it, “up for anything, me.” The other witches enjoyed her company but not her practical jokes. Linda had a fiery temper and a penchant for very nasty spells if anyone crossed her. But after the incident of Dorinda’s elephant ears, none of the witches did. Pamela, the Witch Mother, saw that Linda had potential and was secretly grooming her as her successor.

DAPHNE

Daphne was the quiet one of the Coven. She bumbled around amiably and kept to herself, happily nurturing a colony of giant woodworms, which were slowly eating their way through the house. Daphne loved her woodworms and kept most of her conversation for them.

PAMELA

Pamela was the Witch Mother and the **Darke** one of the Coven. Of course all the witches thought they were **Darke** Witches, but Pamela was the real thing. She had spent some years with DomDaniel at the Observatory and had returned with many **Darke** tales to tell, which had frightened the other Coven members, even though they would rather drink rotten frog juice than admit it. Pamela had her own **Locked** room, which the other witches kept well away from, and at night, when bloodcurdling shrieks echoed from the room, the rest of the Coven stuffed their fingers in their ears and tried to sleep.

DORINDA

Dorinda had not been especially concerned about her appearance until the terrible night of the elephant ears. She knew she was not particularly good-looking, for her nose was slightly crooked after an argument with a fire escape, and she had never liked her hair. But Dorinda gave up any attempt at personal grooming after Linda accused her of eavesdropping on a private conversation with a young Warlock she had brought home. Dorinda had strenuously denied it—even though the whole Coven knew she crept around listening at keyholes. Linda was furious and **Bestowed** upon Dorinda a pair of elephant ears (African elephant ears—the really big ones), saying that “if she was going to go flapping her ears around the place, she may as well have some decent ears to flap.” Since that night Dorinda had worn a large towel swathed around her head and kept up the pretense to the rest of the Coven that she had just washed her hair, even though they knew—and Dorinda knew that they knew—that underneath the huge towel lay a pair of neatly folded African elephant ears. It was a permanent spell, and not even Pamela could get rid of it.

HUGH FOX, CHIEF HERMETIC SCRIBE

Hugh Fox had been a lowly scribe in the Manuscriptorium for twenty-five years when he was **Picked** to become the Chief Hermetic Scribe.

When DomDaniel had lured Marcia back from the Marram Marshes, he had snatched the book she had with her, *The Undoing of the Darkenese*. The **Necromancer** had taken the book to Waldo Watkins, who was the Chief Hermetic Scribe, and told him to use the **Darke Hermetic Powers** that are

always available to a Chief Scribe to **UnLocke** its secrets. Watkins had refused, and that night on his way home Waldo Watkins vanished, never to be seen again.

DomDaniel insisted on an immediate replacement and the **Draw** was made. The **Draw** was a ceremony: each scribe placed his pen into a large ancient enameled **Pot**. The **Pot** was taken into the Hermetic Chamber and left overnight. The next morning one pen would always be found lying on the table, while the rest would remain in the **Pot**. Traditionally the youngest scribe would be sent in to retrieve the chosen pen.

However, when Hugh Fox was **Picked**, DomDaniel insisted on going into the Hermetic Chamber himself to get the pen. When he brought out a much-chewed black pen belonging to Hugh Fox, no one could believe it. Not even Hugh Fox. There were rumors about the **Pick** not being fair, but nothing could be proved.

The truth of it was that DomDaniel had put back a pen belonging to Jillie Djinn, a talented and well-read scribe, and pulled out Hugh Fox's pen—because he reckoned that Hugh Fox was a pushover.

And so Hugh Fox was instructed in the Cryptic Codex, handed the Official Seals and duly installed as Chief Hermetic Scribe. To DomDaniel's disgust, Hugh Fox had great trouble **UnLocking** the secrets of Marcia's book, but he did manage to find the **Flyte Charm—Concealed** in the cover—just as DomDaniel became a bundle of bones in the Marram Marshes.

After DomDaniel's demise and Marcia's return to the Wizard Tower with Septimus, the Restoration Unit threatened Hugh Fox with the same fate that had befallen poor old Watkins if he did not give Simon Heap access to the Ice Tunnels. Hugh Fox agreed. And when Simon Heap demanded the **Flyte Charm**, he handed it over without a murmur. DomDaniel had been right—Hugh Fox was, indeed, a pushover.

PARTRIDGE

Colin Partridge had once been a Custodian Guard. He had been unwillingly recruited from a small village on the edge of the Sheeplands. Partridge was a dreamy child whose days were spent minding his father's sheep. Partridge had lost more sheep than his father cared to think about, and his father despaired of him ever making a good shepherd. So when the Custodian Guard

Recruiting Party promised to “make a man of him,” Partridge’s father had young Colin packed and ready in no time at all, much to the horror of his dotting mother.

Luckily for Partridge, he arrived right at the end of the Supreme Custodian’s regime, and within a month of joining, he had signed up for the Second-Chance Scheme and been snapped up by the Manuscriptorium. Partridge had never been happier.

THE ICE TUNNEL GHOSTS

Eldred and Alfred Stone were brothers. They, like many other stonemasons, had been brought in at the time of the Great Catastrophe underneath the Castle. They had worked long hard hours to try to repair the breach in the tunnels but to no avail. They were among the thirty-nine people who were trapped by the Emergency Freeze and never again saw the light of day. Along with their companions, they continued to walk the tunnels, unaware that many hundreds of years had passed since they were **Frozen**. Both brothers were convinced that their lives still awaited them, if only someone would tell them the way out.

ELLIS CRACKLE

Ellis Crackle had been DomDaniel’s Apprentice when the **Necromancer** was first ExtraOrdinary Wizard at the Castle, many years ago. Ellis was a slow, ungainly young man with little aptitude for **Magyk**, but DomDaniel did not care. He chose Ellis because he was Betty Crackle’s brother. At that time, Betty Crackle was Keeper of the Dragon Boat. She was a disorganized White Witch who meant well, but she always left a trail of trouble behind her, due to her absentmindedness and general untidiness. Aunt Zelda eventually took over from Betty after she wandered off to the Port one winter’s night and got caught by the Big Freeze.

Ellis Crackle was even more forgetful than Betty was, but DomDaniel had guessed that there might be something very important at Keeper’s Cottage—something that stopped him from getting complete control of the Castle—and he wanted to find out what it was. Employing Betty Crackle’s brother seemed like a good way of worming his way into the secret.

Unfortunately for DomDaniel, just after Ellis took up his Apprenticeship, Betty and Ellis had a huge row. Ellis boasted once too often about his important new post and Betty, who was very jealous, could stand it no more. She put an **Enchantment** on Keeper's Cottage to keep Ellis away and never spoke to her brother again. And so it turned out that DomDaniel never discovered the Dragon Boat at Keeper's Cottage—or even where the Cottage was.

When Aunt Zelda took over from Betty Crackle, Ellis was of no further use to DomDaniel. He took on Alther Mella as a new Apprentice and Ellis was **Suspended**—a long and nasty **Darke** process of **Reducing** someone to a **Shadow**. DomDaniel then **Kept** the unfortunate Ellis for further use. He came in very handy later, as Marcia's **Shadow**.

HILDEGARDE

Hildegarde had worked for the Council of the Custodians in the accounts department, which had spent most of its time trying to curb the lavish spending of the Supreme Custodian. It was an impossible task. Later Hildegarde had been transferred to the Sales Force, which forced the sale of all the Palace treasures. Hildegarde grew to love the old pictures and furnishings she had to sell, but she drove a hard bargain and got a good price for them.

Hildegarde was very pleased when the Second-Chance Scheme helped her get accepted for training as a sub-Wizard. She was a little uneasy at being on door duty at the Palace, and when she looked at the empty places where all the treasures had once stood, her conscience troubled her. She was determined to become an Ordinary Wizard and make any amends possible.

About the Authors

ANGIE SAGE was born in London and grew up in the Thames Valley, London, and Kent. She currently lives by a creek in Cornwall where she writes overlooking oyster boats passing to and fro. She also sails a little green boat with red sails called *Muriel*. Ms. Sage has created many picture books and chapter books for children, including *MY HAUNTED HOUSE* and *THE SWORD IN THE GROTTO*, in the *Araminta Spookie* series for young readers. You can visit her online at www.septimusheap.com.

MARK ZUG has loved fantasy novels since he was a teenager. He has illustrated many collectible card games, including *Magic: The Gathering* and *Dune*, as well as books and magazines. He lives in Pennsylvania. You can visit him online at www.markzug.com.

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.

**OTHER BOOKS IN THE
SEPTIMUS HEAP SERIES:**

Magyk

Physik

Credits

Cover art © 2006 by Mark Zug

Copyright

SEPTIMUS HEAP, BOOK TWO: FLYTE. Text Copyright © 2006 by Angie Sage. Illustration copyright © 2006 by Mark Zug. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

ePub Edition February 2008 ISBN 9780061757082

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
25 Ryde Road (PO Box 321)
Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com.au>

Canada

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900
Toronto, ON, M5R, 3L2, Canada
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.uk>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com>

SEPTIMUS HEAP

⚡ BOOK THREE ⚡

Physik



ANGIE SAGE

#1 National Bestselling Author of *Magyk*

Septimus Heap

Book Three

Physik

Angie Sage

Illustrations by Mark Zug

 HarperCollins e-books

*For Rhodri—
my Alchemist,
with love*

Contents

Map

Prologue: The Portrait in the Atti

1 Snorri Snorrelssen

2 The Traders' Market

3 An Unwelcome Visitor

4 The Hole in the Wall

5 Queen Etheldredda

6 The Outside Path

7 Snake Slipway

8 Fire Under the Water

9 Prediction Practical

10 The Queen's Robing Room

11 The Glass

12 Jillie Djinn

13 The Navigator Tin

14 Marcellus Pye

15 The Old Way

16 The Empty Palace

17 Palace Ghosts

18 The Dragon Kennel

19 The RatStranglers

20 Fyre and Seek

21 Rider Retrieve

[22 The Alfrún](#)

[23 Spirit-Seer](#)

[24 The Boarding Party](#)

[25 The I, Marcellus](#)

[26 The Wizard Tower](#)

[27 Hugo Tenderfoot](#)

[28 Impounded](#)

[29 Warehouse Number Nine](#)

[30 Sacred Sheep](#)

[31 Drago's Hoard](#)

[32 The Dark Pool](#)

[33 Princess Esmeralda](#)

[34 Princess Esmeralda's Diary](#)

[35 Knights](#)

[36 Broda Pye](#)

[37 The Banquet](#)

[38 The Summer House](#)

[39 The UnderFlow](#)

[40 The Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik](#)

[41 The Phial](#)

[42 The River](#)

[43 The Great Doors of Time](#)

[44 The Find](#)

[45 The Physik Chest](#)

[46 The Infirmary](#)

[47 Palace Rats](#)

[48 The Send](#)

49 The BoneFyre

Things You Might Like to Know About...

About the Authors

Other Books by Angie Sage

Credits

Copyright

About the Publisher

Map



PROLOGUE:

THE PORTRAIT IN THE ATTIC



Silas Heap and Gringe, the North Gate Gatekeeper, are in a dark and dusty corner of the Palace attic. In front of them is a small door to a Sealed room, which Silas Heap, Ordinary Wizard, is about to UnSeal. “You see, Gringe,” he says, “it’s the perfect place. My Counters will never be able to escape from there. I can just Seal them in.”

Gringe is not so sure. Even he knows that Sealed rooms in attics are best left alone. “I don’t like it, Silas,” he says. “It feels peculiar. Anyway, just because you’ve been lucky enough to find a new Colony under the floorboards up ’ere doesn’t mean they’ll *stay* here.”

“They jolly well will stay if they’re Sealed in, Gringe,” says Silas, clutching his box of precious newfound Counters, which he has just caught. “You’re just being funny because you won’t be able to entice this bunch away.”

“I did not *entice* the last bunch either, Silas Heap. They came of their own accord. Weren’t nothing I could do about it.”

Silas ignores Gringe. He is trying to remember how to do an UnSeal Spell.

Gringe taps his foot impatiently. “Urry up, Silas. I got a gate to get back to. Lucy is most odd at the moment and I don’t want to leave ’er there alone for long.”

Silas Heap closes his eyes so that he can think better. Under his breath, so that Gringe cannot quite hear what he is saying, Silas chants the Lock Incantation backward three times, finishing it off with the UnSeal. He opens his eyes. Nothing has happened.

“I’m going,” Gringe tells him. “Can’t ’ang around like a spare part all day. Some of us ’ave work to do.”

Suddenly with a loud bang, the door to the Sealed room slams open. Silas is triumphant. “See—I *do* know what I’m doing. I *am* a Wizard, Gringe. Oof! What was that?” An icy gust of stale air rushes past Silas and Gringe, dragging their breath right up from their lungs and causing them both to subside into fits of coughing.

“That was cold.” Gringe shivers, with goose bumps running up and down his arms. Silas does not reply—he is already in the UnSealed room, deciding on the best place to keep his Counter Colony. Curiosity gets the better of Gringe and he tentatively enters the room. It is tiny, little more than a cupboard. Apart from the light of Silas’s candle, the room is dark, for the only window that it once had has been bricked up. It is nothing more than an empty space, with dusty floorboards and bare, cracked plaster walls. But it is not—as Gringe suddenly notices—entirely empty. In the dim shadows on the far side of the little room a large, life-size oil painting of a Queen is propped up against the wall.

Silas looks at the portrait. It is a skillful painting of a Castle Queen, from times long past. He can tell that it is old because she is wearing the True Crown, the one that was lost many centuries ago. The Queen has a sharp pointy nose and wears her hair coiled around her ears like a pair of earmuffs. Clinging to her skirts is an Aie-Aie—a horrible little creature with a ratty face, sharp claws and a long snake’s tail. Its round, red eyes stare out at Silas as though it would like to bite him with its one long, needle-sharp tooth. The Queen too looks out from the painting but she wears a lofty, disapproving expression. Her head is held high, supported by a starched ruff under her chin and her piercing eyes are reflected in the light of Silas’s candle and seem to follow them everywhere.

Gringe shivers. “I wouldn’t like to meet ’er out on me own on a dark night,” he says.

Silas thinks that Gringe is right, *he* wouldn't like to meet her on a dark night either—and neither would his precious Counters. “She'll have to go,” says Silas. “I'm not having her upsetting my Counter Colony before they've even got started.”

But what Silas does not know is that she has already gone. As soon as he UnSealed the room, the ghosts of Queen Etheldredda and her creature stepped out of the portrait, opened the door and, pointy noses in the air, walked and scuttled out—right past Silas and Gringe. The Queen and her Aie-Aie paid them no attention, for they had more important things to do—and at long last they were free to do them.

1

SNORRI SNORRELSSEN



Snorri Snorrelssen guided her trading barge up the quiet waters of the river toward the Castle. It was a misty autumn afternoon and Snorri was relieved to have left the turbulent tidal waters of the Port behind her. The wind had dropped but enough breeze caught the huge sail of the barge—named *Alfrún*, after her mother who owned it—to enable her to steer the boat safely around Raven’s Rock and head for the quay just beyond Sally Mullin’s Tea and Ale House.

Two young fishermen, not much older than Snorri herself, had just returned from a day’s successful herring catch and were more than happy to catch the heavy hemp ropes that Snorri threw to shore. Eager to show their skills, they tied the ropes around two large posts on the quay and made the *Alfrún* secure. The fishermen were also more than happy to dispense all kinds of advice on how to take the sail down and the best way to stow the ropes, which Snorri ignored, partly because she hardly understood what they were saying but mainly because no one told Snorri Snorrelssen what to do—*no one*, not even her mother. Especially not her mother.

Snorri, tall for her age, was slim, wiry and surprisingly strong. With the practiced ease of someone who had spent the last two weeks at sea sailing alone, Snorri lowered the great canvas sail and rolled up the vast folds of heavy cloth; then she heaved the ropes into neat coils and secured the tiller. Aware that she was being watched by the fishermen, Snorri locked the hatch to the hold below, which was full of heavy bales of thick woolen cloth, sacks of pickling spice, great barrels of salted fish and some particularly fine reindeer-skin boots. At last—ignoring more offers of help—Snorri pushed the gangplank out and came ashore, leaving Ullr, her small orange cat with a black-tipped tail, to prowl the deck and keep the rats at bay.

Snorri had been at sea for more than two weeks and she had been looking forward to stepping onto firm land again, but as she walked along the quay it felt to her as if she were still on board the *Alfrún*, for the quay seemed to move beneath her feet just as the old barge had done. The fishermen, who should already have gone home to *their* respective mothers, were sitting on a pile of empty lobster pots. “Evening, miss,” one of them called out.

Snorri ignored him. She made her way to the end of the quay and took the well-trodden path that led to a large new pontoon, on which a thriving café was built. It was a very stylish two-story wooden building with long, low windows that looked out across the river. The café looked inviting in the chill early-evening air, with a warm yellow light coming from the oil lamps that hung from the ceiling. As Snorri walked across the wooden walkway that led onto the pontoon she could hardly believe that, at long last, she was here—at the fabled Sally Mullin’s Tea and Ale House. Excited, but feeling very nervous, Snorri pushed open the double doors to the café and nearly fell over a long line of fire buckets full of sand and water.

There was always a general buzz of friendly conversation in Sally Mullin’s café, but as soon as Snorri stepped over the threshold the buzz suddenly stopped, as though someone had thrown a switch. Almost in unison, every customer put down their drink and stared at the young stranger who wore the distinctive robes of the Hanseatic League, to which all Northern Traders belonged. Feeling herself blushing and wishing furiously that she wasn’t, Snorri advanced toward the bar, determined to order one of Sally’s barley cakes and a half-pint mug of the Springo Special Ale that she had heard so much about.

Sally Mullin, a short round woman with an equal dusting of freckles and barley flour on her cheeks, bustled out of the kitchen. Seeing the dark red robes of a Northern Trader and the typical leather headband, her face took on

a scowl. “I don’t serve Northern Traders in here,” she snapped.

Snorri looked puzzled. She was not sure that she understood what Sally had said, although she could tell that Sally was not exactly welcoming.

“You saw the notice on the door,” Sally said when Snorri showed no sign of leaving. “No Northern Traders. You are not welcome here, not in *my* café.”

“She’s only a lass, Sal,” someone called out. “Give the girl a chance.”

There was a general murmur of assent from the other customers. Sally Mullin gave Snorri a closer look and her expression softened. It was true; she was only a girl—maybe sixteen at the most, thought Sally. She had the typical white-blond hair and pale, almost translucent blue eyes that most of the Traders had, but she did not have that hard-bitten look that Sally had come to remember with a shudder.

“Well...” said Sally, backtracking, “I suppose it’s getting on to nightfall and I’m not one to be turning out a young girl into the dark all on her own. What will you have, miss?”

“I...I will have,” Snorri faltered as she tried hard to remember her grammar. Was it, *I will have* or *I shall have*? “I shall have a slice of your very fine barley cake and a half-pint of the Springo Special Ale, if you please.”

“Springo Special, eh?” someone called out. “There’s a lass after me own heart.”

“Be quiet, Tom,” Sally chided. “You’d best try the ordinary Springo first,” she told Snorri. Sally poured out the ale into a large china mug and pushed it across the counter toward the girl. Snorri took a tentative sip and her face wrinkled in disgust. Sally was not surprised. Springo was an acquired taste and most youngsters thought it was revolting; indeed there were some days when Sally herself thought it was pretty foul. Sally poured a mug of lemon and honey for Snorri and put it on a tray with a large slab of barley cake. The girl looked like she could do with a good meal. Snorri gave Sally a whole silver florin, much to Sally’s surprise, and got back a huge pile of pennies in change. Then she sat down at an empty table by the window and looked out at the darkening river.

Conversation in the café started up again and Snorri breathed a sigh of relief. Coming into Sally Mullin’s café on her own had been the hardest thing she had ever done in her life. Harder than taking the *Alfrún* out to sea on her

own for the first time, harder than trading for all the goods now in the *Alfrún*'s hold with the money she had saved up for years, and much, much harder than the crossing over the great northern sea that separated the land of the Northern Traders from the land of Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House. But she had done it; Snorri Snorrelssen was following in the footsteps of her father, and no one could stop her. Not even her mother.

Later that evening, Snorri returned to the *Alfrún*. She was met by Ullr in his nighttime guise. The cat emitted a long, low welcoming growl and followed his mistress along the deck. Feeling so full of barley cake that she could barely move, Snorri sat in her favorite place at the prow, stroking the NightUllr, a sleek and powerful panther, black as the night with sea-green eyes and an orange-tipped tail.

Snorri was far too excited to sleep. She sat with her arm draped loosely over Ullr's warm, silky-smooth fur, looking out across the dark expanse of river to the shores of the Farmlands on the opposite banks. Later, as the night grew chill, she wrapped herself in a sample length of the thick woolen cloth that she planned to sell—and for a good price, too—in the Traders' Market, which started in two weeks' time. Balanced on her lap was a map of the Castle, showing how to get to the marketplace; on the reverse of the map were detailed instructions on how to obtain a license for a stall and all manner of rules and regulations about buying and selling. Snorri lit the oil lamp she had brought up from her small cabin below and settled down to read the rules and regulations. The wind was still now, and the fine drizzle of the early evening had died down; the air was crisp and clear, and Snorri breathed in the smells of the land—so different and foreign from the one she was used to.

As the evening drew on, small groups of customers began to leave Sally's café, until just after midnight Snorri saw Sally extinguish the oil lamps and bolt the door. Snorri smiled happily. Now she had the river to herself, just her, Ullr and the *Alfrún*, alone in the night. As the barge rocked gently in the outgoing tide, Snorri felt her eyes closing. She put down the tedious list of permitted weights and measures, pulled the woolen cloth more tightly around her and gazed out across the river for just one last time before she went down to her cabin. And then she saw it.

A long, pale boat outlined in a greenish glow was coming around Raven's Rock. Snorri sat very still and watched the boat make slow, silent progress up the middle of the river, steadily drawing closer to the *Alfrún*. As it drew near, Snorri saw it shimmering in the light of the moon, and a shiver ran down her spine, for Snorri Snorrelssen, Spirit-Seer, knew exactly what she was looking

at—a Spirit Ship. Snorri whistled under her breath, for she had never seen a boat quite like this one. Snorri was used to seeing wrecks of old fishing boats steered by their drowned skippers, forever seeking safe harbor. Every now and then she had seen the ghost of a warrior long-ship, limping home after a fierce battle, and once she had seen the ghostly tall ship of a rich merchant, with treasure pouring from a gaping hole in its side, but she had never seen a Royal Barge—complete with the ghost of its Queen.

Snorri got to her feet, took out her Spirit eyeglass, which the wise woman in the Ice Palace had given her, and focused it on the apparition as it drifted noiselessly by, propelled by eight ghostly oars. The barge was decked out in flags that fluttered in a wind that had died long ago; it was painted in swirling patterns of gold and silver and was covered in a rich red canopy, strung from ornate pillars of gold. Beneath the canopy sat a tall, erect figure staring fixedly ahead. Her pointed chin rested on a high, starched ruff, she wore a simple crown and sported a decidedly old-fashioned hairstyle: two coiled plaits of hair tightly wound around her ears. Next to her sat a small, almost hairless creature that Snorri took to be a particularly ugly dog until she saw its long, snakelike tail curled around one of the gold pillars. Snorri watched the ghost boat drift by, and she shivered as a chill ran through her—for there was something different, something *substantial*, about its occupants.

Snorri put away her eyeglass and climbed through the hatch to her cabin, leaving Ullr on guard on the deck. She hung her lamp from a hook in the cabin roof, and the soft yellow light from the lamp made the cabin feel warm and cozy. It was small, for most of the space on a Trader's barge was taken up with the hold, but Snorri loved it. The cabin was lined with sweet-smelling applewood that her father, Olaf, had once brought home as a present for her mother and was beautifully fitted out, for her father had been a talented carpenter. On the starboard side was a built-in bunk that doubled up as a seat in the day. Under the bunk were neat cupboards where Snorri stowed all the cabin clutter, and above the bunk was a long shelf where Snorri kept her charts rolled up. On the port side was a drop-down table, an expanse of applewood drawers and a small potbellied iron stove from which a chimney ran up through the cabin roof. Snorri opened the door to the stove and a dull red glow came from the dying embers of the fire.

Feeling sleepy, Snorri climbed into her bunk, pulled her reindeer-skin coverlet around herself and snuggled down for the night. She smiled happily. It had been a good day—apart from the sight of the ghost Queen. But there was only one ghost that Snorri wanted to see—and that was the ghost of Olaf Snorrelssen.

2

THE TRADERS' MARKET



T*he next morning Snorri* was up bright and early, and Ullr, back in his daytime mode of scrawny orange cat with a black-tipped tail, was eating a mouse for breakfast. Snorri had forgotten all about the ghostly Royal Barge, and when she did remember it over her own breakfast of pickled herring and dark rye bread, Snorri decided that she had dreamed the whole thing.

Snorri pulled out her sample bag from the hold, heaved it over her shoulders and set off down the gangplank into the bright morning sunshine, feeling happy and excited. Snorri liked this strange land that she had come to; she liked the green water of the slow river and the smell of autumn leaves and wood smoke that hung in the air, and she was fascinated by the tall Castle walls that reared up before her, behind which was a whole new world to explore. Snorri walked up the steep path that led to the South Gate and breathed in deeply. There was a chill in the air, but it was nothing like the frosts that Snorri knew her mother would be waking up to back home in their dark little wooden house on the quay. Snorri shook her head to get rid of any thoughts of her mother and followed the path up to the Castle.

As Snorri walked through the South Gate she noticed an old beggar sitting on the ground. She fished out a groat from her pocket, for her people considered it good luck to give to the first beggar you saw in a strange country, and pressed it into his hand. Too late, as her hand went through his,

Snorri realized that this was a ghostly beggar. The ghost looked surprised at Snorri's touch, and in a bad temper at being **Passed Through**, he got up and walked away. Snorri stopped and dropped her heavy bag onto the ground. She looked around and her heart sank. The Castle was *packed*, stuffed full to overflowing with ghosts of all descriptions, which Snorri, as a Spirit-Seer, had no choice but to see—whether the ghosts had chosen to **Appear** to her or not. Snorri wondered how she was ever going to find her father in such a crowd. She very nearly turned around right there and went home again, but she told herself that she had also come to Trade, and as the daughter of a renowned Trader, Trade she would.

Keeping her head down and avoiding as many ghosts as she could, Snorri followed her map. It was a good map, and very soon she was walking through the old brick archway that led into the Traders' Market Palace, where she made straight for the Traders' Office. The office was an open hut with a sign above it saying HANSEATIC LEAGUE AND NORTHERN TRADE ASSOCIATION INCORPORATED. Inside the hut were a long trestle table, two sets of scales with assorted weights and measures, a large ledger and a wizened old Trader counting the money in a large iron cash box. Suddenly Snorri felt nervous, almost as nervous as when she had entered Sally Mullin's. This was the moment when she had to prove that she had a right to Trade and a right to belong to the Association. She swallowed hard and, head held high, strode into the hut.

The old man did not look up. He carried on counting out the strange coins that Snorri had not yet become used to: pennies, groats, florins, half crowns and crowns. Snorri coughed a couple of times but still the old man did not look up. After a few minutes, Snorri could bear it no longer. "Excuse me," she said.

"Four hundred and twenty-five, four hundred and twenty-six..." said the man, not taking his eyes off the coins.

Snorri had no choice but to wait. Five minutes later the man announced, "One thousand. Yes, miss, can I help you?"

Snorri put a crown on the trestle table and said fluently, for she had rehearsed this moment for days beforehand, "I wish to buy a license to Trade."

The old man looked at the girl in her rough woolen Trader dress standing before him, and he smiled as though Snorri had said something foolish. "Sorry, miss. You have to be a member of the League."

Snorri understood the man well enough. “I *am* a member of the League,” she told him. Before the man could object, Snorri took out her Letters of Charter and put the roll of parchment with its red ribbon and great blob of red sealing wax in front of the man. As if humoring her, the old man very slowly pulled out his glasses, shaking his head at the impudence of youngsters today, and slowly read what Snorri had given him. As his finger moved along the words, his expression changed to one of disbelief, and when he had finished reading, he held up the parchment to the light, searching for signs that it was a forgery.

It wasn’t. Snorri knew it wasn’t and so did the old man. “This is most irregular,” he told Snorri.

“Ir-regular?” asked Snorri.

“*Most* irregular. It is not usual for fathers to pass their Letters of Charter on to their daughters.”

“No?”

“But all appears to be in order.” The old man sighed and rather unwillingly reached under the table and pulled out a stack of licenses. “Sign here,” he said, pushing a pen over to Snorri. Snorri signed her name and the old man stamped the license as though it had said something extremely personal and rude.

He pushed it across the table to Snorri. “Stall number one. You’re early. The first one here. Market starts at dawn two weeks from Friday. Last day is MidWinter Feast Day Eve. Clear out by dusk. All trash to be removed to the Municipal Rubbish Dump by midnight. That will be one crown.” The man took the crown from where Snorri had laid it on the table and threw it into another cash box, where it landed with an empty clatter.

Snorri took the license with a broad smile. She had done it. She was a Licensed Trader, just as her father had been.

“Take your samples to the shed and leave them for quality control,” the old man said. “You may collect them tomorrow.”

Snorri left her heavy bag in the sample bin outside the shed, and feeling as light as air, she danced out of the marketplace and bumped straight into a girl wearing a red tunic edged with gold. The girl had long dark hair and wore

a gold circlet around her head like a crown. Beside her stood a ghost dressed in purple robes. He had a friendly expression in his green eyes and wore his gray hair neatly tied back in a ponytail. Snorri tried not to look at the bloodstains on his robes just below his heart, for it was impolite to stare at the means by which the ghost had entered ghosthood.

“Oh, sorry,” the girl in red said to Snorri. “I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“No. I am sorry,” said Snorri. She smiled and the girl smiled back. Snorri went on her way back to the *Alfrún*, wondering. She had heard that the Castle had a Princess, but surely this could not be her, walking around just like anyone else?

The girl, who was indeed the Princess, continued on her way to the Palace with the purple-robed ghost.

“She’s a Spirit-Seer,” said the ghost.

“Who is?”

“That young Trader. I did not **Appear** to her but she saw me. I’ve never met one before. They’re very rare, they are only found in the Lands of the Long Nights.” The ghost shivered. “Gives me the creeps.”

The Princess laughed. “You are funny, Alther,” she said. “I bet *you* give people the creeps all the time.”

“I do not,” replied the ghost indignantly. “Well...only if I want to.”

Over the next few days, the autumn weather closed in. The north winds blew the leaves from the trees and sent them skittering down the streets. The air grew chill and people began to notice how early it was getting dark.

But to Snorri Snorrelssen, the weather felt good. She spent her days wandering around the Castle, exploring its highways and byways, looking with amazement into the windows of all the fascinating little shops tucked away underneath the arches in The Ramblings and even buying the odd trinket. She had gazed up at the Wizard Tower in awe, caught a glimpse of what appeared to be an extremely bossy ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and been shocked at the great piles of manure that the Wizards kept in their courtyard.

She had joined the crowd watching the old clock in Drapers Yard strike twelve noon and laughed at the faces that the twelve tin figures had made as they sauntered out from behind the clock. Another day, she had walked down Wizard Way, taken a tour of the oldest printing press, and then peered through the railings at the beautiful old Palace, which was smaller than she had expected. She had even talked to an old ghost called Gudrun at the Palace Gate, who had recognized a fellow countrywoman, even though they were divided by seven centuries.

But the one ghost that Snorri had hoped to see in her wanderings eluded her. Although she only knew what he looked like from a picture that her mother kept at her bedside, she was sure that she would recognize him if she saw him. But despite constantly scanning the crowds of ghosts that wandered by, Snorri caught not so much as a glimpse of her father.

Late one afternoon, after exploring some of the darker alleyways at the back of The Ramblings where many of the Traders took lodgings, Snorri had had a fright. It was getting near sunset and she had just bought a hand torch from Maizie Smalls's Takeaway Torch Shop. As she walked back along Squeeze Guts Alley to the South Gate, Snorri had the uncomfortable feeling that she was being followed, but every time she turned around, there was nothing to see. Suddenly Snorri had heard a scuffling behind her, she spun around and there they were—a pair of round red eyes and one long needlelike tooth glinting in the light of her hand torch. As soon as the eyes saw the flame, they melted into the twilight and Snorri saw no more of them. Snorri told herself that it was only a rat, but not long after, as she walked briskly back to the main thoroughfare, Snorri had heard a shrill scream coming from Squeeze Guts Alley. Someone who had ventured down the Alley without a torch had not been so lucky.

Snorri was shaken and in need of some human company, so that evening she had supper at Sally Mullin's. Sally had warmed to Snorri because, as she had said to her friend Sarah Heap, "You can't blame a young girl just because she's got the misfortune to be a Trader, and I suppose they're not *all* bad. You've got to admire her, Sarah, she's sailed that great barge all on her own. Don't know how she did it. I used to find *Muriel* difficult enough."

The café was strangely empty that evening. Snorri was the only customer. Sally brought Snorri an extra piece of barley cake and sat beside her. "It's terrible for business, this Sickenesse," she complained. "No one dares stay out after dark even though I tell them that rats run a mile when they see a flame. All they have to do is carry a torch. But it's no good, everyone's scared now."

Sally shook her head gloomily. “They go for your ankles, see. And quick as greased lightning they are. One bite and that’s it. You’re gone.”

Snorri was having some trouble following Sally’s rapid stream of words. “Yorgon?” she asked, catching the end of the sentence.

Sally nodded. “As good as,” she said. “Not dead exactly but they reckon it’s only a matter of time. You feel fine for a while, then you get a red rash spreading up from the bite, feel dizzy and bang—next thing you know you’re flat out on the floor and away with the fairies.”

“Fairies?” asked Snorri.

“Yes,” said Sally, springing to her feet at the welcome sight of a customer.

The customer was a tall woman with short spiky hair. She held her cloak close around her. Snorri could see little of the woman’s face, but there was an angry look to the way she stood. A murmured conversation ensued between her and Sally, then the woman left as swiftly as she had come.

Smiling, Sally rejoined Snorri at her seat overlooking the river. “Well, it’s an ill wind that blows no one good,” she said, much to Snorri’s bemusement. “That was Geraldine who just came in. Strange woman, reminds me of someone, though I can’t think who. Anyway, she asked if the RatStranglers can meet up here before they go out, er, rat strangling.”

“Ratstrang-gling?” asked Snorri.

“Well, rat *catching*. They reckon if they get rid of all the rats, they’ll get rid of the Sickness, too. Makes sense to me. Anyway, I’m very pleased. A load of hungry and thirsty rat catchers is just what the café could do with right now.”

No one else came into the café after the spiky Geraldine left, and soon Sally started noisily putting up the benches on the tables and began to mop the floor. Snorri took the hint and bade Sally good night.

“Good night, dear,” said Sally cheerily. “Don’t hang around outside now, will you?”

Snorri had no intention of hanging around. She ran back to the *Alfrún* and was very glad to see the NightUllr prowling the deck. Leaving Ullr on guard, Snorri retreated to her cabin, barred the hatch and kept the oil lamp burning

all night.

3

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR



That evening, while Snorri Snorrelssen was barricading her cabin door, Jenna, Sarah and Silas Heap were finishing supper at the Palace. Although Sarah Heap would have much rather had supper in one of the smaller Palace kitchens, she had long ago given in to the Cook's insistence that royalty most definitely did *not* eat in the kitchen. No, not even on a quiet wet Wednesday, no way, not while *she* was Cook—"and that, Mistress Heap, is final."

And so in the vast Palace dining room, marooned at the very end of a long table, three figures sat in a pool of candlelight. A log fire spat and spluttered behind them, occasionally landing a spark on the wiry and somewhat mangy coat of a large dog, who lay snoring and grunting in front of the fire, but Maxie the wolfhound did not notice. Beside the wolfhound hovered the Supper Servant, glad of the warmth but longing to clear the food and get away from the smells of singed dog hair—and worse—that floated up from Maxie.

But supper was taking an age. Sarah Heap, adoptive mother of Jenna, the Princess and heir to the Castle, had a lot to say. “Well, I don’t want you leaving the Palace *at all*, Jenna, and that is that. There’s something nasty out there biting people and giving them the Sickenesse. You are to stay here where it is safe until this whatever-it-is is caught.”

“But Septimus—”

“No buts. I don’t care whether Septimus needs you to clean out his disgusting dragon or not, though, if you ask me, it would be a whole lot better if he didn’t clean it out quite so often—have you seen the mess down by the river? I don’t know what Billy Pot is thinking of, the piles of dragon droppings must be ten feet high at least. I used to enjoy walking by the river but now—”

“Mum, I don’t mind not cleaning out Spit Fyre, not one bit, but I *have* to go see the Dragon Boat every day,” Jenna said.

“I’m sure the Dragon Boat will manage without you,” Sarah told her. “It’s not as if it knows you’re there anyway.”

“*She* does, Mum. I’m sure she does. It would be awful for her to wake up and find no one there, no one for days and days...”

“Far better than finding no one there ever again,” said Sarah sharply. “You are *not* to go out until something has been done about this Sickenesse.”

“Don’t you think you’re making a fuss about nothing?” Silas asked mildly.

Sarah did not think so. “I do not call having to open up the Infirmary *nothing*, Silas.”

“What, that old dump? I’m surprised it’s still standing.”

“There’s no choice, Silas. There are too many people sick for them to go anywhere else. Which you would have realized if you didn’t spend so much time up in the attic playing silly games—”

“Counter-Foot is not a silly game, Sarah. And now I’ve found what must be the best Colony in the Castle—you should have seen Gringe’s face when I told him—I am *not* going to let the Counters go. They won’t be getting out of a **Sealed** room in a hurry.”

Sarah Heap sighed. Ever since they had moved into the Palace, Silas had practically given up his day-to-day Ordinary Wizard job and had taken up a succession of hobbies—the board game of Counter-Feet being the latest and most long-lasting, much to her irritation. “You know I don’t think it’s a good idea to go opening **Sealed** rooms, Silas,” Sarah chided. “They are usually **Sealed** for a reason, especially if they’re hidden away up in the attic. We had a talk about it at the Herb Society only last month.”

Silas was scathing. “And what do those Herbs know about Wizard stuff, Sarah? Nothing. Huh.”

“Very well, Silas. I suppose you’re safer up in the attic with your daft Counter Colony for now anyway.”

“Quite,” said Silas. “Is there any more pie?”

“No, you’ve got the last piece.” A strained silence followed, and in the silence Jenna was sure she could hear a distant clamor.

“Can you hear that?” she asked. She got up and looked out one of the tall windows that overlooked the front of the Palace. Jenna could see down the drive, which, as ever, was lit with burning torches, and through the great Palace Gates that were locked at night. But on the other side of the gates was a mob, shouting and banging trash can lids and yelling, “Rats, rats, get the rats. Rats, rats, *kill* the rats!”

Sarah joined Jenna at the window. “It’s the RatStranglers,” she said. “I don’t know what they’re doing *here*.”

“Looking for rats, I suppose,” said Silas, his mouth full of apple pie. “Plenty of ’em around here. I think we had one in the soup tonight.”

The chanting of the RatStranglers picked up speed. “Rat trap, rat trap, splat, splat, *splat!* Rat trap, rat trap, splat, splat, *splat!*”

“Poor rats,” said Jenna.

“It’s not rats that are spreading the Sickenesse anyway,” said Sarah. “I was helping at the Infirmary yesterday and the bites are definitely not rat bites. Rats have more than one tooth. Oh, look, they’re off up the road to the servants’ quarters. Oh, dear me.”

At that, the Supper Servant sprang into action. She scooped up the plates,

wrestled Silas's last piece of apple pie from his grasp and rushed out of the room. There was a crash as she dropped the plates down the garbage chute to the kitchens below. Then she fled back to her quarters to check on Percy, her pet rat.

Supper didn't last long after that. Sarah and Silas went off to Sarah's small sitting room at the back of the Palace, where Sarah had a book to finish and Silas was busy writing a pamphlet entitled *Top Ten Counter-Feet Tips*, for which he had high hopes.

Jenna decided to go to her room and read. Jenna liked her own company and she loved wandering around the Palace, especially at night when candles cast great shadows across the corridors and many of the Ancient ghosts woke up. At night the Palace lost the rather empty feeling that it had during the day and became a busy, purposeful place once again. Most of the Ancients chose to **Appear** to Jenna and relished the chance to talk to the Princess, even if many could not remember which Princess she actually was. Jenna enjoyed her chats, even though she had soon discovered that each ghost tended to say the same thing every night, and she soon knew most conversations by heart.

Jenna wandered up the wide sweeping stairs to the gallery that ran above the hall, and stopped to talk to the ghost of an old governess of a pair of young Princesses who spent most nights wandering the passageways looking for her charges.

"Good eventide, Princess Esmeralda," said the governess, who wore a permanently worried expression.

"Good evening, Mary," replied Jenna, who had long since stopped telling Mary that she was actually called Jenna, as it had no effect whatsoever.

"I am glad to see you are still safe and well," said the governess.

"Thank you, Mary," said Jenna.

"Be careful, my dear," said the governess as she always did.

"I will," Jenna replied as ever, and went on her way. Soon she turned off from the gallery into a wide candlelit corridor at the end of which were the tall double doors that led to her room.

"Good evening, Sir Hereward," Jenna greeted the Ancient Guard of the Royal Bedchamber, a disheveled and very faded ghost who had been at his

post for some eight hundred years or more and had no intention of retiring. Sir Hereward was missing an arm and a good deal of his armor, as his entry into ghosthood had been the result of one of the last land battles between the Castle and the Port. He was one of Jenna's favorites and she felt safe with him on guard; the old knight had a jovial manner and a liking for jokes and, unusual for an Ancient, generally managed not to repeat himself too often.

"Good evening, fair Princess. Here's a good one: What is the difference between an elephant and a banana?"

"I don't know." Jenna smiled. "What is the difference between an elephant and a banana?"

"Well, I won't send you out to do *my* shopping then. Hurr hurr!"

"Oh...very funny. Ha-ha!"

"Glad you liked it. Thought you might. Good night, Princess." Sir Hereward briefly bowed his head and stood to attention, pleased to be back on duty.

"Good night, Sir Hereward." Jenna pushed open the doors and slipped into her room.

It had taken some time for Jenna to get used to her huge Palace bedroom, having slept in a cupboard for ten years, but now she loved it, especially in the evenings. It was a large, long room with four tall windows that overlooked the Palace gardens, and caught the evening sun. But now, in the cold autumn night, Jenna drew the heavy red velvet curtains across the windows, and the room was suddenly filled with deep shadows. She went over to the great stone fireplace beside her four-poster bed and lit the pile of logs in the grate, using the **FireLighter Spell** that Septimus had given her for her last birthday. As the warm light from the dancing flames filled her room, Jenna sat on her bed, wrapped her feather quilt around her and picked up her favorite history book, *Our Castle Story*.

Engrossed in her book, Jenna did not notice a tall, thin ghostly figure emerge from behind the thick curtains that hung around her bed. The figure stood very still, staring at Jenna with a disapproving expression in her bright beady eyes. Jenna shivered in the sudden chill cast by the ghost and pulled her quilt closer, but she did not look up.

"I wouldn't bother reading all that rubbish about the Hanseatic League," a

“Indeed. That will be entirely suitable. I do not expect my full title.”

“What *is* your full title?” asked Jenna.

The ghost of the Queen sighed impatiently and Jenna felt her icy breath ruffle her hair. “Chapter Thirteen. I shall not tell you again,” she said severely. “I can see I have not come a moment too soon. You are in grave need of guidance. Your own mother has much to account for in her neglect of your royal teaching and good manners.”

“Mum is a really good teacher,” Jenna objected indignantly. “She hasn’t neglected *anything*.”

“Mum...Mum? Who is this...*Mum*?” The Queen managed to look both disapproving and puzzled at the same time. In fact, over the centuries she had perfected the fine art of mixing every possible expression with disapproval, until, even if she had wanted to, she would no longer have been able to untangle them. But the Queen did not want to. She was quite happy with disapproval, thank you very much.

“Mum is my mum. I mean, my mother,” said Jenna edgily.

“And what is her *name*, pray?” asked the ghost, peering down at Jenna.

“It’s none of your business,” Jenna replied crossly.

“Would it be Sarah Heap?”

Jenna refused to reply. She stared angrily at the ghost, willing her to go away.

“No, I shall not *go away*, Granddaughter. I have my duty to consider. We both know that this Sarah Heap person is not your real mother.”

“She is to me,” muttered Jenna.

“What things are to *you*, Granddaughter, is of no consequence. The truth is that your real mother, or the ghost of her, sits in her turret and neglects your royal education, so that you do appear to be more a lowly serving girl than a true Princess. It is a disgrace, an absolute disgrace, which I intend to rectify for the benefit of this poor benighted place that my Castle—and my Palace—has become.”

“It is not your Castle or your Palace,” Jenna objected.

“That, Granddaughter, is where you are mistaken. It was mine before and soon it will be mine again.”

“But—”

“Do not interrupt. I shall leave you now. It is well past your bedtime.”

“No, it’s not,” said Jenna indignantly.

“In my day *all* Princesses retired to bed at six o’clock until they became Queen. I myself went to bed at six o’clock every night until I was thirty-five and it never did *me* any harm.”

Jenna looked at the ghost in amazement. Then, suddenly, she smiled at the thought of how relieved everyone else in the Palace must have been, all those years ago, when six o’clock came around.

The Queen misinterpreted Jenna’s smile. “Aha, you are seeing sense at last, Granddaughter. I will leave you now to go to sleep for I have important business to attend to. I will see you in the morrow. You may kiss me good night.”

Jenna looked so horrified that the Queen took a step back and said, “Well, then, I can see you are not yet used to your dear Grandmama. Good night, Granddaughter.”

Jenna did not reply.

“I said, *Good night, Granddaughter*. I shall not leave until you bid me Good night.”

There was a strained silence until Jenna decided that she could stand looking at the ghost’s pointy nose no longer. “Good night,” she said coldly.

“Good night, *Grandmama*,” corrected the ghost.

“I will *never* call you Grandmama,” said Jenna as, to her great relief, the ghost began to fade away.

“You will,” came the ghost’s high-pitched drill of a voice out of thin air. “You will...”

Jenna picked up a pillow and, furious, threw it at the voice. There was no response; the ghost had gone. Taking Aunt Zelda's advice, Jenna counted to ten very slowly until she felt calm, then she picked up *Our Castle Story* and quickly turned the thick yellow pages to Chapter Thirteen. The title of the chapter was "Queen Etheldredda the Awful."

4

THE HOLE IN THE WALL



While Jenna sat reading Chapter Thirteen, Septimus Heap, Apprentice to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, had just been caught reading something he was not meant to have read. Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard of the Castle, had been temporarily defeated by a squabble in her kitchen between the coffeepot and the stove. In exasperation she had decided to leave them to it and go check on her Apprentice. She had found him in the Pyramid Library immersed in a pile of tattered old texts.

“What exactly do you think you are doing?” Marcia demanded.

Septimus jumped guiltily to his feet and shoved the papers under the book he should have been reading. “Nothing,” he said.

“That,” said Marcia sternly, “was exactly what I thought you were doing.” She surveyed her Apprentice, trying—but not entirely succeeding—to keep

her stern expression. Septimus had a startled look in his brilliant green eyes and his curly, straw-colored hair was tangled from the way Marcia knew he twisted it when he was concentrating. “In case it has escaped your memory,” she told him, “you are meant to be reviewing for your Prediction Practical Examination tomorrow morning. Not reading a load of five-hundred-year-old drivel.”

“It’s not drivel,” objected Septimus. “It’s—”

“I know perfectly well what it is,” Marcia said. “I have told you before. Alchemie is total twaddle and a complete waste of time. You may as well go boil your socks and expect *them* to turn into gold.”

“But I’m not reading about Alchemie,” protested Septimus. “It’s **Physik**.”

“Same difference,” said Marcia. “It’s Marcellus Pye, I presume?”

“Yes. He’s really good.”

“He’s really *irrelevant*, Septimus.” Marcia reached under the book Septimus had hastily placed on top—*The Principles and Practice of Elementary Prediction*—and drew out the sheaf of yellowed and fragile papers covered in faint jottings. “Anyway,” she said, “these are only his notes.”

“I know. It’s a pity his book has disappeared.”

“Hmm. It’s time you went to bed. You’ve got an early start tomorrow. Seven minutes past seven and not a second later. Understand?”

Septimus nodded.

“Well, off you go then.”

“But, Marcia...”

“What?”

“I’m really interested in **Physik**. And Marcellus did it the best. He had all sorts of medicines and cures worked out, and he knew all about why we get sick. Do you think I could learn about it?”

“No,” said Marcia. “You don’t need it, Septimus. **Magyk** can do everything that **Physik** can.”

“It can’t cure the Sickenesse though,” said Septimus stubbornly.

Marcia pursed her lips. Septimus was not the first to have pointed this out. “It will,” she insisted, “it will. I just have to work on it—what was *that?*” A loud crash came from the kitchen two floors below and Marcia shot off.

Septimus sighed. He put Marcellus’s papers back in the old box he had found in a dusty corner, blew out the candle and went downstairs to bed.

Septimus did not sleep well. Every night for a week he had had the same bad dream about the exam, and this night was no exception. He dreamed that he had missed the exam, Marcia chased him, and he fell down a chimney that went on forever and ever.... He kept grabbing at the walls to stop himself but still he kept falling...falling...falling.

“Been having a fight with your blankets, Septimus?” A familiar voice echoed down the chimney. “Looks like you lost,” the voice continued with a chuckle. “Not wise to take on a pair of blankets, lad. One, maybe, but two blankets always gang up on you. Vicious things, blankets.”

Septimus forced himself out of his dream and sat up, gasping from the cold autumn air that Alther Mella had let in through the window.

“You all right?” Alther asked, concerned. The ghost settled himself down comfortably on Septimus’s bed.

“Wh...errr?” Septimus mumbled, focusing with some difficulty on the slightly transparent figure of Alther Mella, ex-ExtraOrdinary Wizard and frequent visitor to the Wizard Tower. Alther was not as difficult to see as some of the older ghosts in the Castle, but at nighttime his faded purple robes had a tendency to blend into the background, and the dimness of the light made it harder to see the dark brown bloodstains over the ghost’s heart, which Septimus always found his eye was drawn to, however hard he tried not to look. Alther had a calm and kind expression in his old green eyes as he regarded his favorite Apprentice.

“Same bad dream?” Alther inquired.

“Um. Yes,” Septimus admitted.

“Did you remember to use your **Flyte Charm** this time?” asked Alther.

“Er, no. Perhaps I will next time. Except I hope there isn’t a next time. It’s a horrible dream.” Septimus shuddered and pulled one of the obstinate blankets up to his chin.

“Hmm. Well, dreams come to us for a reason. Sometimes they tell us things we need to know,” mused Alther, floating up from the pillow and straightening himself out with a ghostly groan. “Now, I thought you might like a little trip down to a place I know not far from here.”

Septimus yawned. “But what about Marcia?” he asked sleepily.

“Marcia’s got one of her headaches,” said Alther. “I don’t know why she gets so upset over that contrary coffeepot. I’d get rid of it if I were her. She’s gone to bed so there’s no need to bother her. Anyway, we’ll be back before she knows we’re gone.”

Septimus did not want to go back to sleep and get into the dream yet again. He tumbled out of bed and pulled on his green woolen Apprentice tunic, which was neatly folded on the end of his bed, just as he had been taught to do with his Young Army uniform every night for the first ten years of his life, and fastened his silver Apprentice belt.

“Ready?” asked Alther.

“Ready,” replied Septimus. He headed for the window that Alther had **Caused** to open when he had arrived. Septimus climbed onto the broad wooden windowsill and stood in the open window, looking down at the precipitous drop some twenty-one floors down, something that he never would have dreamed of doing a few months ago, given his fear of heights. But now Septimus had lost his fear, and the reason for this was held tightly in his left hand—the **Flyte Charm**.

Septimus carefully took the small golden arrow with its delicate silver flights and held it between his right finger and thumb. “Where are we going?” he asked Alther, who was hovering in front of him and absentmindedly trying to perfect a backward flip.

“Hole in the Wall,” Alther replied, upside down. “Nice place. Must have told you about it.”

“But that’s a tavern,” objected Septimus. “I’m too young to go into taverns. And Marcia says they’re dens of—”

“Oh, you mustn’t take any notice of what Marcia says about taverns,” Alther told him. “Marcia has some strange theory that people go to taverns just to talk about her behind her back. I’ve told her that people have much more interesting things than her to discuss—like the price of fish—but she won’t believe it.”

Alther spun around and righted himself so that he was floating in front of Septimus. The ghost looked at the slight figure standing on the windowsill, his curly hair blowing in the wind that always played around the top of the Wizard Tower and his green eyes flashing with **Magyk**, as the **Flyte Charm** grew warm in his grasp. Although Alther had been helping Septimus practice the **Art of Flyte** for three months now—ever since Septimus had found the **Flyte Charm**—he still felt a flash of fear when he saw the boy standing on the edge of a sheer drop.

“I’ll follow you,” said Septimus, his voice almost blown away by a sudden gust of wind.

“What?”

“I’ll follow you, Alther. Okay?”

“Fine. I’ll watch you take off first though. Just to make sure you’re nice and steady.”

Septimus did not object. He liked Alther being with him, and once or twice during the early days of **Flyte**, he had been very glad of the ghost’s advice, particularly one nasty time when he had nearly crashed into the roof of the Manuscriptorium. Septimus had, in fact, been showing off to his friend Beetle, but Alther had merely **Caused** a sudden uplift of air and set Septimus safely down in the backyard and had not mentioned the showing-off at all.

The **Flyte Charm** was beginning to feel hot in Septimus’s grasp. It was time to go. Taking a deep breath, Septimus hurled himself into the night. For a brief moment he felt the leaden pull of gravity dragging him toward the earth, and then the thing that he loved happened: The downward drag disappeared and he was set free, free like a bird to fly and soar, to loop and swirl through the night air, supported and held safe by the **Flyte Charm**. At the moment the **Flyte Charm** kicked in, Alther relaxed and set off in front of Septimus, arms held out like the wings of a gliding eagle, while Septimus followed more erratically, trying out his new slalom skids.

They arrived at the Hole in the Wall Tavern with a bump—or rather, Septimus did. Alther shot straight through the wall, leaving Septimus to use a slalom skid for real and land with a crash in the bushes that grew across the tumbledown entrance to the tavern.

Alther came a few minutes later to find Septimus picking himself up out of the bushes. “Sorry, Septimus,” Alther apologized. “Just saw old Olaf Snorrelssen. Nice chap. Northern Trader, never got home to see his baby, you know. Sad, really. Goes on about it a bit but he’s a good soul. I keep telling him he ought to get out and about the Castle, but there’re not many places he can go apart from the Traders’ Market and the Grateful Turbot. So he just sits here staring into his beer.”

Septimus brushed a few leaves off his tunic, put the **Flyte Charm** back into his Apprentice belt and surveyed the entrance to the Hole in the Wall Tavern. It didn’t look much like a tavern to him. It looked pretty much like a pile of stones dumped at the base of the Castle wall. There was no sign outside the door. In fact, there was no door, neither were there the usual steamy, lit windows that Septimus was used to seeing in taverns because, well, there were no windows either. As Septimus wondered whether Alther was playing some kind of complicated joke on him, a ghostly nun wafted by.

“Good evening, Alther,” said the nun in her soft accent.

“Good evening, Sister Bernadette,” Alther replied with a smile. The nun gave him a flirtatious wave and disappeared through the pile of stones. She was followed by a virtually see-through knight with his arm in a sling, who carefully tied up his limping horse to an invisible post and shuffled through the bush from which Septimus had just extricated himself.

“Looks like, being a busy night tonight, we’ve got quite a few visitors,” mused Alther, nodding in a friendly fashion to the knight.

“But—they’re *ghosts*,” said Septimus.

“Well, of course they’re ghosts,” said Alther. “That’s the whole point of the tavern. Any ghost is welcome; all others are by invitation only. And it’s not easy to get an invitation, I can tell you. At least two ghosts have to invite you. Of course, we’ve had the odd gate-crasher over the years but it’s still a pretty well-kept secret.”

Three faded Ancient ExtraOrdinary Wizards had now arrived and were stuck at the entrance trying to decide who should go in first. Septimus nodded

politely to them and asked Alther, “So who else has invited me?”

Alther, distracted by the sight of the three Wizards deciding to go in all at once to the accompaniment of much giggling, did not answer the question. “Come on, lad, follow me,” he said, and disappeared through the wall. Some moments later, Alther reappeared and said, a little impatiently, “Come on, Septimus, best not keep Queen Etheldredda waiting.”

“But I—”

“Just squeeze behind the bush and slip behind the pile of stones. You’ll find the way in.”

Septimus pushed through the bush, and feeling his way with the help of the light from the glowing Dragon Ring that he wore on his right index finger, he found a narrow passageway behind the stones that took him deep into a broad, low space hidden within the Castle walls—the Hole in the Wall Tavern.

Septimus was astonished; he had never seen so many ghosts together in one place. Septimus was used to seeing ghosts around the Castle, as he had always been the sensitive kind of boy that ghosts liked to **Appear** to, and since he had been wearing the green robes of an Apprentice to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Septimus had noticed that even more ghosts chose to **Appear** to him. But there was something about the relaxed atmosphere in the Hole in the Wall Tavern—and the fact that he was with Alther, one of the most popular regulars—that meant most of the ghosts allowed Septimus to see them. It was an amazing sight: there were the usual ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghosts, all in purple but with many different styles of robe reflecting the fashions over the years; Septimus was used to seeing these around the Palace and the Wizard Tower. There were a surprising number of Queens and Princesses too. But there were other ghosts that Septimus was unused to seeing: knights and their pages, farmers and farmers’ wives, sailors and traders, scribes and scholars, tramps and tinkers and all manner of Castle inhabitants from the last few thousand years, all holding on to their Hole in the Wall tankards, which they had been given on their first visit and had never needed to refill.

A quiet hum of ghostly chatter pervaded the atmosphere as conversations started many years ago continued their leisurely way, but over in a far corner a regal figure heard the hesitant footsteps of a living boy cut through the noise. She got up from her seat beside the fire and glided through the throng, a respectful sea of ghosts parting before her.

“Septimus Heap,” said Queen Etheldredda. “Five and a half minutes late, but no matter. I have been waiting five hundred years. Follow me.”

5

QUEEN ETHELDREDDA



S*eptimus soon found himself* squashed between the two ghosts at a long table at the far end of the tavern. This was not what he had expected when he had gone to bed that evening, but after eighteen months as Apprentice to Marcia, Septimus had learned not to expect anything—except the unexpected.

Although Septimus knew he was not really squashed at all, he still *felt* squashed as he sat between Alther and Queen Etheldreda and tried not to touch either of them—but he could not shake the feeling that Queen Etheldreda’s pointy elbows really *were* sticking into him. Septimus wriggled farther away from Etheldreda, for it was the height of rudeness to **Pass Through** a ghost and he suspected that the Queen would have something to say about it.

In fact, so far Queen Etheldreda had had something to say about pretty much everything. She sat tall and erect, and her dark violet eyes fixed Septimus with a stern gaze as she gave him the benefit of her opinion: “It’s full of riffraff here, Apprentice, absolutely full. Look at that awful old tramp

snoring under the table. Terrible place, terrible place. I shall most certainly have to do something about *this*. And the behavior of those young Queens over there—*most* unbecoming.” A loud squeal of giggles had erupted from a table of four young Queens (all of whom had died in childbirth). Queen Etheldredda pursed her lips disapprovingly. “I don’t know what Alther Mella is thinking of bringing you here. In my day the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice was not allowed out without a chaperone Wizard, and then it was only to come to the Palace on official business. And a boy your age should be in bed, not carousing in a den of iniquity like this.”

Septimus was not bothered by Queen Etheldredda for she reminded him a little of Marcia, but Alther looked irritated. “Your Majesty,” Alther said huffily, “perhaps you might remember that it was on your express wish—*command* was the word you used—that I woke up this young Apprentice and brought him here. You had, you said, something of great importance to relate to him—a matter of life or death—although you refused to tell me what it might be. You yourself insisted on him coming to this tavern. I assure you, Madam Marcia Overstrand does not normally allow her Apprentice to frequent taverns at night or, indeed, at any time of the day.”

Septimus held his breath. What was the Queen going to say?

Queen Etheldredda said nothing for some time. And then she leaned over to Septimus, and he felt an ice-cold breath across his cheek as she whispered in his ear, “Marcellus Pye, at Snake Slipway, midnight. Be there.” With that, the Queen got up from the tavern bench as if rising from her throne. She swished her train into place behind her, walked, head held disdainfully high, into the fireplace and disappeared.

“Well,” spluttered Alther. “Of all the nerve...”

“Marcellus Pye?” Septimus muttered, feeling a thrill of excitement.

Two nuns had sat down beside him in Queen Etheldredda’s place. One of the nuns looked askance at Septimus. “Do not speak that name lightly, child,” she whispered.

Septimus said no more, but his thoughts were buzzing. Why would the ghost of Marcellus Pye want to meet *him*—just a lowly Apprentice? After all, the ghost had never been seen before. Maybe...Septimus shivered at the thought...maybe the ghost had been **Watching** him read the notes that afternoon and had now decided to **Appear** to him. But why choose Snake Slipway? And why at *midnight*?

Alther noticed Septimus's preoccupied expression. "What did she say?" he whispered.

Septimus shook his head, not wanting to upset the nuns again.

Suddenly Alther felt weary. "Come on then, Septimus, let's go." He sighed. He got up and Septimus followed him, carefully squeezing past the nuns. Alther felt unsettled at the sudden appearance of Queen Etheldredda. She had not been seen around the Palace before, and while it was not unusual for ghosts to appear and disappear, especially the older ones who often fell asleep in a comfortable chair and did not wake for many years, he had never known one to turn up so many centuries after her entry into ghosthood. It was very odd, and there was, thought Alther, something particularly odd about Etheldredda. He wished now that he had not brought Septimus to see her.

Carefully Septimus followed Alther and made his way toward the exit, which was indeed a hole in the wall, through which he could now see moonlight shining. There was a lull in the ghostly chatter as the living Apprentice to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard slipped through the assorted throng. Some stepped back to allow Septimus to pass and continued their conversations; others stopped their chatter in mid-sentence and followed his progress with faded, ghostly eyes. Some expressions were wistful, remembering what it had been like to be a living, breathing eleven-year-old; others were vague, lost in their ghosthood and seeing living beings as strange creatures, unrelated to them. But not one of the ghosts was **Passed Through** by Septimus as he negotiated his way around them. At last he pushed his way through the bush and reached the outside of the tavern with a feeling of relief.

"So what did she say?" Alther asked again. He and Septimus were taking a shortcut through Drapers Yard, a small courtyard around which was a cluster of old houses inhabited by families who worked with cloth. A few candles shone from the windows, which sported a strange variety of curtains and cloth remnants, but the doors were locked and barred, and the yard was so quiet that Septimus could hear the ticking of the Great Draper Clock in the clock tower above the central house.

"She said I should meet Marcellus Pye on Snake Slipway. Tonight," Septimus told him as the Draper Clock began to strike ten and its tinny bell echoed around the yard. *Pling, pling, pling...*

"You will of course be doing no such thing," declared Alther once the clock had stopped and the succession of comical tin figures had done their party pieces and filed back inside. "She's bonkers, Septimus, totally and

utterly bonkers. Anyway, I've never even *seen* the ghost of Marcellus Pye. The trouble is, every now and then a ghost gets delusions of grandeur. Often happens to Royal ghosts. They think they can influence the living. Make things happen, just as they were used to doing when they were alive. Of course all they do is make a nuisance of themselves. Can be almost impossible to get rid of, that's the trouble. The best thing is to ignore them and hope they'll go away. Which is exactly what you must do, lad. I suppose you know who this Pye fellow was?"

"Yes," said Septimus.

Alther nodded approvingly. "Thought you would. It's good to read about the subject. Best not to let on to Marcia though. She has a thing about Alchemie."

"I know," Septimus sighed.

"He wasn't just an alchemist, Marcellus; he was a good physician, too," said Alther. "Pity we've lost some of the things he knew back then. We could use them now."

They were now walking briskly along Brindle Byway, which would lead them to Wizard Way. Brindle Byway was a narrow street with tall drying lofts for yarn and fabric on either side. The drying lofts were dark and quiet at this time of night and a chokingly unpleasant smell of dye hung in the still air. Septimus was too preoccupied with holding his nose and breathing through his mouth to hear, some way ahead, the scrabble of claws and the click of a needle-sharp tooth as it flicked down, ready to bite.

Neither Septimus nor Alther noticed two round red eyes emerging from a drain, blinking and shrinking from the light from the silver torch post outside Number Thirteen Wizard Way. But they did hear something altogether louder and more insistent: hurried footsteps echoing off the walls of the byway, coming toward them.

Alther glanced at Septimus and gestured to a small opening between two drying lofts. In a moment both he and Septimus were hidden in the shadows, listening to the approaching footsteps.

"Probably some pickpocket up to no good," whispered Alther. "He'd better not try anything, I'm not in a good mood this evening."

Septimus did not reply. The footsteps had slowed down now; they

sounded almost hesitant as they approached the gap where Alther and Septimus were hidden. Then the footsteps stopped.

Suddenly, to Alther's horror, Septimus jumped out.

Sarah Heap gave a piercing scream and dropped her basket with a crash. Bottles and jars tumbled out and rolled in all directions.

"Mum!" said Septimus. "Mum, it's only Alther and me."

Sarah Heap stared at them in disbelief. "What on earth are you doing here? Really, Septimus, you nearly gave me a heart attack. And what does Alther think he's doing bringing you down these ghastly alleyways at this time of night?"

"It's all right, Mum. We're on our way back now. We only went to the Hole in the Wall Tavern," Septimus explained, chasing after the dropped bottles and jars and putting them back into Sarah's basket.

"A *tavern*?" Sarah Heap looked horrified. "Alther took you to a tavern—at night? Alther"—this was addressed to the ghost who had just floated out of the alleyway, looking resigned to the evening rapidly going from bad to worse—"Alther, what *do* you think you are doing? And with all this Sickenesse about?"

Alther sighed. "I'll explain tomorrow, Sarah. Although I could ask the same of you. What exactly are *you* doing scurrying down a back alley with all your potions?"

Sarah did not answer. She was too busy checking whether any of her potion bottles had broken. "Thank you, Septimus," she said as he handed her the last bottle.

"But where are you going, Mum?" asked Septimus.

"Going?" Sarah Heap looked as if she had come down to earth with a bump. "Oh, heavens, I'll be late. I don't want to keep Nicko waiting—"

"Nicko?" asked Septimus, confused.

"Sarah," said Alther, "what is going on?"

"I've been called to the Infirmary, Alther. I must have had the last

Message Rat in the Castle. They've had so many people brought in this evening they can't cope. Nicko's going to row me over. Now I *must* get going."

"Not on your own," said Alther. "We'll come with you."

Sarah looked as though she was about to protest but then she changed her mind. "Thank you, Alther," she said. "I—oh my goodness!" Sarah stifled a scream. "Look..." she whispered, pointing into the darkness.

Septimus looked. At first he saw nothing and then, as he shifted his gaze, he saw them—the red eyes, moving toward them, dodging from side to side. At first glance Septimus thought it was a rat, but there was something about the way the eyes were set, both looking forward, that looked wrong for a rat's eyes. Quickly Septimus reached into his pocket, took out a pebble and sent it spinning through the darkness toward the red pinpoints. A high-pitched yelp was followed by the sound of scuffling leaves, and the eyes disappeared into the night.

"Come on, Sarah," said Alther, "let's get you down to the boatyard."

Nicko was waiting anxiously beside a rowboat tied up to the quay in Jannit Maarten's boatyard. Jannit had recently taken Nicko on as Junior Apprentice, and he now slept in a small cabin at the back of Jannit's ramshackle hut. An hour ago, Nicko had tumbled into bed, tired out after a long day helping Rupert Gringe repair the huge rudder belonging to the Port barge. He had only just fallen asleep when an insistent knocking on his window had jarred him awake—it was the Message Rat that Sarah had forwarded to him.

Quickly Nicko had found the rowboat that Jannit sometimes used to ferry people over the river; unfortunately he had woken Jannit, who even in her sleep could hear any unusual sound in the boatyard. Jannit had only just grumpily gone back to bed when she was woken again by the clinking of Sarah's bottles in her basket as she hurried through the boatyard.

Septimus helped Nicko steady the rowboat while Sarah clambered in. "You'll make sure Mum gets to the Infirmary okay, won't you, Nik?" he asked, looking doubtfully across the Moat, which was wide and deep by the boatyard, to the dim lights of the Infirmary, almost hidden under the outlying trees of the Forest some distance away. It was a dangerous walk from the ferry landing stage to the Infirmary at night.

“Of course I will.” Nicko took up two long oars and waited for Sarah to get settled.

“Don’t worry, *I’ll* see Sarah to the Infirmary door,” Alther said to Septimus. “I can still get rid of the odd wolverine if I have to. I’ll have to whiz around by the North Gate, but I’ll be there waiting for her.”

“See ya later, Sep,” said Nicko as he pulled away from the boatyard landing stage.

“No, you won’t, Nicko,” Septimus heard Sarah chide. “Septimus is going straight back to Marcia’s.”

As Septimus watched Alther fly toward the North Gate, a wonderful sense of freedom and exhilaration suddenly swept over him. He could go anywhere, do anything. There was no one to stop him. Of course he *should* go back to the Wizard Tower, but he was not sleepy. Septimus felt restless, as if somehow the night was unfinished. And then he realized why. Queen Etheldredda’s words came back to him: “Marcellus Pye, at Snake Slipway, midnight. Be there.”

Suddenly, Septimus knew why Queen Etheldredda had asked him to meet the ghost of Marcellus Pye: to give him the formula for the antidote to the Sickenesse.

It was only about half past ten. He still had time to get to Snake Slipway before midnight.

6

THE OUTSIDE PATH



S*eptimus decided to take the Outside Path* along the Castle walls, just in case Marcia had been suddenly called out on **Magykal** business, headache and all—it would be just his luck to bump into her. With mounting excitement, he picked his way through the boatyard, careful not to make any noise that might disturb Jannit. Soon he reached the upside-down hull of an old river barge, and squeezing behind the barge, he found what he was looking for—the steep steps that led up to the Outside Path.

The Outside Path was a narrow and crumbling ledge just a few feet above the dark water of the Moat. It had not been built as a path, but was the point at which the huge foundations of the Castle walls finished and the slightly narrower walls, which were built from smaller, more finely cut rock, began. When Septimus had been in the Young Army, many of the older boys had run along the Outside Path for a dare, but it was not something that Septimus had ever wanted to do—until now. Now, with the confidence of a year and a half

as the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice and the knowledge that if he slipped and fell he could always use his **Flyte Charm**, Septimus climbed the steps up to the Path.

The Path was narrower than he had expected; Septimus walked slowly, placing one foot in front of the other and feeling for loose stones as he went. He was grateful for the light of the waning full moon, which reflected off the Moat and shone on the pale stone of the Castle walls, making it easy to find his way. The air was calm in the lee of the east wind, and although Septimus could see the tops of the trees swaying, it was still and quiet beside the water.

Far away on the other side of the Moat, frighteningly near the Forest, the lights of the Infirmary flickered as the branches of outlying Forest trees moved in front of the long line of tiny, candlelit windows. Septimus stopped and watched the steady progress of Sarah Heap's lantern across the Moat as Nicko rowed toward the Forest bank. The lantern seemed such a small pinpoint of light against the great expanse of dark trees. He hoped that Alther would be waiting for her when they reached the Forest side.

Some minutes later, the lantern reached the far bank and Septimus saw Alther's shape illuminated in the glow. Relieved, he set off once more. Soon the curve of the Castle wall took him out of sight of the Infirmary, and a long empty stretch of the Outside Path lay before him. Septimus was a little surprised that he could see no sign of Snake Slipway. He had not realized how much the Castle walls curved. He was used to taking the direct route to the Slipway, but he pressed on, the thought of being able to talk to Marcellus Pye keeping him going.

As Septimus continued—more slowly than he would have liked, for the Path was very uneven—he could feel the chill coming off the Moat and smell the dankness of the water as it flowed by sluggishly. A layer of mist was beginning to form just above the Moat, and as Septimus watched, it grew thicker until he could no longer see the surface of the water. A soft silence came with the mist, which was broken only by the occasional moan of the wind in the tops of the trees on the outskirts of the Forest.

His enthusiasm for seeing Marcellus Pye began to wane, but Septimus kept going. He had no choice, for the Outside Path had now become so narrow that it would have been treacherous to turn around. After slipping twice on some loose stones and very nearly tumbling into the Moat below, Septimus decided that he was being foolish trying to walk along the Outside Path. He stopped, leaned back against the walls to try to keep his balance and

fumbled in his Apprentice belt for his **Flyte Charm**. His hand got stuck in the small pocket in which he kept the **Charm**, and as he tried to pull it out, Septimus felt himself falling forward. In a panic, he grabbed at the stones behind him and only just managed to pull himself back up.

By now Septimus knew that taking the Outside Path was a stupid mistake, but he made himself concentrate on the way ahead and tried to pay no heed to the thoughts that clamored for his attention. These were:

His warm and comfortable bed, which was waiting for him at the top of the Wizard Tower.

The moaning of the wind in the tops of the trees.

Why did the moaning sound so weird?

His bed.

Did wolverines come down to the Castle walls at night?

Could wolverines swim?

They *could*, couldn't they?

His bed.

Why did the mist seem so spooky?

What was under the mist?

Do wolverines especially like swimming underneath mist?

His bed.

Hang on...didn't Marcellus Pye's writings say he had found the secret of eternal life?

Suppose Marcellus wasn't just a normal old ghost?

Suppose he was a five-hundred-year-old man?

Wouldn't he just be a skeleton with bits of skin hanging off?

Why hadn't he thought of this before?

It was then that a large storm cloud covered the moon and Septimus was plunged into darkness. He stopped dead, his heartbeat pounding in his head, and pressed himself against the wall. As his eyes got used to the dark he found he could still see the tops of the Forest trees, but he could not, for some reason, see his feet, however hard he stared. And then he realized why. The mist had risen and was covering his boots; he could smell its dampness. The Dragon Ring on the index finger of his right hand was shining with its comforting soft yellow light, but he took the ring off and put it in his pocket, for suddenly the glow of the Dragon Ring felt like a large label saying, “Come and get me.”

It was probably only about half an hour later—although by now Septimus was sure it was at least three nights strung together by a **Reverse Enchantment**—when he heard footsteps behind him. Heart in his mouth, Septimus stopped, but he did not dare turn around for fear of falling into the Moat. The footsteps continued toward him and Septimus set off again, stumbling along the Path, peering into the night, desperate for the sight of Snake Slipway, but storm clouds kept piling in and the moon stayed hidden.

The footsteps were light and sounded agile, and Septimus knew they were gaining on him, for every two steps he managed to take, the **Thing**—and he was sure it was a **Thing**—took three. Desperately, Septimus tried to pick up speed, but still the footsteps kept coming.

Suddenly Septimus heard a noise behind him. “Ssss...sssss...” The **Thing** was hissing at him. *Hissing*. It must be a **SnakeHead Spectre**...or even a Magog. Magogs sometimes hissed, didn’t they? Maybe one of DomDaniel’s Magogs had got left behind, maybe it lived in the Castle walls and then it came out at night when some idiot decided to go for a stupid walk along the Outside Path.

“Ssss!” A loud hiss sounded in his ear. Septimus jumped in fright. His right foot slipped from the narrow, crumbling Path and he slid off, hands clutching frantically at the stones as he went. His right boot was already in the Moat and Septimus was about to follow it when *something* grabbed his cloak.

7

SNAKE SLIPWAY



Look, just keep still, will you?” said an exasperated voice. “You’ll have us both in the Moat if you’re not careful.”

“Wh-what?” gasped Septimus, wondering why the **Thing** was pretending to be a girl. **Things** usually had very low, threatening voices that made your blood feel cold, not girls’ voices. This one must have got it wrong somehow. Maybe it was a young **Thing**, thought Septimus, with a glimmer of hope. A young **Thing** might be persuaded to let him go. Septimus decided he had to face whatever it was that had hold of him so tightly. He struggled to turn around, and as he did, he was hauled back up onto the Outside Path.

“Stupid boy. Lucky I didn’t drop you. Would have served you right,” said Lucy Gringe, breathless from heaving Septimus up.

Septimus suddenly felt weak and trembly with relief. “Lucy!” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Apprentice boy,” said Lucy.

“Um, well, I just felt like going for a walk,” Septimus replied lamely.

“Weird walk,” muttered Lucy. “Could think of better places to go. Well, get a move on, get on with your walk—or are you stopping here for the night? I hope not because you’re blocking my way and I’ve got things to do.”

With no alternative, Septimus carried on with his slow shuffle along the Outside Path. Lucy’s impatient breath sounded behind him. “Can’t you speed up a bit? We’ll take all night at this rate.”

“I’m going as fast as I can. Anyway, what are you in such a hurry for? And where are you going? Aargh!” Septimus’s foot slipped but Lucy grabbed him and set him going again like a clockwork toy.

“None of your business. None of anyone’s business,” Lucy replied. “The Path gets wider now, so you can go a bit faster, can’t you?”

To Septimus’s relief, his boots found a firmer hold as the Outside Path did indeed widen. “You’ve done this before, haven’t you?” he asked.

“Might have,” said Lucy. “Can’t you go any faster?”

“No, I can’t. So why are you on the Outside Path...it’s because you don’t want Gringe—I mean, your father—to know where you’re going, isn’t it?” asked Septimus, a suspicion forming.

“It’s none of his business what I do or where I go,” said Lucy huffily. “Oh, just *hurry up*, will you?”

“Why?” asked Septimus, deliberately slowing down. “*Why* don’t you want Gringe to know where you’re going?”

“Gosh, you’re irritating. I can see why Simon says you’re an awful little —” Lucy halted in mid-sentence, but too late.

Septimus stopped dead and Lucy walked into him with a bump. “You’re going to see Simon, aren’t you?” he said.

“What are you doing? Stupid boy. You nearly had us both in the Moat.”

“You *are* going to see Simon, aren’t you?” Septimus repeated. “That’s why you’ve come this way. So that no one sees you go. You know where he

is, don't you?"

"No," said Lucy sullenly. "Now get going, will you?"

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me where Simon is," said Septimus, stubbornly holding his ground.

"Well, we'll be here all night then," said Lucy, equally stubbornly.

Lucy and Septimus stood with their backs to the huge Castle wall, which reared up into the night. Neither was willing to back down. The standoff had lasted for some minutes when they both heard a low scuffling sound some ways behind them. This was followed by the sound of a stone being dislodged and falling with a quiet plop into the water.

"Look, Septimus," Lucy said in a hoarse whisper, "it's not safe out here. **Things** use the Path—I've seen them. Let's just get to Snake Slipway. We can talk then, okay?"

Septimus needed little persuading. "Okay," he agreed.

Ten minutes later, Septimus and Lucy had negotiated a particularly treacherous part of the Path below the East Gate Lookout Tower and were nearing Snake Slipway when Septimus stopped unexpectedly. Lucy crushed the backs of his heels with her heavy boots. "Ouch!" Septimus said under his breath.

"Oh, do stop dithering about," Lucy hissed, exasperated.

"But I thought I saw a light. On the Slipway," Septimus whispered.

"Good," Lucy hissed back. "At least we'll be able to see where we're going."

Septimus set off again, only to hear a quiet splash a few seconds later and see the light disappear. He nearly stopped again but thought better of it. "Did you hear a splash?" he whispered.

"No. But there'll be an irritating-boy-size splash in a minute if you don't stop twittering on, Septimus Heap." Lucy gave Septimus a sharp poke in the back. "Now *hurry up*."

Thinking how lucky he was not to have a sister like Lucy, Septimus hurried on.

Soon Septimus and Lucy were clambering down the narrow flight of stone steps that led to Snake Slipway. As they stepped onto it, the muffled sound of the Courthouse clock striking one o'clock reached them through the still night air. Septimus looked around, but it was as he expected—there was no sign of Marcellus Pye.

Septimus yawned, and suddenly he felt very tired. Lucy caught his yawn and shivered in the chill. She took a large key from one of her many pockets and drew her cloak around her. Septimus thought that he had seen the cloak somewhere before, but he could not remember where. It was, he thought, a surprisingly nice cloak for Lucy to have. The Gringes were not a well-off family and Lucy usually made her own clothes and stomped around in a stout pair of brown boots that looked a size too big for her—even her long brown plaits were always tied up with a scruffy assortment of homemade ribbons and bits of string. But her dark blue cloak hung gracefully from her shoulders and had an air of luxury about it.

Lucy was, however, still wearing her big brown boots. She clomped over to a wide door, which Septimus knew went into the boat shed where Lucy's brother, Rupert, kept the paddleboats that he rented out in the summer. With a practiced air, Lucy turned the key in the lock, pushed the door open and disappeared. Septimus ran after her.

It was dark in the boat shed. Septimus put on his Dragon Ring and soon the shed was filled with a dull yellow glow. He could see Lucy in the shadows, struggling to put a paddleboat onto a small trolley.

"Go away," hissed Lucy when she realized that Septimus had followed her in.

"You're going to see Simon, aren't you?" asked Septimus.

"Mind your own business," Lucy replied, trying to heave the surprisingly heavy paddleboat onto the trolley. Septimus took the other end of the boat and together they managed to lift it. "Thanks," puffed Lucy as Septimus took hold of the trolley handle and helped her pull the boat out of the boat shed.

Together they trundled the paddleboat, painted a garish pink, down the

Slipway to the lapping waters of the Moat, unaware that a ghostly figure with a pointy nose and a disapproving expression was standing in the shadows watching their efforts. As Septimus pushed the trolley into the water and allowed the paddleboat to float free, Queen Etheldredda's ghostly foot tapped the ground soundlessly in exasperation.

Septimus gave Lucy the boat's rope to hold, then he pulled the trolley up the Slipway and trundled it back into the boathouse. As he passed by the ghost, she glared at him and hissed under her breath, "Punctuality is a virtue; lateness is a vice, boy," but Septimus heard nothing above the squeak of the trolley's wheels.

He returned to Lucy and there was an awkward silence as Septimus took the rope and steadied the boat for Lucy while she stepped into it. Lucy settled herself down and then, to his surprise, looked at Septimus with a wry smile. "You're not a bad kid really," she said grudgingly as she took up the handles that turned Rupert's bizarre paddles.

Septimus said nothing. There was an air about Lucy that reminded him of his great-aunt Zelda, and Septimus had learned that if he wanted Aunt Zelda to tell him something, he had to be patient, for Aunt Zelda was as stubborn as Lucy Gringe appeared to be. So Septimus waited patiently, sensing that something was on Lucy's mind.

"Simon and I nearly got married," Lucy suddenly blurted out.

"I know," said Septimus. "Dad told me."

"No one wanted us to get married," said Lucy. "I don't know why. It's just so unfair." Septimus could not think of anything to say. "And now everybody hates Simon and he can never come back home, and that's so unfair too."

"Well, he did kidnap Jenna," Septimus pointed out. "And then he tried to kill me and Nicko and Jenna, and he almost destroyed the Dragon Boat. Not to mention Marcia—he practically finished her off with that **Placement**, and then he—"

"All right, all right," snapped Lucy. "There's no need to be so *picky* about everything."

There was another awkward silence and Septimus decided that there was no point trying to get Lucy to tell him anything more. He let go of the boat and pushed it out into the Moat.

“If you do see Simon,” he said, “you can tell him from me he’s not welcome here.”

Lucy stuck her tongue out at Septimus, then she took up the paddles and started turning them. It looked strange to Septimus, for these were summer boats used for fun, and to see Lucy out in one on a misty, dank autumn night seemed odd. “Safe journey,” he told her, “wherever you’re going.”

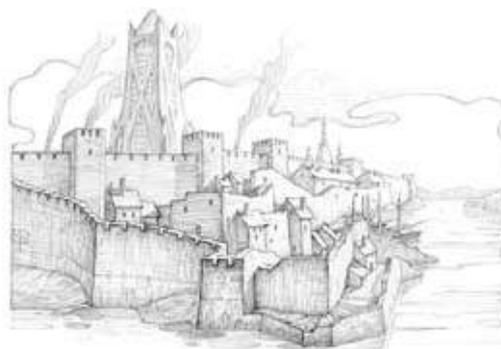
Lucy looked back. “I don’t know where Simon is,” she said, “but he wrote me a note and I’m going to find him. *So there.*”

Septimus watched Lucy paddle off in her pink paddleboat until she rounded the bend and disappeared from view. He stood on the Slipway for a while, listening to the clunky sound of the paddles turning as Lucy made her determined way toward the river.

It was when he at last turned to go home that Septimus saw it—fire under the water.

8

FIRE UNDER THE WATER



It made no sense—how can fire burn underwater?

The water was dark and the flame flickered in the underwater currents as a candle does in the breeze. As Septimus watched, it moved steadily away from the Slipway, keeping close to the foot of the Castle wall. Indeed, it seemed to him that the flame was held by someone walking along the bottom of the Moat. The Moat was about twenty feet deep and the light was, Septimus figured, about fourteen feet below him. Entranced by the idea of a flame burning underwater, Septimus knelt down on the cold stone of the Slipway and stared into the depths of the Moat.

Slowly and surely, the flame was walking away from him. Septimus felt oddly upset, as though he was losing something precious. He leaned forward to take one last look.

Behind him the ghost of Queen Etheldreda stepped out of the shadows, a thin smile on her lips. So intent was Septimus on seeing what was under the water, he would not have noticed the ghost even if she had chosen to **Appear** to him—which she most definitely did not. He stepped right to the edge of the Slipway and leaned out. If he just got a little closer to the water he would be able to see—

Etheldredda gave Septimus a vicious shove.

There was a loud splash and suddenly Septimus was in the water, tumbling to the bottom of the Moat, gasping with shock from the cold. The tide had turned and an icy current was running in from the river; it was swift and strong, and although Septimus was a good swimmer, it quickly dragged him away from the Slipway and out into the center of the Moat.

Septimus surfaced at last, shivering uncontrollably. He was beginning to lose the strength from his arms and legs, and there was more to struggle against than just the swift current. Now he could feel a strong undertow beneath his feet, as though someone had suddenly pulled a plug and the water around him was swirling down the drain.

A moment later, Septimus's head disappeared below the inky waters for a second time. The undertow took him down fast, and within seconds his feet touched the bottom of the Moat. Struggling to keep his eyes open in the murky water and with his lungs feeling as if they were about to burst, Septimus kicked himself up from the muddy bed and swam straight into a thick patch of sticky Moat weed. In moments, the tendrils of the weed were wrapped around him, and Septimus felt his remaining strength drain away. A dark mist fell in front of his eyes, and Septimus began to lose consciousness; yet, as he did so, he had the strangest sensation of an ice-cold grip on his arm, pulling him up...up...up through a dark tunnel toward a bright light.

“Ouch, Sep—that hurt!” Jenna’s voice reached Septimus from the other end of the tunnel. Coughing, spluttering, Septimus gulped frantically for breath.

“Oh, stop making such a fuss, boy,” an irritable ghostly voice snapped. “Here, Granddaughter, take him now, for I have no wish to be **Passed Through** yet again—it is most unpleasant. No manners, young Apprentices nowadays.”

“Sep, Sep, you’re okay now,” Jenna’s voice whispered in his ear, and Septimus felt as if she was guiding him through the darkness and—at last—into the light.

“Aaaah!” Septimus suddenly sat bolt upright and took the deepest breath he had ever taken in his life. And then he took another, and another, and another.

“Sep, Sep, are you okay?” Jenna thumped him on the back. “Can you breathe now? Can you?”

“Aah...aah...aah...” Septimus grabbed a few more lungfuls.

“It’s okay, Sep. You’re safe here.”

“Ah...” Septimus focused his eyes and looked around. He was sitting on the floor of a small sitting room at the back of the Palace. It was a cozy room; a fire was burning in the grate and a mass of thick candles burned brightly on the mantel, their wax dripping steadily onto the hearth. The room had once been a favorite of Queen Etheldredda’s, who would sit there every afternoon and take a small glass of mead and read morality tales. It was now Sarah Heap’s sitting room, where she too sat in the afternoon, except she would drink herb tea and read romantic novels lent to her by her good friend Sally Mullin. Queen Etheldredda did not approve of Sarah Heap’s taste in furnishings and she most definitely did not approve of romantic novels. As for the general clutter and untidiness that pervaded the sitting room, Queen Etheldredda considered it a disgrace, but there was little she could do about it yet, for ghosts must put up with the bad habits of the living.

Queen Etheldredda wore her usual disapproving expression as she looked at the sodden Septimus. He sat in a puddle of muddy Moat water, steaming beside the fire and giving off a dank Moat-water smell. The ghost sat on the only chair that remained in the room from her time as Queen; it was an uncomfortable wooden chair with a straight back that Sarah had been meaning to throw out. Silas had left the remains of a bacon sandwich on it a few days earlier, and Queen Etheldredda was now perched precariously on top of it.

“I trust you have learned your lesson, young man,” Queen Etheldredda said, fixing Septimus with a severe stare. Septimus coughed up some tendrils of slimy Moat weed and spat them out on the rug.

“Punctuality is a virtue,” pronounced Queen Etheldredda. “Lateness is a vice. Farewell.” Still remaining in the sitting position, Queen Etheldredda rose a few feet up from the chair. She glanced at the bacon sandwich with a look of horror, and then floated away through the ceiling. Her feet, clad in richly embroidered, extremely pointy shoes, hovered above Jenna and Septimus for two or three moments until, slowly, they faded away.

“Do you think she’s gone now?” Jenna whispered to Septimus after a safe interval had passed. Septimus stood up to get a better look at the ceiling, but

the floor came up to meet him with a crash and he found himself lying on Sarah Heap's favorite rag rug. Jenna looked concerned. "You'd better stay here tonight. I'll send a Message Rat over to tell Marcia."

Septimus groaned. *Marcia*. He had forgotten about Marcia until now. "Perhaps you'd better not wake her up, Jen. Anyway you'll be lucky to get a Message Rat. Best tell her in the morning," he said, thinking that it was not beyond Marcia to come over to the Palace right there and then and demand to know just what Septimus thought he was doing. It wasn't, Septimus thought, a question that he could easily answer right then.

"You feeling okay, Sep?" asked Jenna.

Septimus nodded and the room began to spin. "What happened, Jen?" he asked. "How did I get *here*?"

"You fell into the Moat, Sep—at least that's what Queen Etheldredda said. She said it was your own fault and that you were late. She said you were lucky that she happened to be on the Slipway, and she rescued you. Well, **Reclaimed** you, is what she said. Whatever that means."

"Er...I learned it last week. But I can't remember it. Brain's not working."

"No, I shouldn't think it is. You almost drowned."

"I know. But I want to remember. Sometimes when you nearly drown your brain doesn't work so well afterward. Suppose that's happened to me, Jen?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Sep. Your brain seems fine to me. You're just tired and cold."

"But...oh, I *do* remember. It was in the latest edition of the *Spirit Guide*," he said suddenly. "That's it. **Reclaime**: Ghostly transportation of living creatures in order to ensure they remain as such, i.e., living. Um...may involve removing from imminent life-threatening danger or longer term planning, such as ensuring that they do not encounter approaching danger. Most commonly reported occurrence is being pushed from path of runaway horse by ghostly hands. There, brain's okay." Septimus closed his eyes and looked pleased.

"Of course it is," said Jenna soothingly. "Now look, Sep, you're soaked. I'm going to get you some dry things. Just rest while I go find the Night

Housekeeper.”

Jenna tiptoed out, leaving Septimus dozing on the rug. Queen Etheldreda was waiting for her outside the door.

“Ah, Granddaughter,” she said in her high, piercing voice.

“*What?*” asked Jenna irritably.

“How is your dear *adoptive* brother?”

“My *brother* is fine, thank you. Now would you mind getting out of the way? I want to get him some dry clothes.”

“Your manners are sorely lacking, Granddaughter. You know I saved the boy’s life.”

“Yes. Thank you very much. It was...very nice of you. Now, please, may I get past?” Jenna tried to duck to one side of the ghost, having no wish to **Pass Through** Queen Etheldreda.

“No, you may *not*.” Queen Etheldreda stepped in front of Jenna and barred her path. The ghost’s features took on a stony look. “I have something to tell you, Granddaughter, and I suggest you listen well. It will be greatly to your *adoptive* brother’s disadvantage if you do not.”

Jenna stopped—she recognized a threat when she heard one. The Queen leaned down toward Jenna and a deep chill filled the air. Then she whispered in Jenna’s ear, and Jenna had never felt so cold in all her life.

9

PREDICTION PRACTICAL



Alther, what do you mean, he spent the night at the Palace?” Marcia demanded very early the next morning. “Why?”

“Well...er, it’s a little complicated, Marcia,” Alther replied uncomfortably.

“Isn’t it always, Alther?” snapped Marcia. “You do realize that if he doesn’t get back right away he’s going to miss his Prediction Practical?”

Marcia Overstrand was sitting at her desk in the Pyramid Library at the top of the Wizard Tower. The Library was dark and gloomy in the early morning light, and the few candles that Marcia had lit flickered as she thumped Septimus’s Prediction Practical Papers down on the desk in exasperation. Her green eyes flashed crossly as Alther Mella floated along the book stacks peering at some of his favorite titles.

“This is very bad, Alther. I spent all day yesterday setting up the Prediction Practical and it’s got to begin before 7:07 A.M. Any later than that and all the stuff will have started to happen—and then it’s just Telepathy and Cognizance, which is *not the point*.”

“Give the lad a break, Marcia. He fell into the Moat last night and—”

“He did *what?*”

“Fell into the Moat. I really think you should postpone—”

“How come he fell into the Moat, Alther?” Marcia asked suspiciously.

Eager to change the subject, Alther wandered over to Marcia and sat down companionably on the corner of her desk. He knew he would regret it, but he could not resist saying, “Well, perhaps you should have predicted this would happen, Marcia, and scheduled the Prediction Practical for later in the day.”

“That’s not funny,” snapped Marcia, checking through the papers. “In fact, you are getting horribly predictable yourself. Predictably childish. You are spending far too much of your time flying around with Septimus and generally showing off when at your age you should know better. I shall send Catchpole down to the Palace to fetch Septimus right now. *That* will wake him up.”

“I imagine you’ll have to wake up Catchpole first, Marcia,” Alther commented.

“Catchpole’s on night duty, Alther. He’s been awake all night.”

“Funny habit he’s got, that Catchpole,” said Alther pensively, “of snoring while he’s awake. You’d think he’d find it irritating, wouldn’t you?” Marcia did not deign to reply. She got up from her desk, drew her purple robes around her and stormed out, slamming the Library door behind her.

Alther floated through the hatch that led onto the golden Pyramid roof and wandered up to the top of the Pyramid itself. The autumn morning air was cool and a fine drizzle fell. The base of the Wizard Tower had disappeared into a thick white mist. A few roofs of the taller houses were visible as they broke through the white blanket, but most of the Castle was lost to view. Although as a ghost, Alther did not feel the cold, he felt like shivering in the wind that eddied around the top of the Wizard Tower. He drew his faded purple cloak around him and looked down at the hammered-silver platform that surmounted the Pyramid. Alther had always been fascinated by the hieroglyphs inscribed in the platform, but he had never deciphered them, as indeed no one else had. Many hundreds of years ago one ExtraOrdinary Wizard had been brave enough to climb to the top of the Pyramid and taken a rubbing of the hieroglyphs, which now hung in the Library. Every time Alther, as ExtraOrdinary Wizard, had looked at the old gray piece of paper

framed on the Library wall, he had felt a horrible sense of vertigo, for it reminded him of the time when, as a young Apprentice, he had been forced to chase his Master, DomDaniel, up to that very place.

But now, as a ghost, Alther was fearless. He experimented with standing on the platform first on one leg and then the other; then he threw himself off, tumbling and turning through the air. As he fell, he tried to imagine what it must have felt like to fall as a human being, as DomDaniel had once done. Just above the mist he leveled out and set off for the Palace.

Catchpole was having a bad dream and it was about to get worse. He hated being on night duty down in the old spell cupboard beside the huge silver doors to the Wizard Tower. It wasn't so much the lingering smells of decaying spells that upset Catchpole; it was the fear of being asked to do something by a more senior Wizard. Catchpole was only a sub-Wizard and he was not progressing as fast as he had hoped—he had had to retake his Primaries twice and still had not passed—which meant that all Wizards in the Tower were senior to him. After years of being deputy to the fearsome Hunter, Catchpole hated being told what to do, especially when he always seemed to do it wrong. So when Marcia Overstrand strode into the old spell cupboard and demanded to know just what he thought he was doing, sitting there with his eyes closed and looking about as useful as a dead sheep, Catchpole's heart sank. What was she going to ask him to do? And what was she going to say when, as usual, he made a mess of it? Catchpole was incredibly relieved when all Marcia did was tell him to get down to the Palace *at once* and bring her Apprentice back with him. Well, he could manage that—and it would get him out of the cramped cupboard. What was more, thought Catchpole, as he ran down the marble steps and into the misty Wizard Tower courtyard, it seemed that that upstart Young Army boy who had inveigled his way into becoming the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice was, for once, in the wrong. He would enjoy that, he thought with a smirk.

Catchpole had now reached a large kennel-like structure. It was built of great granite blocks, was the height of a small cottage and was at least twice the length. There was a line of tiny windows just below the eaves to provide much-needed ventilation and for the occupant to look out if he wanted. At the front of the kennel was a hefty wooden ramp leading to a barn door that was made of thick oak planks. The door was firmly closed and had three iron bars holding it in place. Above the door someone had written in neat handwriting, SPIT FYRE. As Catchpole trotted by, something inside the kennel hurled itself against the door. There was a loud splintering sound and the middle iron bar

on the door bent a little, but not enough for the door to give way. Catchpole's smirk vanished. He shot off at high speed and did not slow down until he was halfway along Wizard Way and could see the light from the palace torches glimmering through the mist.

After dispatching Catchpole, Marcia took the silver spiral stairs back up to her rooms at the top of the Wizard Tower. Something was bothering her. It was so unlike Septimus to miss an exam; something felt wrong. Still on nighttime mode, the silver stairs slowly corkscrewed their way to the top of the Wizard Tower, and Marcia, who was never at her best early in the morning, began to feel queasy with the movement of the stairs and the smells of bacon and porridge, which were competing with the incense that drifted up from the hall below. As Marcia rose past the fourteenth floor, still puzzling over Septimus, something occurred to her. Something important.

"Come on, hurry up," Marcia snapped impatiently at the spiral stairs. Taking her at her word, the stairs sped up to double daytime speed, and Marcia shot up through the rest of the Tower, surprising three elderly Wizards who were up early for a fishing trip. The stairs stopped with the same enthusiasm with which they had obeyed Marcia's earlier command; in one seamless movement the ExtraOrdinary Wizard exited at the twentieth floor and hurtled through the heavy purple door that led to her rooms. Luckily the door saw her coming and flung itself open just in time. Moments later Marcia was racing up the steps to the Pyramid Library.

With a worried frown, Marcia swiftly leafed through the Prediction Practical Papers until she came across what she was looking for: a series of closely written formulae and interpretations that Jillie Djinn, the new Chief Hermetic Scribe, had provided from the *All-Seeing Almanac*. Marcia pulled out the piece of paper, and taking her illuminating pen from her pocket, she ran it over the formulae. As the pen moved across the page, the numbers began to rearrange themselves. Marcia stared at them in disbelief for several minutes.

Suddenly she threw down her pen and ran to the darkest corner of the Library, which housed the **Sealed** shelf. Trembling, Marcia tried three times until she clicked her fingers loud enough to light the massive candle that was set beside it. The flame illuminated the two thick **Sealed** silver doors that covered the shelf and opened only with the touch of the Akhu Amulet, which was passed from one ExtraOrdinary Wizard to the next. Marcia removed the lapis lazuli and gold amulet from around her neck and pressed it against the

long purple wax **Seal** that covered the crack between the doors. The **Seal** recognized the amulet, the wax rolled itself up into a coil and, with a soft hiss, the doors swung open. Behind them was a deep, dark shelf from which the smells of stale air from hundreds of years ago drifted out. Marcia sneezed.

Marcia had never opened the **Sealed** section before. She had never had cause to until now. Alther had once shown her how to do it after he had decided that he wanted her to succeed him as ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Marcia remembered how encouraging Alther had been to her when she had been his Apprentice, and a twinge of guilt stabbed at her for being so short-tempered with the ghost.

With some trepidation, Marcia shoved her arm into the recesses of the shelf, for one never knew what might lurk in a **Sealed** place or what might have grown there since it had last been opened. But it did not take her long to find what she was looking for, and with a sense of relief, Marcia pulled out a solid-gold box. She checked the box in the light of the candle, **ReSealed** the doors and took it down to the desk. Taking a small key from her ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt, Marcia opened the box and lifted out a decaying leather book. As she cradled it in her hands, Marcia could see that it had once been beautiful. The small, thick book was tied with a faded red ribbon and covered in the fragile remains of soft leather on which intricate gold-leaf designs were visible—as was the title: *I, Marcellus*. Gently Marcia placed the book on the table, and as she did so the ribbon fell to pieces, a scattering of fine red dust covered her hands, and the black seal that had bound its two ends fell to the floor and rolled away into the shadows. Marcia did not bother to pursue the seal, for she was anxious—and yet afraid—to open the *I, Marcellus*.

Heart beating fast, Marcia gingerly lifted the cover, sending a shower of leather dust into the air.

“Atchoo!” she sneezed. “Atchoo, atchoo, *atchoo!*” and then, “No, oh, *no!*” for the pages of the book had fallen prey to the dreaded Pyramid Library paper beetle. Marcia took a pair of long-nosed tweezers from a pot on the desk, and one by one, she lifted the delicate lace-wing pages, inspecting them closely with a large magnifying glass. The *I, Marcellus* was divided into three parts: Alchemie, **Physik**, and the Almanac. The first two sections, and much of the last section, were unreadable. Shaking her head, Marcia moved swiftly through the book until she came across a very fat, squashed paper beetle wedged under some astronomical calculations. With an air of triumph, Marcia lifted up the beetle with her pliers and dropped it into a glass jar on the desk,

which already contained a collection of squashed paper beetles. Flipping faster now through the undamaged pages of the rest of the Almanac, Marcia soon came across the present year. Scanning down the cryptic entries, and occasionally consulting some tables at the back that were covered in ink blots, Marcia at last found the date she was looking for, the day of the Autumn Equinox—which was oddly out of sequence—and drew out an ancient piece of paper with familiar spidery writing scrawled over it.

Marcia's expression as she read this piece of paper changed from initial puzzlement to one of dawning horror. Shaking and deathly pale, the ExtraOrdinary Wizard staggered to her feet, gently placed the scrap of paper in her pocket and set off for the Palace as fast as she could.

10

THE QUEEN'S ROBIN ROOM



Over at the Palace, in Sarah Heap's small sitting room, Septimus was beginning to stir. His head felt fuzzy as he opened his eyes, wondering where he was. A dull grayish light filtered through Sarah's flowery curtains and Septimus could feel the dampness from the river in the air. It was not the kind of morning that made him want to get up.

Jenna yawned, still sleepy. She pulled her crocheted blanket up over her head and wished the day would go away. A strange feeling of foreboding was weighing her down, although she could not remember why. "Morning, Sep," she said. "How are you?"

"Wherrr..." Septimus mumbled blearily. "Where am I?"

"Um...Mum's sitting room," Jenna mumbled sleepily.

“Oh, yes, I remember...Queen Etheldreda—”

Jenna was wide awake all of a sudden, remembering what her sense of foreboding had been about. She wished she hadn't.

Suddenly Septimus remembered something else: his Prediction Practical. He sat up, his straw-colored curls standing on end, a look of panic in his bright green eyes. “I gotta go, Jen, or I'll be late. I *knew* I was going to mess this up.”

“Mess what up?”

“My Prediction Practical. I *knew* it.”

“Well, then, that's all right, isn't it?” Jenna sat up and grinned. “I guess you've passed.”

“Don't think it works like that, Jen,” said Septimus gloomily. “Not with Marcia, anyway. I'd better go.”

“Look, Sep,” said Jenna. “You can't go back yet. You have to come see something first. I promised.”

“Promised? What do you mean, *promised*?”

Jenna did not reply. Slowly, she stood up and carefully folded the crocheted blanket. Septimus saw a dark and anxious look in her eyes and decided not to push things any further. “Well, don't worry,” he said, reluctantly crawling out of his makeshift bed, “I'll come see whatever it is first and then I'll go back. If I run fast I might just make it.”

“Thanks, Sep,” said Jenna.

As Jenna and Septimus closed the door of Sarah Heap's sitting room behind them, the ghost of Queen Etheldreda descended through the ceiling with a look of satisfaction on her sharp features. She settled herself down on the sofa, picked up the small book that Sarah had left on the table and, with fascinated distaste, began to read *True Love Never Lies*.

Septimus and Jenna made their way along the Long Walk, the wide passageway that ran the length of the Palace like a backbone. It was deserted in the dim light of the morning, for the Palace servants were quietly employed

elsewhere getting things ready for the day, and the various Ancients who haunted the Long Walk at night had fallen asleep in the early-morning light. Some were propped up in doorways, others were contentedly snoring in some of the moth-eaten chairs that were scattered along the Walk for the benefit of those who found the distance too far to travel in one trip.

A threadbare red carpet that covered the old stone flags ran like a broad path in front of Jenna and Septimus. The Long Walk always felt to Jenna as though it went on forever, although now it was more interesting than it had been, since her father, Milo Banda, had brought back all kinds of strange and bizarre treasures from the Far Countries and set them up in its empty niches and alcoves. In fact, Milo had been so pleased with what he had called “brightening up the place” that he had soon set off on another voyage to bring back even more treasures.

When they passed by what Jenna thought of as a particularly weird section—the area where Milo had displayed some shrunken heads from the Cannibal Islands of the South Seas—Septimus lingered, fascinated.

“Come on, Sep,” Jenna chided. “Don’t stop here, this is a really creepy part.”

“It’s not the heads that are creepy, Jen. It’s that picture. Isn’t that old Etheldredda?”

It was an imposing, full-length painting. Queen Etheldredda’s sharp features gazed down at Jenna and Septimus with her usual expression, accurately caught by the artist. The Queen was posed haughtily against a backdrop of the Palace.

Jenna shivered. “Dad found it in a **Sealed** room in the attic,” she whispered as though the portrait was listening to them. “He took it out ’cause he said it was frightening his new Counter Colony. I’m going to ask him to put it back.”

“The sooner, the better,” said Septimus. “Before it scares the shrunken heads.”

A few minutes later, Septimus and Jenna were outside the Queen’s Room on the top floor of the turret at the end of the Palace. A tall golden door with beautiful emerald-green patterns glinted in the dusty shafts of the early-

morning sunshine. Jenna unclipped a large emerald and gold key from the leather belt that she wore over her gold sash. Carefully, she placed the key in the keyhole that was in the middle of the door.

Septimus stood back and watched Jenna put the key into what appeared to him to be a completely blank and rather cracked wall. This did not surprise Septimus, for he knew he could not see the door to the Queen's Room. Only those who were descended from the Queen could see it.

"I'll wait for you here, Jen," Septimus said.

"No, you won't, Sep. You're coming with me."

"But—" Septimus protested. Jenna said nothing; she turned the key and leaped to one side as the door came crashing down like a drawbridge. Then she grabbed hold of Septimus's hand and pulled him toward what looked to him like an extremely solid and very hard wall.

Septimus resisted. "Jen, you *know* I can't go in there."

"Yes, you can, Sep. I can bring you in. Now keep hold of my hand and follow me." Jenna pulled Septimus forward. He saw her disappear through the wall until only her hand, stretched out behind her and clasping his, remained visible. It was one of the strangest things that Septimus had ever seen, and instinctively he held back, unwilling to be dragged through a wall, even by Jenna. But an impatient tug pulled him so that his nose was right up against the wall—no, it was *in* the wall. Another insistent tug followed and suddenly Septimus found himself in the Queen's Room.

At first Septimus could see little, for there were no windows and the Room was lit only by a small coal fire. But once his eyes became used to the dimness, Septimus was surprised. The Room was much smaller than he had expected; in fact, it was rather cramped. It was furnished simply, with just one comfortable chair and a worn rug laid in front of the fire. The only thing of interest that caught Septimus's eye was an old cupboard set into the curve of the wall on which was written in familiar gold letters: UNSTABLE POTIONS AND PARTIKULAR POISONS. It was identical to the cupboard that Aunt Zelda had in her cottage in the Marram Marshes, and it gave Septimus a sudden longing for one of Aunt Zelda's cabbage sandwiches.

What neither Septimus nor Jenna could see was the occupant of the fireside chair—the ghost of a young woman. Turning to look at her visitors, the young woman gazed at Jenna with a rapt expression. Around her long,

dark hair, the ghost wore a gold circlet, identical to the one that Jenna wore. She had the red and gold robes of a Queen, which were heavily bloodstained over her heart. Having looked her fill at Jenna, the Queen turned her gaze toward Septimus, taking in his green Apprentice tunic and cloak, his brilliant green eyes and, in particular, his ExtraOrdinary Apprentice silver belt. Seemingly satisfied that Septimus was a suitable companion for her daughter, the young woman relaxed back into her chair.

“Feels funny in here,” Septimus whispered, looking at the apparently empty chair.

“I know,” Jenna replied in a hushed voice. Remembering what Etheldredda had said, she looked around the room, half hoping to see the ghost of her mother. She thought there was a faint glimmer of something in the armchair, but when she looked again there was nothing. And yet...Jenna shook the thoughts of her mother out of her head.

“Come on,” she told Septimus.

“Come on where, Jen?”

“Into Aunt Zelda’s cupboard.” Jenna opened the door to the cupboard and waited for Septimus.

“Oh, great, are you taking me to see Aunt Zelda?”

“Stop asking questions, Sep,” said Jenna a little sharply. Septimus looked surprised, but he followed her into the cupboard and Jenna closed the door behind them. The young woman in the chair smiled, happy to think that her daughter was going through the Queen’s Way to see the Keeper in the Marram Marshes. She would, thought Jenna’s mother, make a good Queen. When the Time was Right.

But, unknown to her mother, Jenna was not going to the Marram Marshes. As soon as she had closed the door behind Septimus, Jenna whispered, “We’re not going to see Aunt Zelda.”

“Oh.” Septimus sounded disappointed. And then he said, “Why are you whispering?”

“Shhh. I don’t know. Now there’s a trapdoor here somewhere. Can you see it, Sep?”

“Don’t you know where we’re going either?” he asked.

“No. Look, can you shine your ring down here? I expect it’s in the same place as Aunt Zelda’s trapdoor.”

“You’re being very mysterious, Jen,” said Septimus, shining his Dragon Ring so that the glow lit up the floor. Sure enough, the trapdoor in the Queen’s Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard was indeed in the same place as it was in Aunt Zelda’s. Jenna lifted a carefully concealed thick gold ring (Aunt Zelda’s was only brass) and pulled. The trapdoor lifted easily and silently, and Jenna and Septimus peered warily into the hole.

“What now?” whispered Septimus.

“We’ve got to go down,” Jenna replied.

“Where to?” asked Septimus, beginning to feel uneasy.

“To the Robing Room. It’s the room below. Shall I go first?”

“No,” said Septimus, “let me go first. Just in case...and, well, I’ve got the light from my ring.” Septimus lowered himself through the trapdoor, and instead of the rickety old wooden ladder that led down from Aunt Zelda’s trapdoor, he found a flight of fine silver steps with open filigree treads and a polished mahogany banister on either side. Climbing down backward, for the steps were steep like a ship’s ladder, Septimus called up to Jenna, “It’s okay, Jen. I think.”

Jenna’s boots appeared through the trapdoor, and Septimus went down the steps and waited at the bottom. As Jenna jumped from the last silver step and her feet touched the fine marble floor, two large candles at the foot of the steps burst into flame.

“Wow,” said Septimus, impressed. “It’s a bit nicer than upstairs, Jen.”

The Queen’s Robing Room was more than nice—it was opulent. It was larger than the upstairs room, for the turret widened on the lower floor. Its walls were lined with a burnished gold leaf that, although it had dulled over the centuries, glowed deep and rich in the candlelight. On the wall facing the silver steps was an old looking glass in an ornate gold frame, but it seemed to be of little use, for much of the reflective silvering was gone after years of dampness. The glass was dark and showed only a blurred reflection of the candlelight.

All along the walls were solid silver hooks, each one a different, intricately cast shape. One was shaped like a swan's neck, another like a snake; another was cast from intertwined initials of some long-dead Queen and her soul mate. Some hooks were empty and some had robes or cloaks hanging from them, reflecting the different styles popular through the previous centuries, but all in the traditional red and gold that the Queens of the Castle had always worn. What amazed Jenna—although Septimus did not notice—was that not one of the robes had any dust upon them. All looked as new and fresh as if they had just been made by the Palace seamstress.

Enthralled, for she loved rich cloth, Jenna wandered around the room, running her fingers over the robes and exclaiming, "These are so soft, Sep... oh, feel this one, the silk is so fine...and look at this fur trim, that's even better than Marcia's winter cloak, isn't it?" Jenna had lifted a fine woolen cloak from a silver hook embedded with emeralds and twisted into the shape of a J. She slipped it over her shoulders; it was a beautiful cloak, soft and flowing, edged with a dark red fur trim. It fit her perfectly. Unwilling to put it back on its lonely hook, Jenna fastened the gold clasp and wrapped the cloak around her. It reminded her of Lucy Gringe's blue cloak that Jenna had worn not so long ago, and had recently given to a very surprised Lucy.

"Look, it fits me perfectly. It's as if it were made for me. And see, Nicko's present is just right." Jenna had fastened the cloak with her gold pin, also in the shape of a J, which Nicko had bought from a merchant in the Port and given to her for her last birthday.

"Very nice, Jen," said Septimus, who did not find clothes the least bit interesting and thought the Robing Room a little oppressive. "Look, hadn't you better show me whatever it was you wanted to?"

Jenna came back to earth with a jolt. For a few moments she had forgotten all about the wretched Queen Etheldredda. She pointed at the dark looking glass. "That's it, Sep. Now you have to look in it. That's what I promised."

Septimus looked wary. "Promised who?"

"Queen Etheldredda," Jenna whispered miserably. "Last night. She was waiting for me outside the door."

"Oh," Septimus muttered, "I see. But weird things can happen with looking glasses, Jen. Especially old ones. I don't think I should do this."

"Please, Sep," Jenna pleaded. "Please look in it. *Please.*"

“Why?” Septimus saw a look of panic on Jenna’s face. “Jen—what’s the matter?”

“Because if you don’t, she’ll...”

“She’ll what?”

Jenna looked white. “She’ll **Reverse** the **Reclaime**. At midnight. You’ll drown at midnight tonight.”

11

THE GLASS



Septimus stood warily in front of the looking glass, deliberately avoiding it by staring at his boots. He remembered Alther telling him how he had once looked in a Glass and seen a **Spectre Waiting** for him. He was afraid he might be about to see the same thing. “How does she know whether I’ve looked into the Glass or not?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Jenna said, unhappily twisting the red fur trim on her new cloak. “I didn’t ask. I was so scared that she would reverse the **Reclaime** that I just told her I would make sure you did it.”

“Did she say why I had to?”

“No. She wouldn’t say. She was just so...threatening. It was horrible. Can she really do what she said, Sep? Can she really reverse the **Reclaime**?”

Septimus angrily scuffed his boots on the marble. “Yes, she can, Jen. Within twenty-four hours, if she’s skilled at it, which I bet she is. I bet she’s done it lots of times before. Rescued some poor person and then held them ransom.”

“She’s horrible,” muttered Jenna. “I hate her.”

“Marcia says you shouldn’t hate anyone,” Septimus said. “She says first you should stand in their shoes before you judge them.”

“Marcia wouldn’t stand in anyone else’s shoes,” Jenna said with a wry smile, “unless they were pointy purple python skin with dinky little gold buttons.”

Septimus laughed and then fell silent. So did Jenna. Both felt their gazes drawn toward the Glass but neither looked at it. Suddenly Septimus blurted out, “I’m going to look in it now, Jen.”

“Now?” Jenna’s voice rose up a pitch.

“Yes. Get it over with. After all, what’s the worst that can happen? I might see a horrible old **Spectre** or **Thing**, but that’s all. What you see can’t hurt you, can it?”

“No. I suppose not....” Jenna sounded unconvinced.

“So I’ll do it now. You go back up to the cupboard and I’ll be up in a moment. Okay?”

“No, I’m not leaving you here on your own,” protested Jenna.

“But if there is a **Spectre Waiting** for me, Jen, you mustn’t see it. It will **Haunt** you too. I know what to do about **Spectres** and you don’t.”

“But—” Jenna hesitated.

“Go on, Jen. Please.” Septimus flashed Jenna a smile. “Go *on*.”

Jenna reluctantly started up the silver stairs to the potions cupboard. Once she was safely out of the Robing Room, Septimus took a deep breath to steady his nerves.

Then he looked into the Glass.

At first he could see nothing. The Glass was dark, like a deep marsh pool. Septimus leaned closer, wondering why he could not see his own reflection and, despite doing his best not to, imagining all kinds of horrible **Spectres** at his shoulder, **Waiting** for him.

“Are you okay? Have you looked into the Glass yet?” Jenna’s voice came from the cupboard.

“Um...yes. I’m looking now....”

“What can you see?”

“Nothing...nothing...it’s just dark...oh, wait...I can see something now...it—it’s weird...an old man...staring at me. He looks kind of surprised.”

“An old man?” asked Jenna.

“Oh, that’s odd....”

“What?” Jenna sounded worried.

“Well, if I raise my right hand he does too. And if I frown, he frowns too.”

“Like your reflection would?”

“Well, yes. Oh, I know what it is—it’s one of those Yet-to-Come Glasses. They were very popular in the old days. Traveling fairs used to bring them. They show you what you’re going to look like just before you die.”

“That’s horrible, Sep,” Jenna called down.

“Yeah. Don’t ever want to look like that. Ugh. Oh, look, if I stick out my tongue, he—*hey!*”

“What?” Jenna could bear it no longer. She hurtled down the steps and arrived in the Robing Room just in time to see Septimus spring back from the Glass, slip on the shiny marble floor and fall. As he scrambled to get up and away, Jenna screamed. Reaching out of the Glass were two old, wizened hands. With long bony fingers and curved yellow nails, they snatched at Septimus’s tunic, grabbed hold of it, then wrapped themselves around his Apprentice belt, dragging him toward the Glass. Frantically Septimus tried to pull away, kicking out at the clutching talons.

“Jen! Help, Je—” he yelled, and then there was silence. Septimus’s head had disappeared into the Glass as though sinking into a pool of ink.

Jenna ran down the steps and skidded across the floor, horrified at seeing Septimus’s shoulders rapidly disappearing into the Glass. She leaped forward, grabbed his feet and pulled with all her strength. Slowly, slowly Septimus

began to come out of the Glass. Jenna hung on like a dog with a bone, determined never, *ever*, to let go of Septimus. Little by little, as if emerging from one of the black Marram Marsh pools, Septimus's head broke free. He twisted around and yelled, "Careful, Jen! Don't let him get you!"

Jenna glanced up and saw a face that stayed with her for the rest of her life. It was the face of an old man—an *ancient* man—with a great long nose and sunken, staring eyes that looked at Jenna with surprise, as if he knew her. Long wisps of yellowish white hair hung down and caught over his enormous old ears. His mouth, which contained three great tombstone teeth, was fixed in a wide grimace of concentration as he tried to pull Septimus away from her. Then, suddenly, with a tremendous heave, he succeeded. Septimus shot through the Glass and Jenna was left alone in the Robing Room, staring in disbelief at all that was left of Septimus—his old brown boots, empty in her hands.

With toes stubbed from kicking the Glass and her throat sore from screaming at it to *give Septimus back*, Jenna fled up the steps, clutching Septimus's boots. Once she was safely in the Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard, she slammed the trapdoor closed and opened the bottom drawer under the empty shelves. She heard the familiar metallic click, and then, trying to catch her breath, Jenna waited impatiently until something in the cupboard shifted and she smelled the familiar scent of cabbages cooking.

Jenna pushed open the door and stepped out into Aunt Zelda's cottage.

"Oi!" A startled voice came from the rug beside the fire. A boy with long matted hair, wearing a simple brown tunic fastened with an old leather belt, leaped to his feet with a look of alarm. On seeing Jenna, Wolf Boy relaxed and said, "Hey, it's you again. Can't keep away, huh?" And then, noticing Jenna's expression: "Jenna, what's the matter?"

"Oh...409," gasped Jenna, who had picked up Septimus's habit of addressing Wolf Boy by his old Young Army number. "Where's Aunt Zelda—I've got to see Aunt Zelda. *Now*."

Wolf Boy needed no excuse to leave his early reader potion book by the fire and come over to Jenna. He had never mastered the art of reading, having been completely terrified of his reading and writing instructor in the Young Army. And now, no matter how hard he tried and how patient Aunt Zelda was with him, the way the letters stuck together to make words—or not—still made little sense to Wolf Boy. "She's not here, Jenna," he explained. "She's out gathering marsh herbs an' stuff. Hey, aren't those 412's boots?"

Jenna nodded miserably. She had been sure that Aunt Zelda would know what to do, but now...She leaned against the cupboard door, suddenly exhausted.

“Can I help?” Wolf Boy asked quietly, a concerned look in his dark brown eyes.

“I don’t know....” Jenna almost wailed and then stopped. She must keep calm, she told herself. She must think what to do. She *must*.

“412’s in trouble, isn’t he?” asked Wolf Boy.

Jenna nodded again, not trusting herself to say anything. Wolf Boy put his arm around Jenna’s shoulders. “Then we’d better get him out of trouble... yeah?”

Jenna nodded.

“I’ll come with you. Wait, I’d better leave a note for Aunt Zelda and tell her where we’ve gone.” Wolf Boy rushed over to Aunt Zelda’s desk, which looked faintly ridiculous with duck feet on the ends of its legs and a pair of arms to help with the paperwork, both courtesy of Marcia Overstrand. Aunt Zelda hated these additions but Wolf Boy had learned to use them to his advantage.

“Piece of paper, please,” he asked the arms. The rather clumsy hands on the ends of the arms scabbled around in the desk drawer, took out a crumpled piece of paper, smoothed it out and put it neatly on the desk.

“Pen, please,” asked Wolf Boy.

The right hand picked a quill pen from a tray on top of the desk and held it surprisingly delicately, hovering above the paper.

“Now write: Dear Aunt Zelda—what’s the matter?” The left hand was impatiently drumming its fingers on the paper. “Oh, sorry. Ink, please. Now write: Dear Aunt Zelda, Jenna and me have gone to rescue 412. With love from 409. Oh, and Jenna. Love from Jenna too. That’s it, yes, thank you. Thank you, you can stop now. Put the pen away. No, you don’t need to blot it, just leave it on her desk and make sure she sees it.” The hands rather fussily put away the pen, and then the arms folded themselves somewhat crossly, as if dissatisfied with being asked to write so little.

“Let’s go,” said Jenna, stepping back through the door of the Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard.

“Coming,” said Wolf Boy, and then remembering something, he dashed back to the fire and picked up an uneaten cabbage sandwich.

Jenna eyed the sandwich warily. “Do you really like those?” she asked.

“No. Can’t stand ’em. But 412 does. Thought he’d like this one.”

“He’s going to need a whole lot more than a cabbage sandwich, 409.” Jenna sighed.

“Yeah, well. Look, I’ll follow you and you can tell me about it. Okay?”

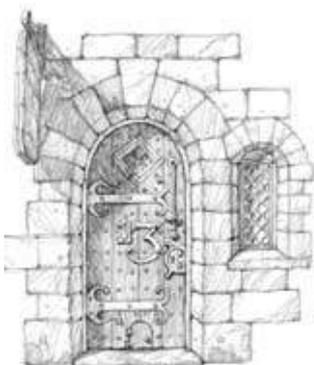
Wolf Boy and Jenna emerged from the cupboard in the Queen’s Room with Wolf Boy in a somber mood. Jenna had told him what had happened. They walked past the Queen’s chair, unaware of her shocked expression at the apparently sudden change that Septimus had undergone—from neatly dressed Apprentice to a half-wild-looking boy. As Wolf Boy passed the ghost, he felt the hair on the back of his neck rise; he looked around like a wary animal and a low growl rose from the back of his throat. “Something funny in here, Jen,” he whispered.

Jenna shivered, unnerved by Wolf Boy’s feral growl. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s get out of here.” She grabbed Wolf Boy’s hand and pulled him through the door.

Jillie Djinn, recently **Chosen** Chief Hermetic Scribe, was waiting for them.

12

JILLIE DJINN



Miss Djinn!” gasped Jenna, taken aback at the unexpected sight of the Scribe’s indigo robes with their impressive gold flashes. How did Jillie Djinn know where she had been? And how come the Scribe knew where the Queen’s Room was? Even Marcia did not know that.

“Your Majesty.” Jillie Djinn sounded a little breathless. She inclined her head respectfully, her new silk robes rustling as she moved.

“Please don’t call me that,” Jenna said angrily. “Call me Jenna. Just Jenna. I am not Queen yet. And I don’t ever want to be either. You just end up being a horrible person doing horrible things to everyone. It’s awful.”

Jillie Djinn looked at Jenna with a concerned expression and was not sure how to reply. The Chief Hermetic Scribe had no children and, apart from a very solemn and precocious Temple Scribe in a Far Country some years ago, Jenna was the first girl of eleven that Jillie had spoken to since she herself was eleven. Miss Djinn had devoted her life to her career and had spent years traveling in the Far Countries learning the arcane secrets of the many and varied worlds of knowledge. She had also spent some years researching the hidden secrets of the Castle, which she was pleased to see had not been

wasted.

“Jenna,” Jillie Djinn corrected herself, “Madam Marcia wishes to see you. Her Apprentice is missing and she fears the worst.” Jillie Djinn’s gaze alighted on Septimus’s boots, which hung by their laces from Jenna’s right hand. “I assume that I am right that something of that nature has occurred?”

Puzzled, Jenna nodded. She wondered how Marcia could possibly already know what had happened. And then she sniffed. And sniffed again. A strange smell of dragon poo was in the air. Jillie Djinn sniffed too. She scraped her right shoe—a neat black lace-up—vigorously on the floor, inspected the sole, then scraped it again.

“Would I be right also, Princess, if I were to say that there is a Glass in the Queen’s Room?” Jillie Djinn’s bright green eyes fastened onto Jenna expectantly. Jillie had many theories about many things and she was excited to think that one of them might be working out right now.

Jenna did not answer, but she did not need to. The Chief Hermetic Scribe was not the best person in the Castle at reading people’s expressions, but there was no mistaking the look of astonishment on Jenna’s face.

“You may not be aware, Princess Jenna, but I have made an extensive study of Alchemical Glasses—*extensive*—and we actually have a specimen in the Hermetic Chamber. This morning, I saw a disturbance in that Glass. I made haste to the Wizard Tower to report the disturbance, which we are duty-bound to do by our Charter, and I met Madam Overstrand leaving in a distressed state. I have drawn my own conclusions and now respectfully ask if you will consent to accompany me to the Manuscriptorium,” said the Scribe, as if addressing a lecture hall of particularly slow scholars. “I have also asked Marcia Overstrand to meet us there.”

Marcia was about the last person Jenna wanted to see just then, as she knew she would have to tell her that *she* had caused Septimus’s disappearance. But Jillie Djinn’s mention of another Glass in the Manuscriptorium had raised her hopes. Could it be possible that the old man in the Glass was just one of those weird old scribes from their spooky Spell Vault that Septimus used to talk about? Maybe he had just pulled Septimus through to the Manuscriptorium? Maybe Sep was waiting for her there right now, and then he’d spend the rest of the day telling her all about it until she was completely fed up? Maybe...

Anxious now to get to the Manuscriptorium, Jenna followed the bustling,

bright-eyed Scribe down the narrow winding steps. Wolf Boy, who had been hanging around in the shadows, blending into the background like the Forest creature that he was at heart, joined them, causing Jillie to jump in surprise. At the foot of the steps, Jillie scraped her shoe once more and then took the side door out of the turret.

“I must say,” said Jillie self-importantly as she strode along the path around the back of the turret, “it is most gratifying when a theory is proved right. I had narrowed the whereabouts of the Queen’s Room down to two positions. The first was down there—” Jillie Djinn waved her hand toward the old summer house by the riverbank, whose octagonal golden roof was just visible above the early-morning river mist. “Of course, Princess Jenna, I knew that your key would open both, but nothing else about the summer house made sense, although I did wonder whether its legend of the Black Fiend had been put about by the various Queens to keep people away. But naturally, by looking at all the facts and giving them due consideration, I chose the right place. *Most interesting.*”

“Interesting?” muttered Jenna under her breath, wondering if Septimus’s disappearance was no more than a diverting academic exercise for the Scribe.

With Wolf Boy and Jenna in tow, Jillie Djinn rounded the base of the turret and emerged at the front of the Palace. She set off across the lawns toward the Gate, and as their feet made dark footprints in the dew, the Chief Hermetic Scribe continued to expound on various pet theories, for Jillie had a captive audience and she was not about to waste it. Her audience was not, however, appreciative; Jenna was too preoccupied with worrying about Septimus to listen and Wolf Boy gave up after the first sentence. The way that Jillie Djinn talked made his head ache.

Despite her diminutive size, Jillie kept up a fast pace and they were soon rushing along Wizard Way, which was beginning to stir. Wizard Way was one of the oldest streets in the Castle. It was a broad, straight avenue lined with beautiful silver torch posts. It ran from the Palace Gates at one end to the Great Arch of the Wizard Tower at the other. The houses and shops were built from the oldest yellow limestone from quarries emptied long ago. They were weathered and crooked but had a friendly feeling to them that Jenna loved. The Way was lined with countless small shops and printers, selling all manner of printed papers, inks, books, pamphlets and pens, plus an assortment of spectacles and headache pills for those who had spent far too long reading in dark corners.

As the shopkeepers and printers peered through their misty windows and decided against putting out their wares in the damp air, the first thing they saw was the Chief Hermetic Scribe striding down the Way, accompanied by an odd-looking boy with tangled hair and the Princess, who was carrying an old pair of boots.

Two-thirds down the Way, the trio stopped outside a small purple-painted shop with its window stacked so high with papers and books that it was impossible to see inside. On the door was the number 13, and over the window was the inscription: **Magykal** MANUSCRIPTORIUM AND SPELL CHECKERS INCORPORATED. Jillie Djinn, her ample figure almost filling the narrow doorway, regarded Jenna and Wolf Boy with a solemn air.

“The Hermetic Chamber is not to be entered by anyone who has not been inducted into the tenets of the Manuscriptorium,” she informed them ponderously. “However, in these difficult circumstances I will make an exception for the Princess, but the Princess only. Indeed there is a possibility of precedence as I have reason to believe that some of the more ancient Queens have been admitted to the Chamber.” With that, the door to the Manuscriptorium opened with a little *ping* and Jillie Djinn stepped inside.

“*What* did she say?” Wolf Boy asked Jenna.

“She said you can’t come in,” said Jenna.

“Oh.”

“Well, not into the Hermetic Chamber anyway.”

“The what?”

“The Hermetic Chamber. I don’t know what it is, but Sep told me a bit about it. He’s been in there.”

“Maybe he’s there now,” said Wolf Boy, brightening.

“Well, I—I suppose he could be,” said Jenna, hardly daring to hope.

“You go in and have a look. I’ll wait outside like she said, and I’ll see you and 412 in a minute. How about that?”

Jenna grinned. “Sounds good,” she said, and she followed Jillie Djinn inside.

13

THE NAVIGATOR TIN



As Jenna walked into the front office of the Manuscriptorium, she heard a strange noise, rather like the stifled squeak of a distressed hamster, coming from behind the door. She peered around and saw the shadowy figure of a slightly chubby boy with a shock of black hair wedged behind the door handle. “Beetle?” she asked. “Is that you?”

The distressed hamster, who was indeed Beetle, holding the door open for his Chief Hermetic Scribe, replied with another squeak, which Jenna decided to take as a yes.

Jenna glanced about the Manuscriptorium with some trepidation, but to her relief there was no sign of Marcia.

“This way, please, Jenna. We shall have to proceed without Madam Marcia.” Jillie Djinn’s voice came from somewhere at the back of the office and Jenna hurried toward it, skirting a large desk at the far end. She joined the Scribe beside a small door in a half wood, half glass partition wall. Jillie Djinn pushed open the door, and Jenna followed her into the Manuscriptorium itself.

A hushed silence hung over the Manuscriptorium, broken only by the

sound of the scratching of pens and the occasional twang of a broken nib. Twenty-one scribes were hard at work copying out **Incantations** and **Invocations, Chants** and **Charms, Summonses** and **Spells** and even the occasional love letter for those who wanted to make an impression. Each scribe was perched at a high desk, laboring under a small pool of yellow light cast by one of the twenty-one oil lamps, which were suspended on long and sometimes dangerously frayed ropes from the vaulted ceiling.

The Chief Hermetic Scribe beckoned Jenna to follow her. Jenna found herself tiptoeing through the tall banks of desks while each scribe turned to look at the Princess, and wondered what she was doing and why she was carrying a pair of old boots. Twenty-one pairs of eyes watched Jenna follow Jillie Djinn into the narrow passageway that led to the Hermetic Chamber. Surprised glances were exchanged and a few eyebrows were raised, but no one said anything. As Jenna disappeared around the first corner of the passageway, the scratching of nibs on paper and parchment resumed its normal level.

The long, dark passage that led into the Hermetic Chamber turned back on itself seven times to cut short the flight of rogue spells and anything else that might try to escape from the Chamber. It also cut out the light, but Jenna followed the rustling sound of Jillie Djinn's silk robes and before long she stepped into a small, white, round room. The room was virtually empty; in the center was a simple table on which was placed a lit candle, but it was not the candle that drew Jenna's eye, it was the Glass—a horribly familiar, tall, dark Glass with an ornate frame propped up against the roughly plastered wall of the Hermetic Chamber.

Jillie Djinn saw Jenna's hopeful expression fade. There was no Septimus, just the sight of another Glass, which was the last thing she wanted to see again.

"From my studies," the Scribe said, "I understand that the early Glasses were simple, one-way-only openings. And from my calculations, I would say that this Glass is an early model and was made at the same time as the Glass in your room. I suspect this one actually comes *back* from that place."

"The place where Septimus is?" asked Jenna, her hopes rising yet again.

"Indeed. Wherever that may be. So tell me," Jillie said, "does this look the same as the Glass in the Queen's Room?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly in the Queen's Room," said Jenna.

“Oh.” The Scribe sounded surprised. “Then where was it?” She picked up a pen and a notebook from the table and stood poised to write down the information. It was not forthcoming.

“I cannot say,” said Jenna, adopting the Scribe’s officious tone. She felt grumpy at the intrusive questions—the secrets of the Queen’s Room were none of the Scribe’s business.

Jillie Djinn looked cross but there was nothing she could do. “But this Glass does look the same as the other Glass—*wherever* that may be?” she persisted.

“I think so,” said Jenna. “I can’t remember all the details of the other one. But it’s got the same black glass and...the same horrible feeling.”

“That is not entirely illuminating,” said Jillie Djinn, “for a Glass will, to some extent—depending on your susceptibility to such manifestations that may or may not be apparent—reflect your own expectations.”

Jenna had an inkling of how Wolf Boy had felt earlier. “They do what?” she asked.

“You see what you expect to see,” said Jillie Djinn briskly.

“Oh.”

The Scribe sat down at the table and opened a drawer. She drew out a large leather-bound notebook, a sheaf of papers covered in columns of figures, a pen and a small bottle of green ink. “Thank you, Jenna,” she said without looking up. “I believe I have enough information. I will now proceed.”

Jenna waited patiently for a few minutes and then, when the Scribe showed no sign of stopping her scribbling, she asked, “So...Septimus—he’ll come back here, will he?”

The Chief Hermetic Scribe looked up, already lost in another world of calculations and conjunctions. “Maybe yes. Maybe no. Who can say?”

“I thought *you* might,” Jenna muttered crossly.

“I may,” said Jillie Djinn sternly, “be able to say when my calculations are done.”

“When *will* they be done?” asked Jenna anxiously, feeling that she could hardly wait another minute to see Septimus again and ask him what had happened.

“This time next year, if all goes well,” replied the Scribe.

“This time *next year*?”

“If all goes well.”

Jenna walked back into the front office in a bad mood. At the sight of the Princess, Beetle jumped up from his seat behind the desk. His ears suddenly turned bright red; he gave a hamster-style squeak and said, “Hey.”

“What?” snapped Jenna.

“Um. I wondered...”

“*What?*”

“Um...Sep okay?”

“No, he’s not,” Jenna replied.

Beetle’s black eyes looked worried. “I guessed not.”

Jenna shot Beetle a glance. “How did you know?”

Beetle shrugged. “His boots. He’s only got one pair of boots. And you’ve got them.”

“Well, I’m going to give them back to him,” said Jenna, making for the door. “I don’t know how I’m going to find him, but I will—and I’m not waiting a whole year to do it either.”

Beetle grinned. “Well, if that’s all you need to do, it’s easy.”

“Oh, ha-ha, Beetle.”

Beetle gulped. He didn’t like making Jenna cross. “No, no, you don’t understand. I’m not being funny. It’s *true*. He’s easy to find—now that he’s **Imprinted** a dragon.”

Jenna stopped, hand on the doorknob, and stared at Beetle. “How do you mean?” she asked slowly, not daring to hope that Beetle might have the answer that his Chief Hermetic Scribe did not.

“I mean that a dragon can always find his **Imprintor**,” said Beetle. “All you have to do is a **Seek** and then, whizz bang, off he goes. Easy-peasy. You could go with him if you wanted, seeing as you’re the Navigator. Just got to do a **Locum Tenens**, that’s all. Problem solved.” Beetle folded his arms with an air of satisfaction.

“Beetle, could you...um, could you say all that again? A bit slower this time, please?”

Beetle grinned at Jenna. “Wait a minute,” he said. Beetle hurled himself through the door and vanished into the back of the Manuscriptorium. Just as Jenna was wondering what could have possibly happened to him, the door burst open and Beetle was back, clutching a bright red and gold tin.

He held the tin out to Jenna. “Yours,” he said.

“Mine?”

“Yep.”

“Oh, well, thank you,” said Jenna. A silence ensued while she looked at the tin and read the words **LOKKJAW TOFFEE COMPANY FINEST TREACLE TOFFEES**, printed in thick black letters on the lid. “Would you like a toffee, Beetle?” asked Jenna, trying to pry open the tin.

“Not toffees,” said Beetle, coloring.

“Oh?”

“Here, let me get the lid off for you.”

Jenna handed Beetle the tin. He struggled with it for a few seconds; then the lid popped off, and a flurry of what appeared to be bits of very thin leather, most of them either singed, crumpled or torn, tumbled to the floor. A strong smell of dragon filled the air. Flustered and hot, Beetle knelt to retrieve the pieces of sloughed dragon skin.

“Not toffees,” muttered Beetle as he collected them.

“No, they’re not,” agreed Jenna.

“Navigator stuff,” Beetle elaborated. He picked out a long piece of green leather and held it up, saying, “**Seek.**” Then he found a charred red scrap and said, “**Ignite.**” Lastly he found what he was looking for—a much-folded sheet of thin blue papery material—and said triumphantly, “**Locum Tenens!**”

“Oh. Well, thank you, Beetle. That’s really nice of you.”

Beetle went a deeper red. “It’s okay. I mean...um, you see, after you became Sep’s Navigator on Spit Fyre, I collected all the stuff I could find about Navigators and put it in my toffee tin. The one that my auntie gave me for MidWinter Feast Day. I hope you don’t mind,” he said a little sheepishly. “I mean, I hope you don’t think I was being nosy or anything.”

“No, of course not. I always meant to find out about being a Navigator but I never did. I think Sep thought—I mean, *thinks*—that being a Navigator means cutting Spit Fyre’s toenails and cleaning out the dragon kennel.”

Beetle laughed and then stopped as he remembered that something horrible had happened to Septimus. “So...would you like me to show you the **Locum?**” he asked.

“The what?”

“The **Locum Tenens**. It will let you take over from Sep, and Spit Fyre will do everything you ask after that—or, well, he’ll do everything that he would have done for Sep.”

“Not *everything* then.” Jenna smiled.

“No. But it’s a start. Then you can do the **Seek** and off you go to find Sep. Easy—well, it should be. Here it is.” Beetle carefully took the thin blue piece of sloughed skin, unfolded it and flattened it out on the desk. “It’s a bit complicated, but I reckon it will work okay.”

Jenna stared at a mass of confusing symbols, which were written in a tight spiral that wound its way up to a burned corner. Complicated was putting it mildly. She had no idea where to start.

“I can translate it if you like,” Beetle offered.

Jenna brightened. “Could you really?”

Beetle's ears went deep crimson again. "Yeah. Of course I could. No problem." He took a large magnifying glass from the drawer and squinted at the skin. "It's quite simple, really. You just need something belonging to the **Imprinter**—" Beetle stopped and glanced at Septimus's boots. "Which... um...you've got. You lay it...them in front of the dragon, I mean Spit Fyre, and then you put your hand on the dragon's nose, look into his eyes and tell him—look, I'll write this down so you don't forget." Beetle reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled card, then, taking his pen from its inkstand, he wrote a long string of words with great concentration.

Grateful, Jenna took the card. "Thank you, Beetle," she said. "Thank you so much."

"S all right," said Beetle. "Anytime. Except. I mean. I hope there isn't any other time. I mean. I hope Sep's okay and...if you need any help..."

"Thanks, Beetle," said Jenna, a little tearfully. She ran for the door and wrenched it open. Wolf Boy was leaning up against the window, looking extremely bored. "Come on, 409," said Jenna, and she ran off toward the Great Arch at the end of Wizard Way. Soon she and Wolf Boy had disappeared into the blue shadows of the lapis lazuli archway.

Back at the Manuscriptorium, Beetle sat down and ran his hand over his forehead. He felt hot, and he knew it was not just because he always went red whenever he saw Jenna. As Beetle leaned back in his seat, a cold sweat ran over him from top to toe and the office began to spin.

The scribes inside the Manuscriptorium heard the crash as Beetle fell off his chair. Foxy, the son of the disgraced former Chief Hermetic Scribe, rushed out to find Beetle sprawled on the floor. The first thing that Foxy noticed was a single puncture mark, from which spread a brilliant red rash, in the gap of flesh between the top of Beetle's boots and his leggings.

"He's been bitten!" Foxy yelled to all the shocked scribes. "Now *Beetle's* got it!"

14

MARCELLUS PYE



M*arcellus Pye hated* mornings. Not that you could easily tell when it was morning in the depths where he lurked. Night or day, a dim red light suffused the Old Way under the Castle. The light came from the globes of everlasting fire, which Marcellus now considered to be his greatest, and certainly most useful, achievement. The Old Way itself was lined with the large glass globes, which Marcellus had placed there some two hundred years ago when he had decided he could no longer live above the ground, among the mortals of the Castle, for it was far too noisy, fast and bright, and he no longer had any interest in it whatsoever. Now he sat damp and shivering by a globe at the foot of the Great Chimney, feeling sorry for himself.

Marcellus knew it was morning because he had been out the night before on one of his nighttime walks under the Moat. Nowadays, Marcellus only needed to breathe every ten minutes or so, and it did not particularly bother him if he did not take a breath for thirty minutes. He enjoyed the feeling of weightlessness under the water; it took away the terrible pain of his old fragile bones for a while. He liked to wander through the soft mud, picking up the

odd gold coin that someone had thrown into the Moat for luck.

When he returned, squeezing through a long-forgotten Moat inspection chamber, Marcellus had taken a tall candle, marked the hours off down its length and stuck a pin into the fourth mark as an alarm. Not because he was afraid he might fall asleep, for Marcellus Pye slept no more—indeed he could not remember when he had last slept—but because he feared that he would forget the Appointed Hour, which he had promised his mother faithfully he would not miss. The thought of his mother made Marcellus grimace as if he had just eaten an unexpectedly rotten piece of apple with a fat maggot sitting in it. He shuddered and huddled up inside his threadbare cloak for warmth. He placed the candle in a glass, then sat on the cold stone bench under the Great Chimney and watched the candle burn all through the night, while old Alchemical formulae drifted in and out of his mind in their usual haphazard and useless way.

Above him the Great Chimney rose like a pillar of darkness. Cold wind swirled inside it and howled the way the Creatures in Marcellus's flasks once used to howl to get out—now he knew how they had felt. As the candle steadily burned down, Marcellus cast the occasional anxious glance at the pin and stared up into the blackness of the Chimney. As the flame approached the pin he tapped his foot nervously and started to chew his fingernails, an old habit that he soon thought better of. They tasted disgusting.

To pass the time and take his mind off what he would soon have to do, Marcellus thought about his escapade the previous night. It had been many years since he'd been out in the open air and it had not been so bad. It had been cloudy and dark and there was a pleasant mist that had muffled any sounds. He had sat for a while on Snake Slipway and waited, but Mother had been wrong. No one had arrived. That hadn't bothered him too much for he liked the Slipway; it held happy memories of when he had lived there, next to the house where they now kept those silly paddleboats. He had sat at his old place by the water and checked that his gold pebbles were still there. It had been good to see a bit of gold again, even though they had been hidden under a coating of mud and were badly scratched, presumably by those stupid boats. Marcellus frowned. When he'd been a young man he had had a *real* boat. The river was deep then, not the silted-up and lazy waterway that it was now. True, the waters had been fast and treacherous, but in those days, boats were big with long and heavy keels, great swaths of sail and beautiful woodwork painted in gold and silver. Yes, thought Marcellus, boats were boats in those days. And the sun always shone. Always. Never a rainy day that he could remember. He sighed and stretched out his hands, looking with distaste at his

withered fingers, the parchmentlike skin stretched tight and transparent across every lump and hollow of the old bones inside, and at his thick yellow fingernails that he no longer had the strength to cut. He grimaced again; he was completely and utterly revolting. Would nothing release him? A faint memory of hope came to him and then slipped from his mind. He was not surprised—he forgot everything nowadays.

There was a sudden *ping* as the pin fell from the burning candle and hit the glass. Wearily Marcellus got to his feet, and feeling inside the Great Chimney, he clutched at a rung and swung himself onto an iron ladder that was bolted to the old brick of the inside walls. Then, like a misshapen monkey, the Last Alchemist began the long climb up the inside of the Great Chimney.

It took Marcellus longer than he had expected to reach the top of the Chimney. It was more than an hour later when, exhausted and weak, he pulled himself onto the broad ledge that ran around the top. And there he sat, eyes shut tight, pale and wheezing, trying to catch his breath and hoping that he wasn't too late. Mother would be angry. After a couple of minutes Marcellus made himself open his eyes. He wished he hadn't. The faint light from his candle way down at the foot of the Chimney made him feel dizzy and sick with the thought of how far he had climbed. He shivered in the dank wind and drew his feet up under his cloak; his cracked old toes felt like blocks of ice. Maybe, thought Marcellus, they *were* blocks of ice.

It was then that Marcellus heard voices—young voices—echoing through the walls of the Chimney. Creaking like a rusty gate, the Alchemist pulled himself to his feet and shuffled toward what, at first, seemed to be a dark window in the wall of the Chimney. As he approached, it became clear that the window was no ordinary window, but more like a deep pool of the darkest water imaginable. Fumbling, Marcellus Pye took a large gold disc from underneath his tattered robes and touched it against an indentation at the top of the Glass. He peered into the darkness of the first Glass he had ever made and, for a moment, looked surprised. As if in a dream he raised his left hand and then frowned. After a few moments, Marcellus stuck out his tongue, and then he pounced.

With a speed that startled his old bones, Marcellus Pye threw himself toward the Glass and pushed his arms through it, his fingers clawing into empty space. The Alchemist cursed, he had missed. *Missed*. The boy—what was his name?—had escaped. With one last stretch he pushed farther through the Glass and, to his relief, grabbed hold of the boy's tunic. After that it was

easy; he wrapped his fingers around the Apprentice belt—this was where the curved nails came in handy—and pulled. The boy put up a fight, but that was to be expected. What he had not expected was the sudden appearance of Esmeralda. His old brain was playing cruel tricks on him nowadays. But Marcellus pulled with all his strength, for this was a matter of life or death to him, and suddenly the boy's boots came off in Esmeralda's hands, and Septimus Heap—*that* was his name—came hurtling through the Glass.

15

THE OLD WAY



S*eptimus came through fighting.* He landed three punches on the Alchemist and numerous kicks that were of little use without his boots, but gave Septimus some satisfaction. He twisted and struggled and at one point he broke free of Marcellus’s bony grasp and hurled himself back at the Glass, only to bounce off as though it were a wall of stone.

“Careful, Septimus,” said Marcellus. He grabbed hold of Septimus’s tunic and pulled him away. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

“Let go of me,” Septimus yelled, frantically twisting and turning.

Marcellus Pye kept his grip on Septimus. “Look, Septimus,” he said. “You’ll want to be cautious up here. It’s a long way down, you know. You don’t want to fall, do you?”

Septimus stopped at the sound of his name. “How do you know who I am?” he asked.

Marcellus Pye smiled—pleased that he remembered now. “We go back a long way, Apprentice,” he said.

Septimus wasn’t sure if he liked the sound of that, but the old man’s smile calmed him a little. He stood still for a moment and took stock. He was, as far as he could tell, in a dark cave with a very old man. It could be worse, but then again, it could be better. He could have his boots on for a start. And then

Septimus's right foot found the edge of the ledge and he realized it could be a whole *lot* better.

"How high up are we?" Septimus asked, feeling along the edge with his foot, the familiar feeling of vertigo shooting through him.

"I couldn't rightly say, Apprentice. 'Tis a long climb, *that* I know. 'Tis a long climb down too, so we'd best be going."

Septimus shook his head and pulled away. "I'm not going anywhere," he said. "Not with you."

"Well, that be true, for you won't go anywhere if you don't come with me." Marcellus chuckled. "There surely is nowhere else to go up here."

"I'm going back through the Glass. Back to Jen. I am not going with *you*." Septimus pulled away from Marcellus's grasp and threw himself against the Glass again. And again he bounced straight off and staggered back, losing his balance.

"Steady now," said Marcellus, catching him just before he reached the edge of the ledge. "You will never return through the Glass," he told Septimus. "I made the Glass. Only I have the **Keye**."

Septimus was silent. He was terribly afraid that the disgusting old man was telling the truth. He looked at his Dragon Ring, which was glowing with its usual reassuring yellow light, but it gave him little comfort.

Marcellus Pye shuffled over to the edge of the ledge and eased himself onto the top rung of the ladder. Septimus heard Marcellus moving. He held up his ring to see what the old man was doing, and Marcellus smiled at him, his three long teeth shining yellow with spittle. "Come now, Septimus. Time to see where you'll be spending your Apprenticeship. No need to look so gloomy. There were not many who got the chance to be *my* Apprentice."

"Apprentice! I will *never* be your Apprentice. I am already Apprenticed. To the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. And she'll be here soon to get me back," said Septimus, sounding more certain than he felt.

"I doubt that very much," Marcellus replied. "Now, it's time you came down."

"I'm not going anywhere," Septimus said.

“Don’t be foolish. You’ll be cold and hungry after a few days up here and you’ll be begging to come down. Either that or you’ll fall off and be smashed to pieces. Not nice, believe me. Now, come, won’t you?” Marcellus’s voice took on a wheedling tone.

“No,” said Septimus flatly. “Never.”

For the second time that morning Marcellus’s claw flashed out and grabbed hold of Septimus’s tunic and pulled him. The strength of the old man surprised Septimus and caught him off guard. He lost his balance and toppled toward the ledge. “Careful!” shouted Marcellus, suddenly afraid that his prize might be short-lived.

But Septimus had learned from his dream. In his left hand he now clutched the **Flyte Charm**. Holding it between finger and thumb, he pointed the ancient golden arrow down the chimney, and taking a deep breath, he hurled himself into the darkness.

As Marcellus Pye watched in horror as his potential Apprentice plummeted down, he saw the golden glint of something he remembered well. It was something that he himself had once possessed and indeed loved almost more than anything else in the world, apart from his dear wife, Broda. “The **Charm!**” he yelled. “You have my **Charm!**”

But Septimus was gone, deep into the depths of the Chimney.

It was not an easy **Flyte**. Although Septimus had practiced regularly with Alther, it had always been in open spaces. The cramped conditions in the Chimney were much more difficult—and frightening. But Septimus soon discovered that the secret to controlling his **Flyte** was to drop through the air as slowly as possible. Several minutes later, Septimus landed lightly at the foot of the Chimney.

Septimus took a few deep breaths and looked around. Behind him was the solid brick wall of the Chimney, but in front of him stretched what Septimus knew must be an ancient tunnel. The Castle had many layers of tunnels built at different times, but the brick-lined ones were the oldest. Septimus had a map of known tunnels on his bedroom wall, but this one was not on it. This was another one to add to the map when he got back—*if* he got back.

The flames in the lines of globes on either side of the passageway gave a dull red glow and cast flickering shadows across the walls. Septimus whistled under his breath. This must be the **Everlasting Fyre** of the Alchemists that he

had read about but had never believed was possible. One of these globes was at Septimus's feet and he could not resist having a closer look at it. He knelt and touched the globe. The thick green glass was cool, even when the flame came up to meet his hand and danced before it, like a small excitable dog wanting attention.

Septimus was shaken from his fascination by the rattle of the ladder, as far above him, Marcellus Pye heaved himself onto it and began the long climb down. With each step Marcellus took, the ladder shook.

Septimus panicked. He ran, his thick woolen socks slipping and sliding along the smooth limestone floor of the Old Way, and as he ran he scanned the featureless walls for any sign of a doorway or tunnel that might hold out some chance of escape. But there was nothing, no escape and nowhere to hide once the old man finally reached the ground—as Septimus knew he surely must soon.

The Old Way meandered along, roughly following the route of the ancient Alchemie Way far above it. Soon Septimus had rounded the first bend and was, to his great relief, out of sight of the Chimney. Breathless, Septimus slowed his pace and took more care to look around him. It was not long before he was rewarded with the welcome sight of a small archway set a few feet up the wall. Quickly Septimus scrambled up into the archway and found himself at the foot of a flight of shallow, twisting lapis lazuli steps.

Feeling hopeful at last, Septimus rushed up the steps. They twisted and turned, snaking ever upward. After some minutes Septimus slowed down to catch his breath. He listened for the sound of pursuing footsteps but, to his relief, he heard nothing. Taking the steps more slowly now, Septimus headed on, his dragon ring lighting the lapis lazuli, which stretched in front of him and behind with no end in sight. Septimus was just beginning to get the feeling that the steps went on forever when he rounded the last shallow bend and found himself face to face with another Glass. It stood dark and mysterious at the top of the steps. Septimus saw a dim reflection of himself, wide-eyed and scared, staring back. He took a deep breath and told himself to calm down.

Praying that the surface would sink beneath his fingertips as the last one had, Septimus pushed his hand against the Glass. It was as he had feared—the old man had told the truth. The Glass would not let him pass. It was as solid as a rock. Desperately, Septimus threw himself against it, pushing with all his strength. But it held firm, as unyielding as ever. Knowing that it would do no

good, but unable to stop himself, Septimus hammered on the Glass with his fists, until his hands were bruised and his arms were sore. On the other side of the Glass, Jillie Djinn looked up from her notes and smiled. It was always satisfying when one's calculations worked out. She placed her pens in a neat row, folded her papers and briskly set off for the Palace.

Septimus aimed one last, despairing kick at the Glass and stubbed his toe. Feeling horribly close to tears, he raced back down the steps. The descent was easier, and soon Septimus saw the little archway ahead and the red glow of the globes of everlasting fire beyond. He jumped down from the arch only to hear, "Well met, Apprentice." The old man's quavering voice echoed along the tunnel as he shuffled doggedly toward him. "We are nearly at our destination."

The confidence in the old man's voice told Septimus that he was already trapped, but there was one last thing Septimus could do that would keep him out of the old man's clutches for just a little longer. Septimus reached into his Apprentice belt for his **Flyte Charm**. *It wasn't there.*

Septimus raced off. "There is nowhere to run," his slow but relentless pursuer called out, and as Septimus rounded the last bend in the tunnel he knew the old man was telling the truth. He had reached the end. In front of him, the Way was barred by two tall golden doors. Two huge globes of **Everlasting Fyre**, almost as big as himself, were placed on either side of the doors. Septimus sat down between them and watched the flames dance toward him as though meeting an old friend. He could go no farther. All that was left for him was to listen to the halting footsteps, steadily shuffling closer.

"Ah, Apprentice," puffed the old man, smiling his tombstone-toothed smile. "I believe this was yours." He waved the **Flyte Charm** tantalizingly at Septimus. "One must be ever vigilant to keep the **Flyte Charm**, for it is a flighty thing and delights in eluding those who think they possess it. But now, once again, it appears to be mine."

"The **Flyte Charm** belongs to no one," said Septimus sulkily.

The old man chuckled. "A good answer, Apprentice, and a true one. I can see we will work well together. My congratulations—for you have passed your entrance examination. You have found the entrance...ha-ha. 'Tis my little joke. Ah, now where did I put my key?"

Septimus panicked and turned to run, but Marcellus's practiced hand reached out, his bony claws wrapped around Septimus's Apprentice belt and

hauled him back. Breathing laboriously with the effort, the old man pulled out his gold disc and placed it in a circular indentation in the center of the golden doors. Then he dragged Septimus away, saying, “Step back, Apprentice, this is dangerous work we do today.”

The doors slowly opened to show a deep, mirrored blackness beyond. Septimus stared before him, unable to understand what he was seeing. Suspended within the blackness, gazing out at Marcellus Pye and Septimus, stood a young man with dark curly hair wearing black and red robes embroidered with a golden circle rather like the disc that the old man held in his hand. The expression on the young man’s face was an odd mixture of shock and expectation.

With a look of infinite longing, for Marcellus knew he was face to face with something he could never be again—himself as a young man of thirty years—the old man gave Septimus a powerful shove and sent him sprawling into the icy blackness.

Silently the great doors closed behind him and Septimus was gone.

16

THE EMPTY PALACE



As *Septimus* was being pushed through the great gold doors, Gringe, the North Gate Gatekeeper, was crossing the low wooden bridge that led to the Palace.

“Mornin’, miss,” said Gringe to Hildegarde, the sub-Wizard on duty at the door that morning.

“Good morning, Mr. Gringe,” Hildegarde replied.

“Say, you know my name!” exclaimed Gringe.

“Well, of course I do, Mr. Gringe. Everyone knows the North Gate Gatekeeper. Can I help you with anything?”

“Well, see...it’s a delicate matter and I can’t be long, seein’ as I left Mrs.

Gringe on the Gate and she's in a bit of a state and she don't like countin' the money at the best of times so I got to get back sharpish and, well..."

"So what can I do for you?" asked Hildegarde.

"Oh. Yes, well, I've come to see Silas Heap. If you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind at all, Mr. Gringe. If you'd like to take a seat over there I'll send a messenger to find him." Hildegarde went over to the Long Walk and rang a small silver handbell that sat on an ancient ebony chest. The tinkling sound echoed down the empty corridor.

Gringe felt a little overawed by the Palace; he could not quite believe that Silas Heap actually lived there. He eyed the line of fragile-looking gold chairs with little red velvet seats that Hildegarde had waved him over to and decided they looked troublesome, so he scuttled off to the darkest corner of the hall, where he had spied a comfortable-looking armchair. The armchair was almost hidden in the shadows and sitting on it, unseen by Gringe, was the Ancient ghost of Godric, ex-doorkeeper, slumbering peacefully.

"No!" Hildegarde's voice rang out sharply. "Not that seat, Mr. Gringe!"

Gringe, who had been about to sit down, jumped up as though something had bitten him.

"There's someone sitting on that one," explained Hildegarde.

Gringe, who had never seen a ghost in his entire life and had no intention of starting now, shook his head sadly. It was true what they said; they were all bonkers up at the Palace. That was, of course, why it suited Silas Heap so well.

Gringe was relieved when Silas arrived with Maxie trailing behind him. Silas was a little flustered; he had been glad of an excuse to get away. He had left Marcia searching the Palace for Septimus, who appeared to have skipped an exam, much to Silas's admiration. At last his son was settling down and acting like a normal boy.

Gringe jumped up like a terrier after a rabbit. "Where is he?" he demanded.

"Not you as well," said Silas. "I've just told Marcia, *I don't know*. Anyway, it's perfectly normal. Personally, I don't blame the boy for missing

the odd exam.”

“What exam?” asked Gringe, taken aback.

“Well, it’s not one I remember doing, that’s for sure. Can’t be that important. Anyway, what do *you* want him for? Has he been playing chicken on the drawbridge? That’s boys for you.” Silas chuckled indulgently, remembering the times when he and a gang of friends would run up the drawbridge as it was being raised and see who could jump at the very last moment and not fall in the Moat.

“Chickens?” asked Gringe, who was getting the usual disconnected feeling of living on a different planet from Silas Heap. “As Simon been pestering chickens now? Not that I’m surprised, mind. He’ll cause trouble wherever he goes, that boy will.”

Now it was Silas’s turn to be taken aback. “Simon?” he asked. “*Chickens?*”

Gringe was not to be put off. “Look ’ere, Heap. I just want to know where your Simon is.”

“Well, wouldn’t we all?” snapped Silas.

“Yeah. My Rupert would be after him, that’s for sure. He’s very attached to ’is little sister, is Rupert, and now she’s run off again with that good-for-nothin’—”

“Run off with Simon?” asked Silas, who was beginning to share Gringe’s opinion of his eldest son as a good-for-nothing. “How?”

“I dunno *how*. If I knew *how* I would’ve stopped her.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Gringe,” said Silas, who was tired of being blamed for Simon’s misdeeds, “but I don’t know where Simon is. And I’m sorry that your Lucy is still mixed up with him. She’s a nice girl.”

“Yeah, she is,” said Gringe, the wind taken out of his sails. Gringe and Silas stood awkwardly in the Palace Hall for a moment. Then Gringe said, “Well, I’ll be gettin’ along then. Make sure you keep an eye on your Jenna, if that Simon’s around.”

“Jenna...” said Silas. “That’s funny, I haven’t seen her this morning...”

“No? Well, I’d go look for ’er if I was you. I’ll be off then. See you later for a game, if you like. I can lend you a set of Counters.”

“I have my own set now, Gringe. No thanks to you,” said Silas, sniffing. And then, remembering Sarah’s instructions, he said, “Look, why don’t you come up here? Make a change.”

“Me? Up at the Palace twice in one day? Well, well.” Gringe chuckled. “Thank you, Silas.”

Silas walked Gringe to the Palace door. “See you later then,” said Gringe. And then after a moment’s thought: “We don’t have no chickens on the drawbridge. Not even *one*.”

“No. Of course you don’t,” said Silas, soothingly. He waved Gringe goodbye; then he and Maxie set off in search of Jenna.

Silas had as little luck finding Jenna as Marcia was having. Marcia strode down the Long Walk with Alther in tow. She threw open each door in turn, yelling, “Septimus? *Jenna!*” and then slammed the door with a crash, until Alther felt he could stand it no longer.

“There’s something going on here, Marcia,” he told her.

“Too right, Alther. Septimus? Jenna?” *Crash!*

“It’s odd that Jenna is not around either.”

“Quite. *Very* odd. Septimus? Jenna?” *Crash!*

“Well, Marcia, I’ll be off for a while. There’s someone I want to talk to about it.”

“Talking is not going to do any good, Alther. I had enough talking this morning from that wretched Hermetic Scribe to last me a lifetime—and it’s all a load of rubbish. I have to find Septimus *now*. Septimus? Jenna?” *Crash!*

Alther left Marcia to her doors and flew off along the Long Walk. When he got to the end, he floated through to the turret on the east end of the Palace; then he wound himself around the spiral stairs and stood for a quiet moment on the top-floor landing, gathering his thoughts. Alther looked a little nervous. He brushed down his robe, which of course made no difference to its

appearance at all, and tugged at his beard. Then he took a deep breath and, in an unusually respectful manner for Alther, he walked slowly through the wall into the Queen's Room.

The Queen jumped up.

"Please excuse me, Your Majesty," said Alther, rather formally, bowing his head slightly.

"I might do, Alther, I suppose," replied the Queen with a half smile. "If you tell me what it is that brings you here. And for goodness' sake don't call me Your Majesty. Just Cerys will do. I am only a Spirit like yourself. No more majesty for me, Alther." She sighed.

"I am wondering if you have seen your daughter this morning, Cerys?" asked Alther.

The Queen smiled fondly. "Yes, I have indeed," she replied.

"Ah. So she went to Zelda's, did she?"

"So you know about the Queen's Way too, Alther? It is no longer the secret it was."

"Your secret is safe with me. Did Jenna take the young ExtraOrdinary Apprentice with her by any chance?"

"He was with her. A nice-looking boy. How much you know, as ever. I always was in awe of you. You seemed to understand...well, everything."

"So she *did* take Septimus with her? Well, that explains it. Thank you, Cerys. I shall go tell Marcia to stop driving everyone mad."

"Dear, dear Marcia," mused the Queen. "She saved my Jenna, you know."

"I know," said Alther. They were both silent for a moment, remembering the day when they both entered ghosthood, until Alther shook himself out of his reverie. "I'll be off then. Thank you."

Alther turned to go and then said, "You know, Cerys, you should get out more. It's not good for you being stuck in this turret all the time. And you could think about **Appearing** to young Jenna. I know it's a big decision but..."

“I shall **Appear** when the Time is Right, Alther,” the Queen said, a little severely. “It is important for a Princess to discover things for herself and to prove herself worthy of becoming Queen—just as I had to. Meanwhile, I stay here to guard the Queen’s Way from harm, as my mother did for me. And as Jenna will do for her own daughter.”

“Goodness, Cerys. That’s a little way off, I hope.”

“I hope so too. But one must be eternally vigilant. Good-bye. Until we meet again...” The Queen drifted back to her chair by the ever-burning fire, and Alther knew that the audience was over. He floated through the wall with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction—but it was only later that Alther realized that the Queen had not given a straight answer to any of his questions.

Alther went to find Marcia to tell her to stop slamming doors because Jenna had taken Septimus to see Aunt Zelda. He found her arguing with Sir Hereward outside Jenna’s room.

“If you don’t stand aside, Sir Hereward,” Marcia was telling the ghost angrily, “I shall be forced to **Pass Through**, make no mistake about it.”

The old knight shook his head regretfully. “I do apologize, Your ExtraOrdinariness, but the Princess specifically instructed me not to let anyone into her room. Which, unfortunately, includes yourself. I only wish it were otherwise, but...”

“Oh, do stop dithering, Sir Hereward. I need to speak to her urgently. Now stand aside!”

“Oof!” Sir Hereward gasped as the sharp point of Marcia’s purple python shoe poked through his armor-plated instep.

“Marcia!” said Alther sharply. “Marcia, there is no need for that. No need at all. Sir H does a very good job. Jenna is not in her room, she has taken Septimus to see Aunt Zelda.”

“*What?*” Marcia stopped, her foot still firmly placed in Sir Hereward’s. The knight pulled his foot away; then he drew his sword, placed it across the door and gave Marcia a withering look.

Marcia stepped back from the ghost. “But—but why on earth has she

taken Septimus to see Aunt Zelda? Alther, this is terrible. Septimus must not leave my side today, he is in grave danger. And as for Jenna, you know as well as I do that she should stay in the Castle. Anything could happen to them traveling all that way across the Marshes. What *are* they thinking of?”

Alther glanced at Sir Hereward, unsure if he should say anything in the presence of the old knight, but the ghost was diplomatically staring at his feet. Sir Hereward knew when to blend into the background. All the same, Alther took Marcia by the elbow and led her away from the old ghost. As they walked up the corridor, Alther noticed to his dismay that Marcia was trembling.

As soon as he was sure they were out of earshot, Alther said, “Um, they haven’t gone across the Marshes, Marcia. There is another Way.” Alther felt awkward. The Queen’s Way was a secret kept by the Queens and their descendants. Many years ago, when he himself was ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Alther had stumbled across the Queen’s Way at Keeper’s Cottage when he had been looking for Aunt Zelda’s predecessor, Betty Crackle. Betty had left the Way open, and Alther had, to his shock, found himself in the Queen’s Room in the company of Queen Matilda, Cerys’s fearsome grandmother. He had soon made his way back to Keeper’s Cottage, but not before Queen Matilda had extracted a terrible promise from him never to divulge the secret of the Way.

“Well, going through the Port is no better, Alther.”

“It’s not through the Port, Marcia. It is much quicker—and safer—than that.”

Marcia knew her old tutor well enough to tell when he was keeping something from her. “You know something, don’t you?” she asked. “You know something and you’re not telling.”

Alther nodded. “I am sorry, Marcia, I swore I would never tell. It is a secret of the Queens.”

“It’s obviously not a secret from Septimus,” Marcia said.

“No. Well, Septimus seems to be different,” said Alther.

“That’s the trouble, Alther,” replied Marcia, her voice rising in what sounded to Alther suspiciously like a panic. “He *is* different. He’s different enough to have written me a note *five hundred years ago*.”

17

PALACE GHOSTS



With great relief, Sir Hereward had watched Marcia and Alther set off down the wide corridor, take a right turn at the end and disappear from sight.

Behind the doors of Jenna's bedroom, another, altogether more unpleasant ghost took her ear from the door, a smile playing across her thin lips. So the troublesome young Princess had run off to the Marram Marshes with the Apprentice, had she? And not done what she had promised by the sound of it. She would pay for this, and the Apprentice need not think he had gotten away with anything either.

Quickly the ghost of Queen Etheldredda crossed the floor to a small roughly made box where Jenna kept all her treasures. The ghost perused the box and then **Caused** the lid to silently open. Poking a long and bony finger through Jenna's possessions, Etheldredda found what she was looking for and

then did something that no ghost should be able to do—she picked up the object, a small silver ball inscribed with the letters *I.P.*—and placed it in her pocket. Then, with a knowing smile, the ghost of Queen Etheldredda walked through the door and **Passed Through** the much put-upon Sir Hereward.

The ghost of Queen Cerys gave every appearance of dozing in her fireside chair, so when the ghost of Queen Etheldredda sidled in and headed straight for the potion cupboard, she was most surprised to suddenly find her way barred by a very determined descendant.

“You may *not* pass,” Cerys told Etheldredda coldly.

“Don’t be ridiculous, child. I have every right to walk the Queen’s Way. And I intend to do so. Stand aside.”

“I will not.”

“You will!” The angry Etheldredda pushed her way through. Cerys, who gasped—not only from the shock of being **Passed Through**, but also from the surprisingly solid feeling of Etheldredda—recovered just in time to **Cause** the potion cupboard door to jam shut.

“Two may play at that game,” snapped Etheldredda, **Causing** the door to reopen.

“But only one may win,” replied Cerys, **Causing** the door to close.

“Indeed, child. I am glad you see sense.” Etheldredda **Caused** the door to open.

“I intend to protect my daughter. You shall not stop me,” Cerys declared angrily, and **Caused** the door again to slam shut. Then, before Etheldredda could retaliate, Cerys began to spin. Faster and faster she turned, like a whirlwind, revolving the air in the turret with her until, despite herself, Etheldredda was caught up in the currents and whirled around the small circular room like an autumn leaf caught up in a windy corner.

“Go!” yelled Cerys. With that, Queen Etheldredda was hurled from the room, out of the turret and across the lawns toward the river, where she landed in the middle of one of Billy Pot’s careful arrangements of dragon droppings. Angrily, she picked herself out of the mess and haughtily floated

toward the riverbank, where the ghostly Royal Barge awaited her.

Head held high and without a backward glance, Queen Etheldredda walked up the gangplank. As she took her place upon the dais, the ghostly barge began to move. Silently it glided away from the Palace gardens and headed for the middle of the river, where it drifted downstream, **Passing Through** a blockade of boats, which for some reason seemed to be on fire. Queen Etheldredda tutted to herself at the lawlessness of the Castle and comforted herself that it would not be so for much longer. She would see to that.

With a satisfied smile, Queen Etheldredda sat back to enjoy the journey. There was, thought the ghost, more than one way of getting to Keeper's Cottage.

As Queen Etheldredda was being hurled from the turret, Alther was leading Marcia down one of the many flights of back stairs that led to the Long Walk. "What exactly do you mean, Marcia—he wrote you a note nearly five hundred years ago?"

"This morning, Alther...I opened the **Sealed** shelf."

"You did *what*?"

"You know, you showed me once how to do it. There was something there I had to see."

"Not the *I, Marcellus*?" Alther had become increasingly pale over the previous half hour. Now he went almost translucent.

Marcia nodded.

"You opened the *I, Marcellus*? But it's been **Sealed** since before the Tunnels were **Frozen**."

"I know, I *know*, but it was a risk I had to take. I saw...I saw something in Jillie Djinn's calculations for Septimus's Prediction Practical."

"Huh. That woman's always calculating something," said Alther. "I caught her working out the percentage of wear on her new shoes yesterday. Wanted to know exactly how long they were going to last."

“That does not surprise me, Alther. Personally, she drives me nuts. I’m meant to be at the Manuscriptorium now listening to more of her tedious theories. Oh, what a *mess*.”

“Marcia,” said Alther, “what exactly did you find in the *I, Marcellus*?”

“I found...” Marcia started, and then ground to a halt as her voice choked up. “Oh, it was *awful*.”

“What did you find?” asked Alther gently.

“I found a note from Septimus. It was addressed to me.”

“Marcia, are you *sure*?”

“Yes. You know how Septimus always signs his name with that complicated squiggle at the end—I think it’s meant to be a number seven?”

“Yes,” said Alther. “It’s terribly affected, but the young do have the most peculiar signatures nowadays. I just hope he settles on something more down-to-earth when he gets a bit older.”

“He can have the weirdest signature he wants, Alther. He can sign his name in strawberry jam standing on his head if he wants to—I really don’t mind. But I doubt we’ll ever see him get older...not in this Time anyway.”

Alther was silent. He was stunned, for he knew that Marcia was not one to exaggerate. Marcia was silent too, because she had just realized that what she had said was probably true.

“What did the note say?” asked Alther quietly. They had reached the foot of the stairs and stopped in the curtained darkness of the doorway. A brief squall of chill rain battered a skylight high above them, and Marcia shivered as she brought out a scrap of very fragile old paper. Carefully, for the paper was threatening to disintegrate into a pile of dust, Marcia unfolded the note, and squinting in the dim light, she read aloud the words that Septimus had written all those years ago.

Dear Marcia,

I know that one day you will find this note because when I don’t come back I know you will look everywhere in the Library and through all the Alchemie things that are there. I’ve never seen

*Marcellus's book in the Library but I bet you know where it is. It is probably in that **Sealed** shelf. I hope you find it soon after I have gone so that you do not worry about me too much and you can tell everyone where I am. I am going to put it in the Almanac section of Marcellus's book. He is writing it for our Time—I mean, your Time. It is not my Time anymore. I will put it in the day that I went so you will know where to look for it. I hope the paper beetles don't eat it.*

I want to say thank you as I really liked being your Apprentice and I wish I still was, but I am Apprenticed to Marcellus Pye now. You must not worry as it is not so bad, but I miss you all and if you can by any chance come get me (but I don't know how you can), I would be SO happy.

I have to go now, Marcellus is coming.

I came here through a Glass. Jenna will tell you.

*Love,
Septimus xxx*

“Oh,” whispered Alther.

THE DRAGON KENNEL



J*enna and Wolf Boy* were outside Spit Fyre's kennel. Although the kennel was only a couple of months old, the door had already acquired a battered look and was showing some serious splits that had been repaired by metal ties.

"You take one side of the bar and I'll take the other," Jenna told Wolf Boy. "They're really heavy. Sep...well, Sep always gets someone to help him. Usually me." The door was barred with three broad iron bars, and it was the top one of these that Jenna and Wolf Boy were about to lift off.

Septimus had not liked keeping Spit Fyre locked up at night, but he had been forced to give in after a deputation of Wizards had refused to leave Marcia's rooms until something was done. Up until then, Spit Fyre had been allowed the run of the Wizard Tower courtyard, but the combination of a free-range young dragon and two-foot-high piles of dragon droppings had led to

trouble. Soon there was scarcely a Wizard who, late at night, had not inadvertently walked into one of these piles and lost a boot or, even worse, fallen in headfirst and had to be pulled out. Spit Fyre had also developed a taste for the blue woolen cloaks worn by the Ordinary Wizards, and the dragon enjoyed nothing more than a quick chase around the courtyard in pursuit of a tasty-looking cloak to work up an appetite.

The kennel was reverberating to the sound of the young dragon's snores, for Spit Fyre, who had reached the dragon equivalent of a teenager, had recently begun to sleep late in the mornings. But as Wolf Boy and Jenna lifted the bar and placed it carefully on the ground, Spit Fyre woke up. With a great crash, his tail smashed against the rafters of the roof, and a loud crack of splintering wood resounded through the air. Wolf Boy jumped back in shock, but Jenna, who had heard worse noises by far coming from Spit Fyre's kennel, stood her ground.

"Sorry, Jenna," said Wolf Boy, a little shamefaced. "Wasn't expecting that. Here, I can do the other two." To Jenna's surprise, Wolf Boy heaved off the badly bent middle bar and the lowest bar all by himself and dropped them onto the ground with a clang. Inside the kennel came an answering smash as Spit Fyre thumped his tail with excitement at the prospect of being let out.

Now all Jenna had to do was unlock the kennel door. She fetched the large key that hung on a hook and placed it in the big brass keyhole. "The door opens outward," she told Wolf Boy. "So you have to be careful it doesn't smash into you when Spit Fyre comes out. And keep your feet out of the way too, as he likes to tread on your toes. Sep always said—says—he does it by accident, but I reckon Spit Fyre does it on purpose. He thinks it's a game, he likes the way people hop around yelling and holding their feet." Jenna turned the key, the door crashed open and Spit Fyre hurtled forward, neck outstretched to catch the cool morning air, claws clattering down the ramp. At the foot of the ramp the young dragon stopped and looked around as if puzzled. He tilted his head to one side and then, seeming a little dejected, he sat down unusually quietly.

Spit Fyre was growing into a handsome young dragon. Although he was still only about fifteen feet long—half his eventual adult size—he already looked large and powerful. His brilliant green scales shone in the early-morning drizzle and rippled across his huge shoulder muscles as he shifted position slightly. His leathery greenish-brown wings were neatly folded on either side of the row of thick black spines that ran along his backbone, from just behind his ears to the very tip of his tail. Spit Fyre's emerald-green eyes

flashed and his wide nostrils flared as he sniffed the air, searching for the scent of Septimus Heap, his **Imprintor**.

Keeping a tight hold on Septimus's boots, Jenna approached Spit Fyre with some caution, careful not to make any sudden movements, for he could be unpredictable in the mornings. But the dragon did not react as Jenna walked slowly up to him and laid her hand on the cool scales of his neck. "Septimus is not here, Spit Fyre," she said gently. "I'm here in his place."

Spit Fyre regarded Jenna suspiciously and sniffed the boots. Then he snorted and blew out a large greenish-gray blob of dragon snot, which shot straight across the courtyard and landed with a resounding *splat* on one of the second-floor windows of the Wizard Tower. A moment later the window was thrown open and an angry Wizard poked her head out. "Hey!" she yelled. "Can't you keep that beast under control? It took me three days to scrape the last stuff off," and then, seeing that it was Jenna rather than Septimus with the dragon, "Oh. Oh, dear. Sorry, Your Majesty," and slammed the window closed.

"Don't call me that," Jenna muttered, and then, seeing Wolf Boy's quizzical look, she said, "I'm *not* Queen. They shouldn't call me that. And I don't ever want to be Queen either." Wolf Boy looked surprised but he said nothing, which is generally what Wolf Boy did when things became a little tricky.

"I've got to do the **Locum Tenens** now, 409," said Jenna, looking a little anxious. "I hope it works."

"Course it'll work," said Wolf Boy, who was of the opinion that Jenna could do anything that she wanted to. He watched Jenna take Beetle's scruffy card of instructions from her tunic pocket and read them slowly, then open an old toffee tin, draw out a fragile sheet of blue dragon skin, and carefully unfold it. Jenna sat down quietly beside Septimus's boots and Wolf Boy saw her lips move as she read the words on the dragon skin over and over, painstakingly memorizing them. He was surprised at how long it took—almost as long as he had taken to read one of Aunt Zelda's potion recipes. Wolf Boy knew there wasn't much he could do to help Jenna with the **Locum Tenens**, but he thought he could try out the skills he had learned when he had lived with the wolverines in the Forest.

And so Wolf Boy sat down about ten feet in front of Spit Fyre and very deliberately fixed his gaze on the dragon, willing him to stay calm and quiet. Spit Fyre caught Wolf Boy's glance and quickly looked away, but it was

enough. The dragon knew he was being **Watched**. He shifted about uncomfortably, but he did not move away. Spit Fyre sat unusually still in the soft drizzle, hoping that soon his **Imprintor** would appear and put an end to the unnerving two-legged wolverine who would not stop staring at him.

At last Jenna was sure that she could remember the **Locum Tenens**. She picked up Septimus's boots and laid them at Spit Fyre's feet. Still quiet, Spit Fyre sniffed the boots. Then he reared up his head and blew out a long, hot breath. Wolf Boy felt sick. He was not used to the smell of dragon breath, which is best described as a combination of the stench of burning rubber and the stink of old socks, with overtones of a hamster cage in dire need of a cleaning.

Jenna stood on tiptoe and rested her hand on Spit Fyre's nose. "Look at me, Spit Fyre," she said. Spit Fyre looked at his feet, he looked at the sky, he looked at his claws and then, twisting his head back, he suddenly found the tip of his tail extremely interesting. "Spit Fyre," said Jenna, insistent, "look at me—*please*."

Something in Jenna's voice caught Spit Fyre's attention. He put his head to one side and looked at her. Jenna kept her hand firmly on the dragon's wet and sticky nose. Her hand was trembling. This was her only chance of finding Septimus and it all depended on Spit Fyre, who was not the most dependable of creatures. Spit Fyre regarded Jenna warily. Did she have his breakfast with her? he wondered.

Jenna held Spit Fyre's gaze. Then she took a deep breath and slowly began. "Spit Fyre, look at me and I will tell you the five things you must understand. First: Spit Fyre, in good faith I tell you that your **Imprintor** is lost." Spit Fyre cocked his head and hoped it wasn't porridge for breakfast again.

"Second: Spit Fyre, in good faith I bring you that which belongs to your **Imprintor**." Spit Fyre closed his eyes and decided a couple of chickens would be very tasty.

"Open your eyes, Spit Fyre," said Jenna sternly. Spit Fyre opened his eyes. What was all the fuss about?

"Third: Spit Fyre, in good faith I tell you that I am your Navigator." Spit Fyre thought that he wouldn't mind chickens *and* porridge that morning. Preferably all mixed together in a big bucket.

“Fourth: Spit Fyre, in good faith I ask you to accept me as your **Locum Imrintor**.” Spit Fyre wondered if they might give him three chickens with his porridge, since breakfast was late.

“Fifth: Spit Fyre, in good faith I beseech you to find your true **Imrintor**, through fire and water, earth and air, wherever he may be.” Jenna held Spit Fyre’s gaze for the required thirteen seconds and then looked away. Spit Fyre wondered if he had to find Septimus before or after breakfast. He hoped it was after. Then he picked up Septimus’s boots—and ate them.

“Spit Fyre!” yelled Jenna. “*Give them back!*” She grabbed at a fast-disappearing bootlace and pulled. Spit Fyre pulled his head back. He liked tug-of-war games and this seemed like a good one. He had always thought that Septimus’s boots looked tasty. Jenna tugged hard, there was a *snap* and she was left holding nothing more than the damp, frayed end of a bootlace. Spit Fyre swallowed, gave a satisfied burp and then jumped in surprise.

A deafening clanging and banging had just started up outside the Great Arch, along with some loud and threatening whoops and screams. Wolf Boy leaped to his feet in consternation. He did not like sudden loud noises—they reminded him too much of the Young Army’s midnight wake-up call.

“It’s the RatStranglers,” said Jenna. “They must have found a rat. Poor creature. Doesn’t stand a chance now. You’d think people would have something better to do than run around the Castle all day banging trash can lids and killing rats.”

The noise became louder as the RatStranglers started up their chant. “Rats, rats, *get* the rats. Rats, rats, *kill* the rats! Rat trap, rat trap, splat, splat, *splat!*” It echoed around the Wizard Tower courtyard, and numerous Wizards threw open their windows to see what the noise was. Then, with a roar, the assorted mob of RatStranglers surged through the Great Arch in pursuit of their quarry: two desperate rats in full flight, one dragging the other behind it.

Why the rats headed for the dragon kennel. Jenna did not know, but they scooted across the courtyard, ignoring the relative safety of the well and two convenient drains. They dived between Spit Fyre’s feet, shot up the ramp of the kennel and hurled themselves deep into the pungent straw covering the kennel floor.

In a moment the RatStranglers had surrounded the kennel, banging their lids and chanting. Spit Fyre snorted in dismay. No dragon likes to be surrounded, especially by a raucous mob banging lids and screaming.

Dragons generally have a surprisingly subtle ear for music and enjoy the finer kinds of classical music and plainsong; indeed, many an isolated monastery has been surprised to find a dragon regularly turning up to listen to the evening's Gregorian chant. Spit Fyre was no exception. The banging made his delicate dragon ears hurt and the chanting was not even in tune. With a roar he rounded on the RatStranglers, breathing hot dragon breath over them.

Most people would have given up at this point, and some of the hangers-on who had just come along for a laugh and a bit of fun took off, but the bulk of the RatStranglers stayed. They had never yet lost a rat and they did not intend to start now.

Jenna was furious. "How dare you?" she yelled. "How dare you come in here chasing two poor rats and frightening a young dragon. How *dare* you?" The noise subsided as the RatStranglers, who in their excitement had not noticed the Princess, put down their lids. The chant petered out into an embarrassed silence.

The leader of the RatStranglers, an earnest-looking young man sporting a badge showing a fearsome rat with huge yellow fangs dripping with blood, stepped forward. "We are doing our civic duty, Your Princessness. Rats are filthy vermin, they spread disease—"

At this Jenna laughed. "That's ridiculous. They're as clean as you or I. And it's humans that spread disease, not *rats*."

"We beg to differ, Princess," said the young man. "The Sickenesse that has come to the Castle has been brought by the rats. They must be destroyed."

"That's crazy," said Jenna, shaking her head in disbelief. "You're just chasing rats because you like killing defenseless animals. It's horrible."

"*You* should be grateful to us," a thin, reedy voice piped up from the back of the crowd.

"Why?" asked Jenna, catching the threat in the voice.

"Because some people say that *you* have brought the Sickenesse, Princess."

"*Me*?" Jenna was incredulous.

"They say it came on your Dragon Boat. They say it's a pity that that

mutant ship wasn't left on the bottom of the Moat where it belongs." This was accompanied by a general muttering of agreement from the back of the throng, but no one near Jenna dared say anything.

Jenna was shocked into silence and the RatStranglers took her silence for permission to invade Spit Fyre's kennel. They swarmed up the ramp, and in no time at all they were raking through the straw, searching for the rats. Jenna and Wolf Boy were overwhelmed by sheer numbers and there was nothing they could do—but Spit Fyre decided otherwise. As the RatStranglers crowded past him, he swung his tail angrily and sent the owner of the reedy voice flying into a pile of dragon droppings at the back of the kennel. Then with a loud creaking as the tough dragon skin stretched out from its creases—accompanied by the smell of stale dragon sweat—Spit Fyre unfurled his wings and raised them high into the air, casting a shadow across the dragon kennel. The RatStranglers stopped their hunt and watched in amazement as Spit Fyre bowed his head toward Jenna, as if inviting her to sit where Septimus always sat—just behind his neck between his shoulders.

Afraid that Spit Fyre might change his mind any minute, Jenna scrambled up into Septimus's place and hauled Wolf Boy up behind her, into the Navigator's position where she usually sat. Then, remembering the instructions that Alther had given Septimus on Spit Fyre's **FirstFlyte**, she gave the dragon two kicks on the right side. They worked; Spit Fyre beat his wings slowly, once, twice, and on the third stroke, Jenna felt the dragon's muscles tense as he rose just a few inches off the ground, keeping himself steady and controlled in the close confines of the Wizard Tower courtyard. Then, as Spit Fyre hovered for a brief moment and prepared to accelerate, a yell came from one of the RatStranglers: "There they are! Catch 'em!"

As Spit Fyre left the ground, he was carrying more passengers than he had bargained for. Hanging from the barb on the tip of his tail were two terrified rats.

19

THE RATSTRANGLERS



The two rats' teeth chattered with fear as Spit Fyre rose from the Wizard Tower courtyard to a chorus of jeers and boos from the RatStranglers below. Jenna was concentrating too hard on remembering all she knew about dragon flight to pay much attention, but one shrill voice rose above the clamor.

“She’s in league with them. Didn’t I tell you? It’s her and that boat she brought here. Come on, boys.” Although the voice belonged to a tall, spiky-looking woman, the RatStranglers were mostly men and boys. “Come on, let’s go sink it once and for all.” There was an answering howl from the rest of the RatStranglers.

Spit Fyre flew higher, and Jenna and Wolf Boy saw the mob surge through the Great Arch and head off along the narrow lane that led to the boatyard. Underneath the dragon, the rats swayed perilously.

“Dawnie,” gasped the larger rat that was hanging on to Spit Fyre’s tail,

while the shorter, more rotund rat clutched on to his ankles. “Dawnie, your claws are *killing* me. Do you have to hold on quite so tight?”

“Do you think I am doing this for the fun of it, Stanley? What do you suggest I do? Let go and get killed by those fiends down there? Is that what you want?”

“Ouch. No. Don’t be silly, dear. I just wondered if you could loosen your grip a little. I can’t feel my feet.”

Spit Fyre swooped down low over the mob members, one of whom let fly a well-aimed trash can lid. It skimmed toward the rats, spinning in the air like a flying circular saw. Stanley shut his eyes. This was it, he thought. What a way to go, seen off by a flying trash can lid.

But Spit Fyre had seen the missile hurtling toward them, and the last few weeks of avoidance training with Septimus, which he had hated, as it had involved Beetle throwing all manner of things at him, paid off. Like a true professional, Spit Fyre dodged the lid and for good measure gave it a hefty swipe with his tail.

“Aargh, Stanley! We’re going to dieeeeeee...” Dawnie screamed. Wolf Boy, who was feeling quite sick, felt some sympathy for Dawnie.

Jenna took Spit Fyre at full speed to the boatyard. They flew over the RatStranglers and Jenna reckoned they had about five minutes before the mob arrived at the boatyard. Five minutes in which Jenna had to land Spit Fyre, get over to the Dragon House and somehow make it secure.

Jannit Maarten was not at all pleased when she saw Spit Fyre heading toward her boatyard. The last time the dragon had turned up had been a complete disaster, brought about by the Heaps, as usual. And now here it was again, no doubt with one of the Heap clan on board. As Spit Fyre flew low into the boatyard Jannit tried to direct the dragon to an empty space recently occupied by the Port barge that Jannit and Rupert Gringe had just launched. Spit Fyre ignored Jannit. He didn’t like people waving their arms at him and shouting, “Over here, over *here*! Oh, gunwales and gimlets, what is the idiot creature doing?”

Spit Fyre flew right over Jannit’s head, missing her by a hairbreadth, and landed on the pilothouse of an old trawler, which was in a rather delicate state. The pilothouse could just about withstand the odd seagull landing on it, but it had no chance against a dragon whose total weight in seagulls was

exactly 764. With a loud crack, the pilothouse collapsed, and Spit Fyre and his passengers found themselves in a pool of stagnant water in the trawler's hull.

"Up, Spit Fyre, up!" yelled Jenna, giving Spit Fyre a hefty kick on the right. With some difficulty, accompanied by a lot of squeaking from the end of his tail, Spit Fyre flapped and clawed his way out of the hull in a rather undignified fashion and landed beside the trawler.

"Look what you've done!" protested Jannit, arriving breathless beside the wreckage. "We could have repaired that. Rupert was going to make a start on it tomorrow. *Now* look at it."

"I'm sorry, Jannit," Jenna apologized as she slipped down from Spit Fyre's neck. "I really am. But the RatStranglers are on their way to smash up the Dragon Boat."

"Whatever for? She's not a rat."

"I know," said Jenna rather curtly. Leaving Wolf Boy to keep hold of Spit Fyre, Jenna ran off toward the Dragon House.

Jannit set off in pursuit. "Jenna!" she called out to her. "*Jenna!*" But Jenna did not stop. Jannit was annoyed; she didn't like the sound of this. It was true that she had not been exactly thrilled when the half boat, half dragon had turned up unannounced in the middle of the night a few months back. But now that the Dragon Boat was in her boatyard, Jannit considered it to be her responsibility, and no one messed around with Jannit Maarten's boats, especially not a bunch of thugs calling themselves RatStranglers. Jannit liked rats.

"Rupert," said Jannit, waylaying Rupert Gringe, who was busy sawing wood, "take as many yard hands with you as you can find and close the tunnel gates. Put the bar across. Quick!" Rupert Gringe dropped what he was doing and went to do Jannit's bidding at once. He knew when Jannit meant business.

The Dragon Boat lay at the end of the Cut, until recently a dead-end piece of water that lay to the side of the boatyard, which had ended at the blank cliff face of the Castle wall. Ever since Jannit had had the boatyard she had wondered what the point of the Cut was. Three months ago she had found out. She had woken in the middle of the night to find that a huge cavern had opened up deep into the wall at the end of the Cut. Not just any old cavern either, but a towering lapis lazuli hall, covered in golden hieroglyphs. Jannit

did not go in for opulence and thought the whole thing was a bit of an embarrassment, but she could not help being impressed all the same. She doubted that any other boatyard in the world had such a place—or such a boat—and that made her proud.

What dismayed Jannit was that although she, Rupert Gringe and Nicko had repaired the Dragon Boat beautifully—so that you would never know the dragon had been hit by two **ThunderFlashes** and had sunk to the bottom of the Moat—the creature itself was still unconscious. The dragon lay with her head resting on the cool marble walkway on the side of the Dragon House, her great green eyes closed, her breathing quiet and slow. Her tail had been carefully placed on a marble ledge at the back of the Dragon House, neatly coiled by Jannit and Nicko, like a huge piece of green rope, and it had not moved since.

A great clang reverberated through the yard as Rupert put the bar in place across the doors to the tunnel. A moment later an even louder clanging and banging started up. The RatStranglers had arrived just in time to see the doors closed against them.

“I’m not having that unruly mob in here wrecking my boats.” said Jannit, catching up with Jenna. They squeezed around a large stack of planks piled up against the great Castle wall, then they ran along a narrow path between two tall-masted boats in need of new rigging and quickly reached the entrance of the Dragon House. With angry shouts and the sound of battering on the boatyard doors echoing across the yard, Jenna and Jannit entered the quiet shadows of the Dragon House.

The Dragon Boat lay still, with her great head resting on Jannit’s one and only Persian rug, now somewhat charred, which was laid on the marble walkway along the side. Jenna knelt down and placed her hand on the creature’s head, but the dragon, as ever, did not move. Her smooth scales felt cool to the touch and the emerald eyes under her thick dark green eyelids did not flutter as Jenna gently stroked them.

Jannit stood back and watched Jenna. Even at a time like this, Jannit did not like to interrupt whatever was going on between Jenna and the Dragon Boat. She was used to Jenna’s moments with the dragon, but usually she kept well out of the way, for she felt as if she would be intruding if she came too near. Jannit had noticed that the boatyard often fell silent when Jenna put her hand on the dragon, but not today. The sounds of the RatStranglers systematically ramming the boatyard door filled the air. Jannit wondered what

Jenna thought she was doing, wasting time stroking the dragon when they ought to be setting up some kind of barricade in front of the Dragon House. But she did not say so, for Jannit had, over the last few months, become a little in awe of Jenna and her determination to wake the Dragon Boat.

Suddenly Jenna sprang to her feet. “I think I heard her,” she said, her eyes bright with excitement.

“What?” asked Jannit, distracted by some inventive insults that Rupert Gringe was hurling at the RatStranglers.

“The *dragon*. She was very faint, but I’m sure I did. We have to **Seal** the Dragon House.”

“How, exactly?” snapped Jannit, worried now, realizing that the mob was not going to go away and was unlikely to stop at smashing up just the Dragon Boat.

“The way it was opened. With **Fyre**—Dragon **Fyre**.” And then Jenna’s face fell as she remembered. “Oh,” she said. “Spit Fyre can’t do **Fyre**.”

“Yes, he can,” said Jannit, who had heard all about Spit Fyre’s hatching from Nicko. “Did it when he hatched.”

“That’s just Infant **Fyre**. All dragons do that when they’re first hatched.”

The noise of splintering wood echoed through the boatyard.

“They’re nearly through the doors,” said Jannit in her matter-of-fact tone. “Not much time left. Excuse me, I’m going to go get my ax. If they’re looking for trouble, they’re going to find it.”

Jenna knew that there was nothing else to be done; she must try to **Ignite** Spit Fyre. Taking her Navigator’s toffee tin from her tunic pocket, Jenna opened it and fished out the red piece of dragon skin. She unfolded it and, to her surprise and dismay, there was only one word on it: **Ignite**. How could that possibly be enough?

But Jenna knew she had to try. She raced back to Spit Fyre.

“Excuse me, 409,” said Jenna, breathless, clambering back onto Spit Fyre. Wolf Boy began to climb up too, but to his relief Jenna said, “I’ve got to do this on my own. I’ve got to make Spit Fyre breathe **Fyre**.”

Spit Fyre pricked up his ears. **Fyre?** Now? But what about breakfast?

A chorus of yells rose from behind the boatyard door, and Rupert's voice could be heard shouting, "If you want rats, Matey, you've got 'em. Great big ones with axes. Come on then!"

As if in response to Rupert Gringe's kind invitation, the RatStranglers gave one massive heave at the door. There was a splintering crash and the mob surged through. A tremendous noise erupted as a fight broke out at the gate. Rupert, Jannit and the yard hands put up a good fight and seemed to be winning, but a few of the RatStranglers evaded the hail of blows.

Led by the tall, spiky woman, they broke away, and brandishing an assortment of makeshift weapons, they headed toward the Dragon House, yelling, "Get the dragon, kill the dragon, kill, kill, *kill!*"

20

FYRE AND SEEK



J*enna and Spit Fyre* were airborne.

As the breakaway party of RatStranglers headed across the boatyard below them, Jenna guided Spit Fyre toward the small golden plaque set into the wall above the arch at the entrance of the Dragon House. Spit Fyre was flying beautifully, his wings beating against the air slowly and with great control; he responded to Jenna's every command. Soon the dragon was hovering in front of the plaque, nice and steady, as though he understood exactly what Jenna wanted him to do. In front of him the disc of gold was dull in the chill, damp air, but below him the RatStranglers were now running single file between the two tall-masted ships. They were nearly to the Dragon House.

“Ignite!” Jenna yelled at the top of her voice. **“Ignite, Ignite, Ignite!”**

Nothing happened. Afraid that there was indeed more to the **Ignite**, Jenna was horrified to see the spiky-woman RatStrangler emerging from between the tall ships, brandishing a large plank studded with nails. She was heading toward the sleeping head of the Dragon Boat.

“Please, Spit Fyre, please. Ignite!”

And then Jenna felt Spit Fyre shudder. From deep within the dragon, a subterranean rumble began. It started in the pit of his fire stomach, gathering

force until it burst through the fire valve and shot into his great, thick dragon windpipe. Jenna felt the wave of it travel up his neck. Spit Fyre coughed as if in surprise, instinctively flared his nostrils and a great rush of gas came shooting out.

“Ignite!” yelled Jenna at the top of her voice. With a tremendous *whoosh*, the gas **Ignited**. The jet of flame leaped forward and enveloped the golden disc, and for one awful moment Jenna was afraid that the heat of the flame would melt the gold, for the disc glowed and shimmered so that it looked almost liquid in the red light. And then, far below her, Jenna heard a great yell of surprise from the RatStranglers. She glanced down to see if they had reached the Dragon Boat, and to her amazement, all she could see was the great expanse of stone of the Castle wall.

Spit Fyre had done it! The Dragon House had disappeared as though it had never existed. Once again it was **Sealed** behind the Castle wall as it had been ever since the time of Hotep-Ra.

Jenna threw her arms around the dragon’s neck. It was hot, almost too hot to touch, but she did not care. “Thank you, Spit Fyre, *thank you*. I will never, *ever* complain about cutting your toenails again. I promise.” Spit Fyre snorted, coughed out more superheated gas, and another great plume of **Fyre** sent the RatStranglers diving for cover. It also set fire to a pile of paddleboats that Rupert Gringe had brought in for repair.

Jenna and Spit Fyre flew back to the collapsed trawler. Jenna guided Spit Fyre down beside the smashed-up remains of the boat, and keeping his wings outstretched for a quick takeoff, the dragon waited for Wolf Boy to take his place behind Jenna.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty,” came a familiar voice beside Jenna’s left foot, “could you budge up a bit? Then Dawnie and I can squeeze in behind you.”

Jenna knew that voice. It always seemed to turn up when she least expected it. She looked down and there, as she had guessed, was Stanley—ex-Message Rat, one-time Secret Rat. Current position: fugitive from the RatStranglers.

“Come on then, Stanley, quickly, before the RatStranglers see you.” Jenna leaned down to help Stanley up.

“I’m not getting back on that—that *thing*,” said the small fat rat who was

with Stanley.

“But, Dawnie dear, it’s our only hope.”

Suddenly the clamor of the RatStranglers changed.

“She’s over there,” said the shrill voice of the spiky woman. “*She* did this. She should answer for it. *Now*.”

“Now, now, *now!*” the chant began. “Now, now, *now!*”

“They’re coming this way,” said Wolf Boy. “Quick, Jenna. Leave the rats if they don’t want to come. We’ve gotta go.”

Jenna reached down to grab Stanley’s paw.

“Don’t leave me, Stanley!” wailed Dawnie. She launched into a superb tackle and brought Stanley down by the ankles.

“Dawnie, *let go!*”

Jenna hauled up the two squabbling rats, one in each hand, and placed them firmly between two large spines behind her, one behind the other. A moment later Spit Fyre was airborne, followed by a hail of trash can lids and a nasty-looking plank with nails stuck in it.

Two hundred feet above the Castle, the squabbling continued. “I hope you realize you nearly had us both killed, Stanley.”

“Me? *I* nearly had us both killed? That’s rich, that is, coming from you. If you’d had your way, Dawnie, which may I say you usually do, we’d have both been strangled by now and hung up on the tally board.”

“Sometimes you say the cruelest things, Stanley. My mother was right.”

“There’s no need to bring your mother into it, Dawnie. No need at all.”

“Well, it’s nice to see that you got back together,” said Jenna cheerily, trying to change the subject.

Both rats were unusually silent.

Taking advantage of the silence, Jenna passed the Navigator’s tin back to Wolf Boy. “Can you fish out the green piece of, er...stuff?” she asked. “It’s

got **Seek** written on it. That's the one I need to get Spit Fyre to find Sep."

"**Seek?**" asked Wolf Boy in a panic. "What does **Seek** look like?"

"**S-E-E-K,**" Jenna spelled out, shouting above the whoosh of the dragon's wings. "Big black letters. Can't miss it."

"I can," Wolf Boy muttered to himself. "What's the...S thing look like?" he yelled back.

"Like a snake! S for snake, see?"

Jenna was guiding Spit Fyre so that the dragon kept following the Castle walls. She had decided to take him around in circles until she could do the **Seek** properly. It was also an excuse to look at the Castle, which, spread out far below like a map with ants moving slowly across it, fascinated her. It reminded her of a much-treasured map that Simon had given her one MidWinter Feast Day. It had shown every rooftop, tree, roof garden, alleyway and secret hideaway in the Castle. In fact, as Spit Fyre flew leisurely toward the old Message Rat headquarters, the East Gate Lookout Tower, Jenna wondered if the mapmaker had not had his own dragon, so like the map was the vista spread below her.

Wolf Boy was having trouble finding the **Seek**. It was quite enough, he thought, to be hundreds of feet up in the air, feeling sick and trying not to fall off a flying dragon, without having to look at letters as well. Spit Fyre did not exactly fly smoothly. With every downbeat of the dragon's wings, a great rush of dragon-smelling air passed Wolf Boy's face. Then the dragon shot up in the air, where he hung for a few seconds until the upbeat of his wings. There was another rush of smelly underwing air, and then down he went again. These were not ideal conditions in which to look for a snaky kind of letter-thingy.

As he rifled through the toffee tin, trying not to lose any precious bits of dragon skin, something occurred to him that would explain his troubles finding the **Seek**. "But not all snakes begin with S, do they?" he shouted forward to Jenna. "I mean, there's python and adder and Big Green Forest Snake and—"

Jenna leaned back and saw the look of puzzlement on Wolf Boy's face. "Tell you what," she shouted, "why don't you just pass me all the green pieces?"

"Hey, I've got it!" yelled Wolf Boy, triumphant, as the dragon wings

swept down. “I was confused because...aargh”—the dragon wings swept up—“...there are two snakes on this one. But none of the others...oof”—the dragon wings swept down again—“...have any snakes at all so this must be it. Here, oops”—the wings swept up—“...you are.” He passed Jenna a piece of crackly green leather. On the front of it was written **Seek and Ye Shall Find**.

“Great!” said Jenna. With some difficulty—it was like reading on a roller coaster—and hanging on tight to the scrap of green dragon skin so that it did not blow away, she read out the words of the **Seek**:

“Faithful dragon Seek the One

Whom you be Imprinted on.

Let this Seek show in your Mind

The Way to your Imprinter—*Find!*”

At once Spit Fyre banked sharply to the right. Jenna was caught by surprise. She had taken both hands off Spit Fyre’s spines while she read out the **Seek**, and in one swift and terrifying movement, she slipped from her place behind Spit Fyre’s neck, grabbed at the spines she should have been holding on to—and missed.

“Jenna!” yelled Wolf Boy. “*Jenna!*”

There was no reply. Jenna was gone.

21

RIDER RETRIEVE



Jenna was too shocked to scream, she knew that there was nothing but thin air between her and Raven's Rock far below.

But, as Spit Fyre felt the weight behind his neck disappear, something instinctive kicked in. Something that, unknown to Spit Fyre, all human-**Imprinted** dragons possessed: **Rider Retrieve**. As Jenna fell, Spit Fyre dropped like a rock and grabbed her with his feet. Two seconds later he was carrying Jenna in his talons, as an eagle carries its prey.

Wolf Boy was frantic. He could not see Jenna dangling below. All he knew was that she was no longer there.

"Jenna!" he yelled. "*Jenna!*"

"409!" came an answering voice, or so he thought.

"Where's she gone, Stanley?" asked Dawnie peevishly. "I do think that's a bit much, just getting off like that. I mean, who's going to fly this thing now, I'd like to know?"

“Oh, do be quiet, Dawnie!” snapped Stanley. Dreading what he was going to see, the rat peered out over the great black spines of the dragon, but all he could see was Spit Fyre’s fat stomach.

“409!” came Jenna’s voice, almost blown away by the wind.

“Jenna?” Wolf Boy twisted around to see if she was behind him but there was nothing. He looked down to see if she was clinging on below him but he saw nothing except Spit Fyre’s belly.

“409...I’m *here*....” Wolf Boy began to wonder if he was imagining it. Where *was* she?

Spit Fyre had turned back toward the Castle and was descending now, slowly and carefully. Wolf Boy looked down, scanning the ground, fearing the worst. They flew over Raven’s Rock, across the new boat blockade, which spanned the river and stopped any Sickness-infested boats from arriving at the Port, and now they were heading toward the quay below Sally Mullin’s Tea and Ale House. Customers were running from the café, and Wolf Boy could see people milling around, looking up and pointing excitedly. As Spit Fyre came in lower, Wolf Boy could hear what they were saying.

“It’s the Princess!”

“That Wizard dragon’s taken the Princess!”

“Look at her—just hanging there...oh my, oh my...”

“Dead.”

“Don’t say that. She can’t be. She *can’t*.”

“Well, she ain’t doin’ much.”

“Ain’t much she can do, stuck in them claws like that. I always said that that dragon would turn. They all do.”

“Look! Look—she’s moving. She’s alive, *look*...”

“He’s comin’ down. He’s going to squash her.”

“Aargh! I can’t look—I *can’t*!”

Spit Fyre was now hovering no more than ten feet off the ground. Wolf

Boy's relief at realizing that Jenna had not fallen was replaced by a horrible thought: How was Spit Fyre going to land without crushing her?

Slowly, slowly, Spit Fyre came lower until he was so near to the quay that Wolf Boy could easily make out the complicated patterns on top of the fishermen's hats. The beating of Spit Fyre's wings—and quite possibly the strong smell of dragon—pushed the crowd back; Wolf Boy watched their astonished faces as the dragon hovered about five feet above the ground, uncurled his talons and let Jenna jump lightly onto the edge of the quay, running forward to keep her balance.

The crowd applauded and there were a couple of appreciative whistles, which seemed to go to Spit Fyre's head, for the dragon settled onto the quay, stuck out his neck and rumbled so that Wolf Boy felt it deep inside him. The crowd, fascinated by seeing Spit Fyre at such close quarters, especially after such a daring feat, was drawing near, pointing out the various strange bits and pieces that are part of any dragon.

“Horrible black spines he's got...”

“Look at the size of his tail...”

“Wouldn't fancy being stuck in them claws myself...”

And then, noticing Wolf Boy: “There's a kid on the back...”

“He's got quite a stare on him. Wouldn't want to come across *him* on a dark night.”

“Shh, he'll hear you.”

“No, he won't. Listen, what's that?”

The rumble deep inside Spit Fyre was getting louder. Jenna jumped back, for she knew what was coming, missed her footing and fell off the edge of the quay into the water. Still intrigued by the dragon, the crowd paid no attention whatsoever to the *splash* as their Princess vanished below the flotsam. As if drawn by a magnet, people drew closer and closer to Spit Fyre, watching the dragon as he threw back his head and flared his nostrils, listening to the volcanic rumblings inside him. Unnoticed, Jenna surfaced, spat out a small, but disgustingly dead fish and swam toward the steps at the end of the quay.

Suddenly, with a jet-engine of a roar, a great plume of hot gas streamed

from Spit Fyre's nostrils and **Ignited**. Ten, twenty, thirty seconds of fire shot into the air and across the water, where it torched the sails of two herring boats that formed part of the blockade across the river. At the end of the thirty seconds the crowd had gone. Many had taken refuge in Sally Mullin's café only to find themselves handed one of the large collection of fire buckets kept at the ready and told to "go and put that dragon out before we all go up in flames." The rest could be seen running up the hill toward the South Gate with a great story to tell in the taverns at lunchtime.

By nightfall, most people in the Castle had heard a version of how "the Princess was snatched by the Wizards' dragon, yes, she was, I'm telling you, she *was*. Great beast of a thing. Then it dropped her like a stone, it did. Yes, it *did*. No, she's all right. No, she didn't bounce. She fell in the river. She's a good swimmer, that girl. But then the dragon, see, he *turned*. They all do. Great fire spurting out of his nose right at me—singed my hair too, see? No, look, this bit here, no, *here*. Well, you need to get yourself a decent pair of glasses, that's all I can say."

Most people had also heard the other version too—how the Princess was to blame for bringing the Sickenesse in her pestilential boat, how she had tried to trap the RatStranglers in the Castle wall by means of some **Darke** trickery and—"Well, if you want *proof*, I'll give you proof. She rescued a couple of vermin. Not ermine, *vermin*. Are you deaf? Rats, you fool, *rats*. Took them away on her dragon. Now what do you have to say to *that*?" And the speaker would sit back, arms folded with a smug smile.

It was, people discovered, quite possible to believe both, depending on who you were talking to at the time. But everyone agreed on one thing: There was more to this young Princess than met the eye. Much more.

Stanley and Dawnie had watched the crowd run away with a great feeling of relief. In the middle of all the excitement no one had paid them much attention as they cowered among Spit Fyre's thick spines. They sat up straight again, and Dawnie settled herself with the air of a rat much used to dragon flight. "I hope we get going soon," she said. "I'm feeling quite famished. I rather fancy some lunch in the Port."

Stanley sighed, but he said nothing. He watched Jenna, dripping wet, clamber back onto Spit Fyre. "All right, Your Majesty?" he asked.

Jenna did not mind Stanley calling her Your Majesty. In fact, she rather

liked it, for she knew Stanley meant it affectionately. “Yes, thank you, Stanley,” she replied. “And are *you* all right?”

“Never been better,” said Stanley brightly. “Lovely crisp morning, clouds clearing and off for a flight. What more could a rat want?”

“Lunch,” said Dawnie under her breath.

22

THE ALFRÚN



Spit Fyre had a confident and purposeful air about him. He was flying at a leisurely pace, following the river south, toward the Port.

“I hope he’s not going out to sea,” said Jenna.

“Yeah,” agreed Wolf Boy, who was feeling quite dragon-sick and could think of nothing worse right then. To take his mind off things, Wolf Boy gazed down at the silver thread of the river that wound beneath them and tried to spot Sam’s Beach, where he and 412 had set off from the Forest a few months ago. Wolf Boy smiled, remembering how thrilled he had been to find his best friend again, even though 412 was nothing like his Young Army self. It wasn’t just that 412’s hair had grown, that he had acquired a family and a weird name to go with them, or that he was wearing a fancy Apprentice tunic and belt; it was more than that. 412 had become confident, funny and even more like...well, even more like the best parts of 412. And now...and now 412 was gone—maybe forever.

“Did you see that Quarantine notice on the quay?” Jenna’s voice suddenly

intruded on Wolf Boy's thoughts. He was glad it had.

"What notice?" he shouted above the noise of Spit Fyre's wings. Wolf Boy thought he wouldn't know one notice from another. And anyway, what was a Quarantine? Wolf Boy imagined a horrible monster, the kind of thing that was maybe, just at that moment, chasing 412 through the Forest, or wherever he was. Wolf Boy, even with all his tracker skills, was stumped. How can you track someone who is pulled through a looking glass?

"The one about the Sickenesse!" yelled Jenna across the two rats, who were following the conversation as if watching a tennis match. "And the barricade. That means no Northern Traders this year. It's going to be a miserable MidWinter Feast without the Traders' Market!"

"Oh," said Wolf Boy. And then yelled, "What's a Northern Trader?"

"They've got very nice boats," ventured Stanley. "Go anywhere, those boats do. Mind you, when I was a Message Rat you had to be careful. The Traders ran a tight rat-free policy. Had to, you see, to comply with the Market Regulations. Some of the nastiest cats I've ever encountered have been on a Trader's barge. Had a terrible run-in with an ex-Trader cat on my last Message Rat mission." Stanley shook his head ruefully. "Should have realized then how things were going to turn out. Worst mission ever, that was—never met another rat who encountered anything like it. Did I tell you about Mad Jack..." And so Stanley rattled on, blissfully unaware that no one could hear him above the noise of Spit Fyre's wings, except for Dawnie, who always made a point of not listening to more than the first sentence of anything Stanley said.

"There's one down there!" Jenna shouted in reply to Wolf Boy's question. "Look!"

Wolf Boy peered at the river. Far below, he saw a long, narrow barge with a large white sail going downstream—and so did Spit Fyre. Wolf Boy felt the rhythm of the dragon's flight change and began to feel slightly less sick.

"We're going down!" Jenna yelled.

Spit Fyre slowed his wing beats and was losing height. Jenna glanced around to see where he was heading, and a feeling of excitement came over her. There was no doubt about it, Spit Fyre was homing-in on something. The **Seek** was working. Soon, very soon, perhaps, they would find Septimus.

“He’s heading for the water!” shouted Wolf Boy.

“No, he’s not. He’s going for the Forest!” yelled Jenna.

Spit Fyre had wheeled around so that he was no longer above the river; he was still descending and was now heading over the Forest. Then, just as Wolf Boy and Jenna had resigned themselves to a Forest landing, the dragon began to turn back toward the river again.

“He’s circling!” shouted Jenna. “I think he’s trying to figure out where to land.” Jenna was half right. Spit Fyre was circling but he knew exactly *where* to land—he just had to work out *how*.

After three more circuits Spit Fyre and his passengers were flying over the tops of the Forest trees almost close enough for them to reach down and grab at the leaves. A thin wisp of smoke drifted up from a campfire, and Wolf Boy felt a pang of homesickness for the Heap boys’ camp.

Spit Fyre left the trees behind and suddenly dropped sharply down over the river. Dawnie screamed. Right in front of them was the Trader’s barge, from which came an enticing smell of frying bacon.

Jenna did not think it was possible for a fifteen-foot dragon to land on a sixty-foot boat sporting a large sail. As Spit Fyre came in low and hovered directly above the barge, her opinion was clearly shared by the boat’s skipper, who was waving her arms and yelling something in a language whose words Jenna did not understand but whose meaning she certainly did.

Spit Fyre neither understood nor cared. He was heading for the flat expanse on top of the barge’s cabin and he could smell *breakfast*. Even a dragon on a **Seek** needed breakfast, *particularly* a dragon on a **Seek**.

They landed with a bump. Not a big bump by dragon-landing standards, but big enough to push the *Alfrún* down into the water almost up to her gunwales. The barge rebounded and then rocked from side to side, sending waves washing out to the banks of the river and her skipper running angrily toward them, brandishing a long boat hook.

“Go away! *Go away!*” yelled Snorri Snorrelssen angrily. Snorri had had a bad day. She had been woken at dawn by the sound of heavy footsteps tramping across her cabin roof and an insistent hammering on the hatchway. Snorri was not easily frightened but this did frighten her. Over the previous few days the Castle had become an unwelcoming place for a foreigner. People

were beginning to blame the Traders for the Sickness and Snorri had had numerous insults aimed her way as she had wandered around the Castle. The last few days had seen Snorri hiding in the *Alfrún*, waiting for the arrival of more Northern Traders. None came. Unknown to Snorri, the fishing boat blockade at Raven's Rock was already turning them away with a hail of abuse and rotten fish.

And so that morning Snorri had sailed away as the gray dawn broke, after being given ten minutes "to get out, or else." Snorri didn't like the idea of *else*—whatever it was—so she got out. And now, just as she was beginning to take stock, 764 seagulls' worth of dragon had landed on her cabin roof. It was definitely not a good day.

The *Alfrún* was made of sterner stuff than the rotten fishing boat in the boatyard. The deck creaked a little in protest but stayed put. The barge settled a little lower in the water, and continued her way downriver with her new cargo, which was not taking kindly to being poked in the ribs by a sharp boat hook. Beneath her feet, Jenna could feel a telltale rumble of fire starting up in Spit Fyre's fire stomach.

"No, Spit Fyre!" she yelled. "No!" Jenna scrambled down from the dragon, much to the amazement of Snorri, who had not noticed that the dragon was carrying passengers. The rumble continued to grow. Wolf Boy heard it and jumped off, and the two rats scurried up the mast and perched precariously on a narrow yardarm, roosting like an odd pair of seagulls.

Jenna grabbed Snorri's boat hook, which she was prodding at Spit Fyre. "Don't provoke him!" she shouted. "Please!" But Snorri, who was taller and stronger than Jenna, wrested the boat hook back. The rumble in the fire stomach grew louder until even Snorri noticed it. She stopped and looked puzzled.

"What...is...that?" she asked in Jenna's language.

"Fyre!" yelled Jenna. "He's making **Fyre!**"

Snorri, as any boat skipper would, understood the word *fire* well enough. She grabbed a couple of buckets with rope tied to their handles and thrust one into Jenna's hands. "Water!" yelled Snorri. "Get water!"

Jenna followed Snorri's example and, holding on to the rope, she threw her bucket over the side of the barge into the river, pulled it up brimming with murky green water and threw it. It landed on a surprised Wolf Boy, who was

quickly feeding Spit Fyre Snorri's breakfast of bread and bacon. It was then that Jenna realized that the rumble had stopped.

Wolf Boy grinned. "I figured he couldn't eat and make **Fyre** at the same time," he said.

Snorri watched Spit Fyre gulp down the last of her bacon, siphon up the rest of the water from the fire bucket and finish by swallowing the wooden plate whole. This, thought Snorri, is going to be trouble. You didn't need to be a Spirit-Seer to see that.

23

SPIRIT-SEER



S*pit Fyre was asleep* and Snorri had an empty space in her tightly packed hold where one of the barrels of salted fish used to be. The *Alfrún* was tied up to a large willow tree that overhung the bank on the Farmlands side of the river, for the skipper felt it was too dangerous to continue the journey with an unpredictable dragon on board.

Snorri and Jenna were sitting in the cockpit at the stern of the barge, trying not to listen to Spit Fyre's snores and snuffles. Wolf Boy, who was still queasy after his dragon flight, and wanted to feel solid ground beneath his feet, was exploring the apple orchards planted along the riverbank.

Snorri had never expected to meet the Princess for a second time, let alone have her land on her boat on a *dragon*. She was a little overawed. She had provided Jenna and Wolf Boy with a welcome breakfast of bread, cake, pickled fish and apples, which they had eaten hungrily. Wolf Boy regretted that he had fed all the bacon to Spit Fyre, particularly as it had hardly dented the dragon's appetite, and Snorri also had to feed him a whole barrel of salted

fish.

“I am really sorry, Snorri,” said Jenna yet again after Wolf Boy had set off. “We were on our way to find Septimus, and Spit Fyre just decided to land. I didn’t stop him because I thought Septimus was here...but he’s not.” Jenna lapsed into silence. She could not help wondering whether the **Seek** was going to work with Spit Fyre. He was such a young and impetuous dragon, and if he could be distracted by the smell of frying bacon, what else would send him off on the wrong course?

“Your brother Septimus. He...fell through some glass?” asked Snorri.

Jenna nodded.

“Then...surely you will find him in the Infirmary?”

Jenna shook her head. “It was a looking glass—you know, a mirror?” she explained.

“Ah...” said Snorri. “An Ancient Glass. Now I understand.”

“You do?” said Jenna, surprised.

“My grandmother had one. But we are...we were never allowed to touch it. Her sister, Ells, fell through it when she was young.”

“Did”—Jenna hardly dared ask—“did they ever find her?”

“No,” said Snorri.

Jenna was silent. Suddenly Snorri leaped up and ran to the side of the barge, looking upriver. Jenna followed her gaze but she could see nothing. The river was empty and quiet. The drizzle had stopped a while ago and now the water was flat and sluggish, reflecting the heavy gray clouds that hung in the sky. Nothing, not even an adventurous fish popping up to the surface for a fly, disturbed it.

Snorri drew out her Spirit eyeglass from a pocket in the folds of her tunic and put it to her left eye. She muttered something under her breath.

“What is it?” asked Jenna.

“I do not like this boat,” whispered Snorri.

“But it’s a lovely boat,” said Jenna. “I really like it, especially your little cabin. It’s very cozy.”

“No. Not *this* boat,” explained Snorri. “*That* boat.” Snorri put the eyeglass down and pointed upriver. Jenna followed Snorri’s gaze, noticing now how her eyes were locked onto something, following its slow progress downriver toward them.

Snorri glanced at Jenna. “Ah,” she said, “you cannot see the Spirit Ship?”

Jenna shook her head.

“It is coming this way,” whispered Snorri.

Suddenly the air felt colder and the river seemed threatening. “*What* is coming this way?” Jenna asked.

Snorri did not reply. Squinting through the eyeglass, she was engrossed in watching Queen Etheldredda’s Royal Barge draw near. Although the barge had been on the far side of the river as it rounded the bend, it was now crossing the river and heading straight for the *Alfrún*. Snorri shivered.

“*What?* What can you see?” Jenna whispered.

“I see a barge. It is with a high prow and it is built as they used to build many years ago. I see four ghostly oars on the port and four on the starboard; they move but they make no disturbance on the water. I see a Royal red canopy covering the barge on gilded posts, and I see the Queen who sits beneath it.”

“Does...the Queen wear a high ruff around her neck and have coiled plaits wound around her ears?” whispered Jenna, who suddenly had a horrible feeling who the Queen was. “Does she look as though she has just smelled something disgusting?”

Snorri turned to Jenna with a smile, the first smile that Jenna had seen on Snorri’s face.

“So you, my sister, are a Spirit-Seer too. I have so much longed for a Spirit Sister. Welcome!” Snorri enveloped Jenna in a hug but, desperate not to be seen by Queen Etheldredda, Jenna wriggled out and fled to Snorri’s cabin.

Snorri followed Jenna below. “I am sorry if...I offended you,” she said.

Jenna was sitting on the steps, white-faced and hugging her knees. “You—you didn’t offend me,” she whispered. “I mustn’t let the Queen see me. She is the one who made me show my brother the Glass. She’s horrible, really *horrible*.”

“Ah,” whispered Snorri, not at all surprised, remembering the chill that had run through her when she had first seen the Royal Barge. “You stay here, Jenna. I shall go **See** this Queen. I will tell you what she is doing, for I think she has chosen not to **Appear** to you for a bad reason. Maybe she has your brother prisoner on board?”

“Sep!” said Jenna. “On a ghost boat. But that would mean that he’s a ghost too....”

“No, not always. It is possible to be **Taken** by a Spirit and still be Living. It happened to my uncle Ernold.” With that, Snorri disappeared up on deck, leaving Jenna to reflect that Snorri’s family was somewhat accident-prone when it came to the Spirit side of things.

The Royal Barge was nearing the *Alfrún*, and Snorri saw that it had once been a beautiful boat. It was a long, narrow barge painted with intricate gold and silver swirls. Ornate gold poles held up a luxuriant red canopy to keep the sun and the rain off the Queen and her courtiers, who would have lolled on the long cushioned seats on the dais at the stern of the barge. But now Queen Etheldredda sat alone, as she had also done for much of her lifetime, for her courtiers had found all manner of excuses to avoid being stuck on the Royal Barge without escape from the Queen. Belowdecks eight ghostly oarsmen sat on their narrow wooden benches, pulling their insubstantial oars to and fro, to and fro, while the river water remained undisturbed.

As the Royal Barge swung toward the *Alfrún*, Snorri put the Spirit eyeglass away and busied herself tidying the breakfast things. She had no wish to show the Queen that she was a Spirit-Seer and it was clear to Snorri that if Jenna could not see the Queen, then the ghost had chosen not to **Appear**. Queen Etheldredda rose from her cushions, walked over to the side of her boat and stared across the water at Snorri. The Queen sniffed disapprovingly. A servant girl, no doubt. The Queen’s stare took in the remains of breakfast, which the servant girl was slowly clearing away—disgracefully slowly. Servants were so lazy in this Time; things would change once she became Queen again. Etheldredda’s eyes were drawn back to Snorri herself. There was something odd about the girl, she thought. She didn’t like the way the girl’s eyes flickered from side to side like a lizard’s and avoided

looking anywhere. Very devious. No doubt her employer would be waking one night soon to find his entire cargo had been sold under his very nose. It would serve him right.

With a grim smile on her lips, Queen Etheldredda allowed the Royal Barge to drift toward the *Alfrún* while she perused the rest of the boat, searching for Jenna. The Queen was on her way to the Marram Marshes, but as soon as she had rounded the bend and seen the *Alfrún* moored alongside the riverbank, she had been overcome by a strong feeling that her errant granddaughter was nearby, which she did not understand, for surely the girl was at the Keeper's Cottage. Those two irritating ExtraOrdinary Wizards had said as much—she had heard them from behind the bedroom door. Queen Etheldredda was a great believer in information gained through eavesdropping; in her lifetime she had perfected it to the point where she never believed what anyone told her to her face unless she had also overheard it for herself.

As the Royal Barge drew alongside the *Alfrún*, Queen Etheldredda's feeling that Jenna was on board became even stronger, but she could see no sign of her. With a puzzled air, the Queen scrutinized the boat. It appeared to be nothing more than a typical Northern Trader's barge: It flew the official flag of the Hanseatic League and was, despite the slatternly servant girl, neat, shipshape and well maintained. All was peaceful, quiet and as it should be. The ropes were neatly coiled, its sail was expertly furled and—*it had a dragon on the deck.*

THE BOARDING PARTY



The dragon on the deck did not stir despite Queen Etheldredda's piercing stare. Spit Fyre lay snoring. A large bubble of gas floated to the top of his stomach and made a break for freedom with a loud *pop*. Queen Etheldredda recoiled as if struck, and the Royal Barge drew away from the noxious dragon fumes. Queen Etheldredda leaned over the side, staring at the *Alfrún* with narrowed eyes. Something, the ghost decided, was going on in that boat and she was going to find out. Delicately, like a heron picking its way through shallow water, the ghost of the Queen stepped from her Royal Barge and, as if walking across the Palace lawns, she sauntered over the surface of the water and stepped aboard the *Alfrún*.

“She is *here!*” Snorri gasped in her own language. Jenna, who did not understand what Snorri had said, but understood the tone well enough, dived under a large woolen blanket, dislodging Ullr, who had been sleeping after his previous night on guard. The cat darted out of the cabin and rushed up on deck, his tail a great sausage of indignant fluff. Ullr was not only a Night

Creature, but he was also from a long line of Spirit-Seer cats, which are, of course, much more common than Spirit-Seer humans. As he emerged on deck he decided he did not like the look of the visiting ghost at all. He didn't like the look of the two rats up the mast either, but they could wait. They would make a good supper that evening.

At the sight of Queen Etheldredda advancing, Ullr threw himself at the ghost, yowling as only a Spirit-Seer cat can. It was a terrible sound, a mixture of banshee and Brownie with a touch of Marsh Moaner thrown in. Queen Etheldredda gasped at the shock of being **Passed Through** in such a violent way and collapsed onto the deck, coughing and spluttering, feeling as if she had swallowed a whole cat—fur, claws, screech and all.

Along the riverbank, Wolf Boy heard Ullr's yowl. He came running through the orchards to see what was going on. He arrived at the *Alfrún* to see the strangest sight: the Trader girl and her cat had gone crazy, totally and utterly crazy. The cat—a nasty, thin orange thing—was hurling himself backward and forward as though running through something over and over again. The girl was waving her arms and yelling something in her own language, which sounded to him like shouts of encouragement. And then suddenly the cat stopped. The girl punched the air in triumph, scooped up the cat and ran to the side of the boat where she gazed down at the river, laughing.

Wolf Boy jumped aboard and rushed down to the cabin. "Jenna? Jenna?" he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes?" came the reply from underneath the blanket.

"What are you doing under there?"

"Hiding," came Jenna's muffled reply. "Shh. She'll see you."

"It's no good hiding, Jen, she's nuts. Let's get out of here while we can. Quick, before she—oh, *bother*."

Snorri's grinning face appeared in the hatchway. "The UnQuiet One has gone," she announced. "She fell overboard and disappeared underwater. She is back on her barge now with riverweed on her crown." Suddenly Snorri's smile disappeared. She clambered through the hatchway and sat down at the top of the steps, shaking her head.

Wolf Boy shook his head too. Their escape route was blocked. They

should have gone when they had the chance.

“There are things,” muttered Snorri, “that I do not understand.”

“What things?” asked Jenna, extricating herself from the extremely itchy blanket.

“One thing is that the Queen has not been on my boat in her Living Time—so why was she not **Returned**?”

“What?” asked Wolf Boy. Why did the Snorri girl talk in riddles?

“A ghost may only tread once more where, Living, he has trod before,” Snorri recited.

“That’s just a kids’ rhyme,” scoffed Wolf Boy.

“It is no kids’ rhyme,” retorted Snorri, offended. “It is a Rule of Ghosthood.”

Wolf Boy snorted.

“It *is*. I *know*,” Snorri insisted. “All Spirit-Seers know them.”

“Huh,” muttered Wolf Boy.

“Shh, 409,” said Jenna, shooting Wolf Boy a warning glance. Jenna believed Snorri, for Snorri had clearly seen Etheldredda, and she wanted to hear more. “What are the other things you do not understand?” she asked.

“I do not understand why the riverweed stuck to her crown. A Spirit has no substance. It should not be possible.”

Wolf Boy sighed; it was all too weird. Give him the Forest any day, where at least you knew where you stood with most of the inhabitants: potential supper.

“So—so what *is* she?” asked Jenna in a hushed voice, as though Queen Etheldredda was eavesdropping outside the cabin.

Snorri shrugged. “I do not know. She is Spirit and yet...she is more than Spirit—”

Thump...thump...thump. Someone—or something—was knocking on the

hull. Snorri leaped to her feet. “What is *that*?” she gasped.

Jenna and Wolf Boy, who were both feeling rather spooked by now, went pale. The sound echoed eerily through the cabin, “*thump...thump...*”

“Etheldredda’s come back,” whispered Jenna.

Bravely, Snorri stuck her head out of the hatchway. “Hello?” she said, in her singsong Northern Trader accent.

“Hello!” replied a cheery voice. “Did you know you’ve got an escaped dragon on your deck?”

“Escaped? From where?” asked Snorri.

“The Castle. It belongs to my brother. He’ll be looking everywhere for it.”

“Your brother?” Snorri hurriedly scrambled up on deck and saw a boy with laughing green eyes tying up his boat to the *Alfrún*. She looked at his salt-stained seafaring tunic and his tangled, curly hair, which was almost as fair as her own, and she knew she could trust him.

“Yeah. ’Fraid so,” said Nicko. “I’d offer to take him back with me but he’s too big for my boat. Bit too big for yours too, if you ask me. Hey—*Jen!*”

“Nik!” Jenna emerged from the cabin and laughed. “What are you doing here?”

“Been sent out collecting Rupert’s blasted paddleboats. Someone broke into his store last night and he figures he’s lost loads. But I’ve only found one so far.” Nicko indicated a small pink paddleboat that he was towing. “Waste of time if you ask me.”

Jenna noticed Snorri’s look of confusion. “It’s Nicko. He’s my brother,” she explained.

“Your brother?” asked Snorri, who felt that the brother tally was stacking up a little too fast. “The one who fell through the Glass?”

“What glass?” asked Nicko.

“Oh,” said Jenna, her feelings of excitement at seeing Nicko draining away, as if she had suddenly sprung a leak. “You don’t know about Sep, do you?”

Nicko saw the tears now welling in Jenna's eyes. With a heavy heart, he clambered aboard the *Alfrún*.

Wolf Boy left Jenna and Nicko together and slipped away. There was someone he wanted to check up on. He found Lucy Gringe where he had left her, sitting on the riverbank under a willow tree.

"You again?" she said, grumpily. "I told you to *leave me alone*. I don't need the stupid paddleboat anyway." Lucy sat with her blue cloak wrapped around her, arms hugging her knees, her pink ribbon bootlaces soggy with the wet grass. She was holding a crumpled and much-folded and -unfolded piece of paper, her lips moving slowly as she read the words that she knew inside out and upside down. It was a note from Simon Heap, and she had found it in the hem of her blue cloak that Jenna had returned to her. It was headed simply with the words *The Observatory*, and it read:

My own Lucy,

This cloak is for you. I will be back soon and we will be together at the top of the Tower. I shall make you proud of me. Wait for me.

*Your only,
Simon*

But Lucy was tired of waiting, and she now knew that Simon could never return to the Castle, so she had set out to find him. And so far all she had done was fall asleep and wake up to find her boat gone. It was not a good start. Wolf Boy's voice broke into her thoughts.

"I found your boat," he said, breathless.

"Where?" asked Lucy, hastily folding the precious note and jumping to her feet.

"Nicko's got it."

"Nicko *Heap*? Simon's brother?"

"Yeah. Suppose he is. He can't help that though." Wolf Boy, who had been on the receiving end of one of Simon's **StunFlashes**, had a poor opinion

of Simon Heap.

“What do you mean he can’t help that, you rude boy!” Lucy’s brown eyes flashed angrily.

“Nothing,” said Wolf Boy, who could see that Lucy was trouble. He was beginning to wish that he hadn’t bothered to ask her if she was all right earlier, when he had seen her tearfully searching the riverbank.

“So where *is* Nicko Heap?” demanded Lucy. “I shall go ask him just what he thinks he’s doing stealing my boat. The *nerve* of it.”

Knowing that he probably shouldn’t, Wolf Boy waved an arm in the general direction of the *Alfrún* and watched Lucy stomp off along the riverbank toward the Trader barge. He followed at a safe distance, which, with Lucy Gringe, was a long one.

As Wolf Boy neared the *Alfrún* he heard the sound of raised voices.

“Give me back my boat!”

“It’s Rupert’s boat, not yours.”

“Rupert says I can use his boats *anytime*, so there.”

“Well, I—”

“And I’m using it *now*, Nicko Heap—got that?”

“But...”

“Excuse *me*. Get out of my way, *will you?*”

Wolf Boy arrived just in time to see Lucy Gringe running across the deck of the *Alfrún* and tripping over the sleeping Spit Fyre’s tail. But nothing put Lucy Gringe off her stride for long. She picked herself up, held her nose as another bubble of gas erupted from Spit Fyre and lowered herself over the side of the *Alfrún*.

Nicko followed her. “Where are you going in that?” he asked, concerned.

“None of your business, nosy boy. Are *all* Simon’s brothers such irritating busybodies?”

Snorri added Simon to the brother count. How many did Jenna have?

“That paddleboat is not safe on the river,” Nicko persisted. “It’s no better than a toy. They’re only meant for fun on the Moat.”

Lucy jumped into the paddleboat, which rocked alarmingly. “It got me this far and it’ll get me to the Port, just you see.”

“You can’t go to the Port in that!” said Nicko, aghast. “Have you any idea what the tide race is like at the mouth of the river? It will spin you around and drag you out to sea—and that’s only if you haven’t already been sunk by the waves that run in off the Great Sandbar. You’re *crazy*.”

“Maybe. I don’t care,” said Lucy sulkily. “I’m going anyway.” She untied the rope, took up the paddle handles and began turning them furiously.

Nicko watched the little pink boat wobble its way out into the river until he could stand it no more. “Lucy!” he yelled. “Take *my* boat!”

“What?” Lucy shouted above the clattering din of the paddles.

“Take my boat—*please!*”

Lucy felt relieved, although she was not going to show it. She had a terrible feeling that Nicko was right about the paddleboat. With some difficulty—and only by rapidly turning one paddle and then another for at least five minutes—Lucy steered the boat around and arrived back at the *Alfrún*, breathless and hot and still in a bad mood.

Jenna, Snorri, Wolf Boy and Nicko watched Lucy Gringe set off once again, this time in Nicko’s deep and seaworthy rowboat.

“But how are you going to get back now?” Jenna asked Nicko. “You’re not going in that paddleboat, are you?”

Nicko snorted. “You must be joking. I wouldn’t be seen dead in one of those, especially one *that* stupid color. I’m coming with you to find Sep, silly.”

Jenna smiled for the first time since Septimus had disappeared. Nicko would make everything all right. She knew he would.

THE I, MARCELLUS

From the Diary of Marcellus Pye:

SunnDay. Equinox.

Today has been a Wondrous yet most Fearfull day.

Though I didst Forecast this Happening in mine Almanac (which will be the Laste Parte of my Booke, the I, Marcellus). Truly, I did not believe that it would come to Pass.

At the Appointed Hour today, Seven minutes past Seven of the Clock this morning, my new Apprentice didst Come Through. Though I was up betimes this morn and made sure that I was beside the Great Doors to Await their Opening, great was my surprise when they did part and Reveal my Glass. Beyond the Glass, dimly didst I see a boy with Feare in his eyes. His garb was a strange green tunic with a silver belt, he wore no shoes, and his hair was ragged but he had a pleasant Face and I liked him well enough at first sight. But what I didst not like, what indeed I hated and feared, was the sight of the Creature behind him. For this Creature I know to be none other but my Poore Self—in five hundred yeares' Time.

The Boy came through the Glass well and is here in my House now. I pray

that his Despair will soon abate when he sees the wonders of which he is destined to partake and the good that he will do.

Woden's Day

It is some three days since my new Apprentice hath Come Through. He seems a promising boy, and as we are Approaching the Conjunction of the Planets for which I have long waited, I do begin to have hope for my new Tincture.

I pray that it may be so, for yesterday I foolishly didst ask my Apprentice, "How was the Ancient Dribbling Ghastliness, my Poore Self, who took you from your Time? Was he—was I—so very repulsive?" My Apprentice nodded but would not speak. I pressed him to tell me and, seeing my Concern, he did relent. How I wish that he had not. He has a strange way of speech, yet I Feare I didst Understand him all too well.

He didst tell me in much detail how my stench was most unbearable, that I shuffled like a Crabbe and cried out in pain at each step, cursing my fate. He didst Saye my nose was ridged and like unto the hide of an Elephant (though I know not what that Creature be but suspect it to be a most foul Toad) and my ears were like great cabbages and spotted also and full of slugs. Slugs—how can this be? My nails were long and yellow like great claws and filthy with hundreds of years of Grime. I do detest dirty fingernails—surely I will not come to this? But it seemeth so. I have Five Hundred Yeares of Decay and Mouldering to endure. I cannot Beare to think on it.

After this I didst detect a lightening in my Apprentice's Gloom, but an increase in mine Own.

Freya's Day. The Conjunction of the Planets.

A day of Hope. Septimus and I didst mix the Tincture at the Appointed Hour. Now it is set to Ferment and Stewe in the cabinet in the Chamber, and it is for Septimus to know when I may add the Final Part. Only a Seventh Sonne of a Seventh Sonne may tell this to the Moment, I know this now. It grieveth me that I didst drink of my first Tincture before Septimus Came Through. Mama was right, for hath she not always said, "Thy Hastiness and Haughtiness shall be thy Undoing, Marcellus"? Indeed, I was both too Hasty and too Haughty to think that I could make the Tincture perfectly without the Seventh of the Seventh. Alack, it is true (as Mama also do Saye) I am but a Poore Foole.

*I pray that this new Tincture will work and give me not only Everlasting Life but Eternal Youth also. I have faith in my Apprentice; he is a most talented and careful Boy and has a great love for **Physik**, just as I did at his age, though I am sure I was not so given to Despondency and Silence.*

Tir'sDay

It is some months now since we didst mix the new Tincture and still Septimus will not say that it is ready. I do grow impatient and afraid that something will happen to it while we wait. It is my Last Chance. I can make no more, for a Conjunction of these Seven Planets will not come for many hundreds of yeares hence, and I know that In my State to Come I will not be Fitted to make Another. Daily Mama grows insistent on her own Tincture. She wheedles from me all my doings and I cannot keep anything from her.

Loki'sDay

*I write with some Excitement, for this Day we do **Seal** my most Precious Booke, my *I, Marcellus*. My young Apprentice, who hath now been here One Hundred and Sixty Nine days and hath worked so well, is completing the last few checks upon the final Pages. Soon I must away to the Great Chamber, for all there do Await me.*

*After I have **Sealed** my great Work, I shall yet again aske the Boy Septimus to look at my new Tincture. I pray it will be ready soon that I may drink of it. Mama doth grow impatient for she thinketh it is for her. Ha! To think that I shouldst desire Mama to live forever too. I wouldst rather die. Except that I cannot... Oh woe.*

Ah, the Bell sounds for Ten of the Clock. I must Tarry no more but make Haste to My Booke.

At the sight of Marcellus Pye arriving, Septimus quickly finished his letter to Marcia and put it in his pocket. He planned to sneak it into the *I, Marcellus* as soon as he could, before the book was **Sealed** that afternoon at the propitious hour of 1:33.

Septimus knew Marcellus Pye's book well; he had read it many times over the seemingly endless days he had now spent in Marcellus's time. The book was divided into three sections: the first was *Alchemie* which was, as far

as Septimus could tell, completely incomprehensible—although Marcellus insisted that it gave clear and simple directions for transmuting gold and finding the key to eternal life.

The second part, **Physik**, was different, and Septimus understood it easily. **Physik** contained complicated formulae for medicines, linctuses, pills and potions. It had well-argued explanations of the origin of many diseases and wonderfully detailed drawings of the anatomy of the human body, the likes of which Septimus had never seen before. In short, it had everything anyone would ever need to become a skilled Physician, and Septimus had read, reread and then read it again until he knew much of it by heart. He now knew all about iodine and quinine, creosote and camomel, ipecacuanha and flea-seed, and many other strange-smelling substances. He could make antitoxins and analgesics, narcotics, tisanes, emollients and elixirs. Marcellus had noticed his interest and given him his own **Physik** notebook—a rare and precious thing in that Time as paper was very expensive.

The third section of the *I, Marcellus* was the *Almanac*, a day-to-day guide for the next thousand and one years. This was where he planned to hide his note—in the entry for the day that he had disappeared.

Septimus was dressed in his black and red Alchemie Apprentice robes, which were edged with gold and had gold Alchemical symbols embroidered down the sleeves. Around his waist he wore a thick leather belt, fastened with a heavy gold buckle, and on his feet, instead of his lost—and much-loved—brown boots, he wore the strange pointy-toed shoes that were fashionable and made him feel very foolish. Septimus had actually cut the ends off each point because he had kept tripping over them, but it did not exactly improve the shoes' appearance and made his toes cold. He sat huddled in his winter woolen cloak. The Great Chamber of Alchemie and **Physik** felt cold that morning, as the furnace was cooling after many days of use.

The Great Chamber was a large, circular vault underneath the very center of the Castle. Aboveground there was nothing to show but the chimney that rose from the great furnace and spouted noxious fumes—and often rather interestingly colored smoke—day and night. Around the edge of the Chamber were thick ebony tables, carved to fit the curve of the walls, on which great glass bottles and flasks filled with all manner of substances and creatures, alive, dead—and halfway between—were lined up and neatly labeled. Although the Chamber was underground and no natural light reached it, it was full of a bright, golden glow. Everywhere great candles were set burning and the light from these reflected off a sea of gold.

Set into the wall near the entrance to the Chamber was the furnace where Marcellus Pye had first transmuted base metal into gold. Marcellus had so enjoyed the thrill of seeing the dull black of the lead and the gray of the mercury slowly change to a brilliant red liquid and then cool to the beautiful deep yellow of pure gold that barely a day since had passed when he did not make a little gold just for the fun of it. Consequently, Marcellus had amassed a large amount of gold, so much that everything in the Chamber that could be made of gold was—hinges on the cupboard doors, drawer handles and their keys, knives, tripods, rushlight holders, doorknobs, taps—everything. But all these little golden knickknacks paled into insignificance beside the two largest chunks of gold that Septimus had ever seen—and wished he never had—The Great Doors of Time.

These were the doors that Septimus had been pushed through one hundred and sixty-nine days ago to the day. They were set into the wall opposite the furnace, two ten-foot-tall chunks of solid gold covered with long strings of carved symbols, which Marcellus had told him were the Calculations of Time. The Doors were flanked by two statues brandishing sharp swords, and they were **Locked** and **Barred**—Septimus had found that out soon enough—and only Marcellus had the **Keye**.

That morning, Septimus was seated at his usual place, the Siege of the Rose, next to the head of a long table in the middle of the Chamber, with his back to the hated Doors. The table was lit with a line of brightly burning candles placed down the center. In front of him was a pile of neatly stacked paper, the results of his early morning's work that had involved the last, laborious checking of Marcellus's astrological calculations, which were the final touches on what he called his Great Work.

At the other end of the table sat seven scribes, for Marcellus Pye had a thing about sevens. Normally the scribes had little to do and spent much of the day staring into space, picking their noses and tunelessly humming strange songs. The songs always made Septimus feel terribly alone, for their notes were put together in an odd way and they were like nothing he had ever heard before. Today, however, all seven scribes were fully employed. They were scribbling furiously, copying out in their very best script the last seven pages of the Great Work, desperate to meet the deadline. Every now and then, one stifled a yawn; like Septimus, the scribes had been hard at work since six that morning. It was now, as Marcellus reminded everyone as he strode into the Chamber, ten o'clock, or ten of the clock, as he put it.

Marcellus Pye was a good-looking, somewhat vain young man with thick

black curls of hair falling over his brow in the fashion of the day. He wore the long black and red robes of an Alchemist, which were encrusted with a good deal more gold than those of his Apprentice. That morning there was even a dusting of gold on his fingertips. He smiled as he looked around the Chamber. His Great Work—the *I, Marcellus* that he was sure would be consulted for centuries to come and make his name live forever—was nearly finished.

“Bookbinder!” Marcellus snapped his fingers impatiently as he surveyed the Chamber in search of the missing craftsman. “Pray, you dullards and dolts, where hideth you the Bookbinder?”

“I hideth not, Your Excellency,” a voice quavered from behind Marcellus. “For surely, I be here. Even as I have so stood upon these cold stones these last four hours or more. Indeed, I was here then and still I be here now.”

Several of the scribes stifled giggles, and Marcellus spun around and glared at the hunchbacked elderly man who was standing next to a small bookbinding press. “Spare me thy twitterings,” said Marcellus, “and bring the press to the table.”

Seeing the man struggling to lift the press, Septimus slipped down from his place and went to help him. Together they heaved the press onto the table with a thud, sending ink flying from the inkwells and pens leaping to the floor.

“Take care!” shouted Marcellus as spots of deep blue ink landed on the last pages of his Work. Marcellus picked up the page, which the scribe had just finished. “Now ’tis Despoiled,” Marcellus sighed. “But the Hour is against us. It must be bound as it stands. ’Twill show that, tho’ Man may strive for Perfection, he will Ever fall short. ’Tis the Way of the Worlde. But a few Spottes of Ink will not divert my Purpose. Septimus, now is the time for your Task.”

Septimus picked up the great bundle of parchment and, doing exactly as Marcellus Pye had instructed him earlier that morning, he took the first eight sheets, folded them and handed them to the nearest scribe. The scribe took out a large needle already threaded with thick linen thread and, with his tongue stuck between his teeth in concentration, he sewed the sheets along their fold. Then Septimus passed them to the Bookbinder. And so the process went on for the rest of the morning, all seven scribes sewing and cursing under their breath when the needle pricked their fingers or the thread snapped. Septimus was kept busy running from one scribe to another, for Marcellus Pye was most insistent on Septimus handling the pages himself. He believed that the

touch of a seventh son of a seventh son could impart powers of immortality, even to books.

They were now working their way through the *Almanac* and as they approached the page for the date of his capture, Septimus grew nervous, although he tried his best to hide it. He desperately wanted to get a message to Marcia and to try to make contact with his own Time. Septimus had resigned himself to the fact that it was probably impossible for Marcia to help, for—and this is where his brain always turned to mush—if she *could* retrieve him from this Time, surely she would have already done so and he wouldn't still be here, over five months later...would he? But whatever Marcia could or couldn't do, Septimus wanted to tell her what had happened.

Suddenly Septimus realized that the next sheet of paper was *the day*. With shaking hands, he pushed it into the middle of a group of eight other sheets—slightly out of sequence, but that could not be helped—and then he passed it to the nearest free scribe for sewing. As soon as the scribe had finished sewing, Septimus took the folded sheets and slipped his note inside. Guiltily, he glanced around him, afraid that all eyes would be upon him, but the steady work of putting the book together continued. The Bookbinder took the sheets from him with a bored expression and added them to his stack of parchment. No one had noticed.

Trembling, Septimus sat down and promptly knocked over an inkwell.

Marcellus frowned and snapped his fingers at one of the scribes. “Go, thee, fetch a rag. I will not have this Work delayed.”

At 1:21 the Bookbinder finished binding the *I, Marcellus*. He handed it to Marcellus Pye, accompanied by a few low whistles from the scribes, for it was a beautiful book. It was covered in soft leather, the title was tooled in gold leaf and surrounded by various Alchemical symbols, which Septimus now understood, and wished he didn't. The Bookbinder had edged the pages with Marcellus Pye's very own gold leaf and had laid the book on a thick red silk ribbon.

At 1:25 Marcellus heated a small copper pot of black sealing wax over a candle flame.

At 1:31 Septimus held the book while Marcellus Pye poured black sealing wax onto the two ends of the ribbon to tie them together.

At 1:33 Marcellus Pye pressed his signet ring into the sealing wax. The *I,*

Marcellus was **Sealed** and the whole Chamber breathed a sigh of relief.

“The Great Work be done,” said Marcellus, reverentially holding the book in his hands, almost lost for words.

“My stomach rumbleth.” The Bookbinder’s petulant voice broke into Marcellus Pye’s dreams of greatness. “For ’tis well past the time to break Bread. I shall tarry no more. I bid you Good day, Your Excellency.” The Bookbinder bowed and left the Chamber. The scribes exchanged glances. Their stomachs were not entirely silent either, but they dared not say anything. They waited while the Last Alchemist, lost in dreams of greatness, cradled his Great Work in his arms, gazing at the book as if at a newborn baby.

However, despite Marcellus Pye’s great hopes, no one ever looked at his book again. It was **Sealed** away after the Great Alchemie disaster and never again opened—until Marcia Overstrand ripped the seal off on the day her Apprentice was snatched from his Time.

THE WIZARD TOWER



The scribes had gone to lunch, leaving Septimus behind. Marcellus approached his Apprentice with an anxious look.

“A moment of thy time, Apprentice,” he said, sitting down on the stool beside Septimus, which was normally occupied by Septimus’s personal scribe. “For surely the Tincture neareth completion and doth require thy attention.” Marcellus nodded toward a glass cabinet that stood on a golden plinth on one of the ebony tables at the edge of the Chamber. Inside the cabinet, on a delicate three-legged stand of gold, was a small phial filled with a thick blue fluid. Although Septimus was tired from his morning’s work he did not mind the chance to work with Marcellus on some real **Physik**. He nodded and got up.

Next to the glass cabinet was a new oak chest with gold-covered corners, bound with two thick gold bands. This was Septimus’s personal **Physik** Chest

and he was very proud of it. Marcellus had given it to him at the start of their work on modifying the Tincture for Everlasting Life. It was the only possession that Septimus had in that Time, and it contained his carefully written notes on Mixtures, Linctuses, Remedies and Cures. Most precious of all, it contained his copy of Marcellus's Antidote to the Sickenesse, carefully folded at the bottom. His **Physik** Chest was the only thing he would regret leaving behind if he ever got a chance to try his escape plan—and if it actually *worked*.

But though the chest belonged to him, Septimus did not hold the **Keye**. Like all things in the Great Chamber of Alchemie and **Physik**, it was opened by only one key—the **Keye** that hung around Marcellus's neck on a thick gold chain, securely fastened inside his tunic by a large gold pin. Keeping a wary eye on Septimus, Marcellus unpinned the **Keye** and pulled out the chain, the same thick gold disc embossed with seven stars surrounding a circle with a dot in the middle that the old Marcellus had worn. Septimus eyed the disc longingly, knowing it opened the Great Doors of Time and was the key to his freedom. But short of ambushing Marcellus and grabbing it—which was impossible given their difference in size—he could see no way of getting it. Marcellus placed the gold disc in a round indentation on the front of the chest and the lid swung open as if lifted by ghostly fingers.

Septimus selected a thin glass rod from the chest, his divining rod, which when dipped into a substance would tell him whether it was what Marcellus called **Entire**. Then he opened the door to the glass cabinet and took out the Tincture. He removed the cork, dipped the rod into the contents, turned it seven times and then held it up to a nearby candle flame.

“What thinkest thou, Apprentice?” Marcellus asked Septimus anxiously. “Are we yet ready for the venom?”

Septimus shook his head.

“When thinkest thou it may be so?” Marcellus asked anxiously.

Septimus said nothing. Although he had become used to the oddly circuitous way of speaking that Marcellus and indeed everyone in this Time used, he found it hard to speak like that himself. If he did say anything, people would look puzzled; if they thought about it for a few moments, they understood what he had said, but they knew there was something very odd in the way he had said it. Septimus had lost count of the number of times people had asked where he came from. It was a question he did not know how to answer and one that he did not wish to think about. The worst thing was that

now, at the rare times he spoke, his accent and intonation sounded odd even to him, as if he no longer knew who he was anymore.

Normally Marcellus did not mind having such a silent Apprentice—particularly as the only subject that Septimus seemed willing to talk about was Marcellus’s future decrepitude—but there were times when it could become irritating. This was one of them. “Oh Prithee, Apprentice, *speak*,” he said.

The truth was, the Tincture had been ready almost immediately, but at the time Septimus had not had the skills to recognize it. But then, as is the way with complex tinctures and potions, it had quickly become unstable, and Septimus had spent the next few months patiently coaxing it back to being **Entire**, for he knew that Marcellus believed that his future depended on this.

Try as he might, Septimus could not dislike Marcellus Pye. Even though Marcellus had taken him from his own Time and was keeping him against his will, the Alchemist had always been kind to him and, more important, had taught him everything Septimus had asked about **Physik**—and more.

“Thou knowest how this is a matter of Life and Death to me, Apprentice,” said Marcellus quietly.

Septimus nodded.

“Thou knowest also that this small amount of Tincture is all I have left. There is no more and none can be made, for the Planetary Conjunction will not come again.”

Septimus nodded again.

“Then I Pray you think hard on this and answer me, for this is my only hope to Change my Terrible Fate. If I can drink of the Tincture which thou hast made I hope that I may not grow Old and Foul as I have seen.”

Septimus didn’t see how Marcellus could change things. He had already seen him as an old, decaying man and that was how it would be, but Marcellus was determined to cling to this one hope. “So Pray tell me when we may add the venom, Apprentice,” said Marcellus urgently. “For I fear the Tincture will decay ere long.”

Septimus spoke. Briefly, it is true, but he spoke.

“Soon.”

“Soon? *How* soon? Tomorrow morn? Tomorrow eve?”

Septimus shook his head again.

“When?” asked an exasperated Marcellus. “*When?*”

“In forty-nine hours exactly. Not a moment before.”

Marcellus looked relieved. Two days. He had waited so long already that he could manage another two days. He watched Septimus carefully place the phial back in the glass cabinet and gently close the door. Marcellus breathed out and smiled.

Relieved about his Tincture, Marcellus took time to notice his Apprentice. The boy was pale and thin, with dark circles under his eyes. Of course his appearance wasn't helped by his refusal to cut or comb his bird's nest of hair, but even so, Marcellus felt a pang of guilt.

“Apprentice,” he said, “it is not good that thou sitteth here like a Mole beneath his Mound. Though it be chill and Snow still layeth upon the ground, outside the Sunne doth shine.” Marcellus fished out two small silver coins and pressed them into Septimus's unwilling and inky palm. “The last Winter Faire is set up upon the Way. Take thee two groats for thy Pleasure and hie thee there.”

Septimus looked at them without much interest.

“'Tis true what they say, Septimus: *A Surfeit of Ink Maketh the Spirit to Sink. Begone.*” Marcellus wandered back to the large table and picked up the pad of blotting paper that rested at Septimus's place, revealing a red rose carved into the wood—which Septimus stared at gloomily. “Go,” insisted his master, shooing Septimus out.

Septimus took the scribes' exit from the Chamber. He made his way up a steep flight of steps and emerged into the network of tunnels that would take him to the Wizard Tower. This was the one treat that Septimus allowed himself: Every so often he would walk through the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower, as the Alchemie Apprentice was entitled to do. It was a bittersweet experience, but nevertheless it reminded him of home in a way that nothing else in that Time could. He knew the way well now and walked slowly along the rush-lit tunnels. Before long he reached a small underground archway

through which could be seen a flight of steps.

“Good day, Septimus Heap,” said the ghost sitting at the foot of the steps—a fairly recent ghost of an ExtraOrdinary Wizard, judging by the brightness of his robes.

Septimus nodded, but he said nothing.

“Turn left at the top and say the password,” instructed the ghost slowly and extremely clearly. Since Septimus had never spoken a word, the ghost had decided that he was not the brightest of Apprentices and made a point of loudly giving Septimus the same instructions whenever he saw him.

Septimus nodded again politely and headed for the steps with the usual strange feeling lurking in the pit of his stomach. At the top of the steps, he turned left as he always did and went through a small cloakroom, which he still thought of as the broom closet. This was the part that still raised his hopes, no matter how many times he told himself not to be so ridiculous. He pushed open the door and walked out into the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower.

The first time that Septimus had visited the Wizard Tower, he had stepped into the Great Hall and was convinced that he had somehow come back to his own Time. Everything was the same. The walls had their brilliant, fleeting **Magykal** pictures floating over them, the same air of **Magyk** permeated the atmosphere and made him feel dizzy with relief. Even the floor of the Great Hall had the same strange sandy feel as he had run across it, too excited to glance down at the welcome message it was writing him. He had jumped on the silver stairs and ridden to the top of the Tower, just as he had done every day for nearly two years. He had not noticed the confused glances of the Ordinary Wizards on the various landings; all he had wanted to do was see Marcia and tell her what had happened—and to promise her that he would never go along the Outside Path again. Never, ever, *ever*. On the twentieth floor he had leaped off the stairs and dashed toward the great purple door at the entrance to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s rooms.

The door would not open.

Septimus had pushed it impatiently, feeling that he could not possibly wait another second to see Marcia, but the door had stayed firmly shut. He could not understand it. Maybe Marcia was in trouble. Maybe she had **Barred** the door...

As Septimus stood wondering what could possibly be the matter, the door

had suddenly opened and a purple-robed figure stepped out.

“Marcia, I’m—”

The ExtraOrdinary Wizard had peered down at Septimus, regarding him with a puzzled air, asking, “How did you get up here, boy?”

“I—I—” Septimus had stammered, staring uncomprehendingly at the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, a thin man with straight fair hair, which flopped over his green Wizard eyes. Around his neck hung *Marcia’s* Akhu Amulet, and around his waist he wore *Marcia’s* platinum and gold ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt. Suddenly Septimus realized the truth of what he was seeing.

“Be not afraid, child,” said the ExtraOrdinary Wizard kindly, noticing Septimus’s sudden gray pallor. “You are newly come, are you not?” The ExtraOrdinary Wizard looked Septimus up and down, taking in his black and red tunic with the planetary symbols embroidered in gold thread down the sleeves. “Surely, you are the new Alchemie boy?”

Septimus had nodded, utterly miserable for having had his hopes raised and then dashed.

“Come now, child. I will take you down to the Great Hall and show you the way out. Follow me.” Septimus followed the ExtraOrdinary Wizard onto the silver spiral stairs, and they stood together in silence as the stairs slowly made their way down through the Wizard Tower.

Now Septimus knew that he no longer belonged in the Wizard Tower, or rather, as he had realized after the first few desperate days, he had yet to belong. But, even so, he found it hard to keep away.

As Septimus walked through the Great Hall, a message in shimmering red and gold saying, WELCOME, ALCHEMIE APPRENTICE, flashed briefly around his feet before moving on to a more important message saying, WELCOME, EXTRAORDINARY APPRENTICE. A slim figure in a green tunic, wearing the silver—*Septimus’s* silver—ExtraOrdinary Apprentice belt, had just come in through the great doors to the Wizard Tower, the ones that he was no longer entitled to use. Septimus had taken an immediate dislike to the Apprentice, a girl not many years older than himself. He knew it was unfair to dislike her. She was friendly enough and nodded to him in a distant way when she saw him, but she had taken his place. Or was it, he asked himself, that *he* will have taken *her* place—eventually? At that point Septimus’s brain refused to think anymore.

Not wishing to have to explain his presence, Septimus slipped into the shadows and headed down the crumbling stone steps at the back of the Wizard Tower. Then he skirted the great base of the Tower and set off across the snow-covered cobblestones of the courtyard toward the Great Arch. It was, as Marcellus had said, a beautiful day; the air was chill but the bright, low sunlight glinted off the gold streaks that ran through the lapis lazuli, which lined the Arch. However, Septimus paid it little attention as he wandered through and emerged into a thronged Wizard Way. He stood for a moment and pulled his thick red and gold woolen cloak around him against the frosty air, breathing in the strange smells and listening to the unfamiliar sounds. He shook his head in disbelief, he felt so tantalizingly near to home and yet so impossibly far away—five hundred years away, to be precise.

As Septimus stood in the chill winter sun, a realization stole over him. At last he had a few hours of freedom—he had time to try out his plan. It was a desperate plan but it might—just *might*—work.

HUGO TENDERFOOT

As *Septimus* walked along Wizard Way, his feet did not tread on the pale limestone that he had been used to in his own Time, but on snow-covered earth. The silver torchposts that *Septimus* had so often watched being lit from his bedroom window at the top of the Wizard Tower were still in the process of being erected in honor of the Queen's Silver Jubilee. The low, yellow stone buildings on either side of the broad avenue, although already old, had a less weathered appearance and showed fine details that *Septimus* had never seen before.

As he passed the Manuscriptorium at Number Thirteen Wizard Way, *Septimus* glanced at the window—which looked odd to him, for it was almost empty and very clean—and a wave of longing to see Beetle swept over him. What would Beetle say now? *Septimus* wondered. Beetle usually had something to say about everything but he thought even Beetle would be lost for words.

Septimus shook away the memories of the fun he and Beetle had had and turned his thoughts to his destination. A network of tunnels, which *Septimus*

knew from his own Time as the Ice Tunnels, linked all the old buildings of the Castle. In this Time the tunnels were still free of ice and were used by the Alchemists and Wizards to move around the Castle on their business, unseen and unremarked upon. Septimus traveled through one every day to get from Marcellus's house to his workplace at the Great Chamber. Recently he had been sent to the Palace to deliver some solid-gold bowls as a gift to the Queen—an apology for something that Marcellus had done wrong. It was this trip that had given Septimus the beginnings of his plan and it was to the Palace tunnels that he was heading now, except this time he was going aboveground, for he had no wish to bump into any nosy Alchemie scribes or Marcellus himself.

The last Winter Faire was in full swing at the end of the Way, just in front of the Palace Gate. Great streams of smoke rose from dozens of braziers cooking chestnuts, corn on the cob, thick winter soup, sausages and potatoes. Septimus pushed his way through the strange-smelling crowds, refusing offers of “best crunchy pig’s ear, Apprentice,” or “tasty hoof pie, who will buy my tasty hoof pie?” Trying to ignore the strains of the hurdy-gurdy playing what he supposed was festive music, Septimus wrenched himself free from a particularly insistent fortune-teller who offered to “reveal thy true Destiny for one groat, young Master—for who knoweth what Life doth have in store for us?” Who knoweth indeed? thought Septimus grimly, as he shrugged away the clutching hand.

Septimus sidestepped a pair of identical twin stilt-walkers, ducked under a tightrope and narrowly avoided being hit by a large piece of wood from an overenthusiastic participant in a Whack-the-Rat stall. One final squeeze past two fat ladies throwing crayfish and rice into a large vat of boiling water and Septimus was out of the crowds. Quickly he turned off down The Twitten, an alleyway that led to Snake Slipway. Soon he was ringing the doorbell of the house that he still thought of as Weasal Van Klampff’s.

As Septimus waited to be let in, he remembered all the times that Marcia had sent him to the very same place to pick up the various pieces for her **ShadowSafe**. If he closed his eyes, he could easily imagine himself there, with the raucous insults of the boys on the pier echoing in his ears. Septimus never thought that he would long to hear the sound of *Hey! Caterpillar Boy!*

A small boy wearing the neat uniform of a house servant opened the door. He looked surprised to see Septimus, who usually came up through the tunnel, but he smiled and bowed to the Alchemie Apprentice. “Prithee, step inside, Septimus Heap,” said the boy, who had earnest gray eyes and freckles,

and whose sandy-colored hair sported the usual pudding-basin haircut that all the children had. Septimus had resolutely refused it, insisting on letting his curls grow ever longer and more tangled by the day.

The boy looked at Septimus expectantly, waiting to escort Septimus where he wanted to go. Septimus sighed; this was not part of his plan. He had forgotten about young Hugo Tenderfoot, who had an irritating tendency to follow him around like a lost puppy. Septimus was forced to say something. He cleared his throat and said, “Thanks very much, Hugo. You can go now.”

“Prithee?” The boy’s eyes widened, partly in surprise at hearing Septimus speak, but mainly because, although he did not *quite* understand what Septimus had said, he felt as if he should.

Septimus made an effort at what he thought of as Old Speak. “Um. Prithee, Hugo, begone.”

“Bigoon?”

Septimus was saved from further efforts by the tinkling of a bell upstairs, which Hugo, after giving Septimus a small bow, ran off to answer.

Quickly Septimus walked to the back of the house and took the creaky steps down to the cellars, where he took the familiar tunnel that led out of the farthest end, along which he had first followed Una Brakket to the Laboratory. The tunnel was well swept and brightly lit with burning rushlights, unlike in Una’s Time, but apart from that, it looked just the same. Septimus ignored the door to the Laboratory, which Marcellus used for the more delicate experiments, and took the side tunnel that he used every morning to get to work.

He soon reached the familiar trapdoor—but *where* was the ladder? Septimus knelt and opened the trapdoor. It looked like a long drop. He hunted around for the ladder, but he could find no sign of it. There was nothing else to do—he would have to jump. Septimus hesitated, trying to judge how far he would have to fall if he dangled full-length from the trapdoor. He told himself that if Simon could do it while wearing a pair of ice skates, then he could easily do it without.

In the tunnel, the sound of voices drew near and Septimus stepped back from the trapdoor. He watched a group of chattering Palace servants pass by below him. They were wearing the old-fashioned Palace uniform that he had seen on some of the ghosts in his own Time. The sight of the servants

disappearing around the corner suddenly made up his mind, for it would be much easier to get into the Palace unnoticed in the middle of a gaggle of servants. Quickly Septimus slipped through the trapdoor. After dangling uncertainly for a few moments, he realized the reason why the floor of the tunnel seemed so far away—it actually *was* far away, for it was no longer covered in a thick layer of ice. But Septimus was committed now. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let go.

“Oof!”

The jarring from the drop took his breath away, and as Septimus lay winded on the tunnel floor he saw Hugo’s worried face peering down at him through the trapdoor. A moment later Hugo had unclipped the ladder from where it hung from the ceiling and pushed it down to Septimus.

“’Tis far to fall, Apprentice,” said Hugo, scrambling down. “I beg a thousand pardons for leaving the trap unsecured. Prithee, give me your hand.” Hugo hauled Septimus to his feet.

“Where was the ladder?” asked Septimus.

“Prithee? I pray you, Apprentice, ascend with care.”

Septimus sighed. “Hugo,” he said, “I don’t want to ascend with care. Now buzz off.”

“Buzzoff?”

“Yes, buzz off. Go away. Scram. Oh...begone with you!”

Hugo’s face fell. He understood “begone with you.” It was something his elder brother said regularly. And his two elder sisters. And his cousins who lived around the corner.

“Oh, come on then, if you want to,” Septimus relented, realizing that if Hugo went back, he would very soon be telling everyone that the Alchemie Apprentice had gone off into the tunnels alone. Septimus had a feeling that Marcellus might get suspicious.

Hugo looked at Septimus quizzically. “Want to?” he said, copying Septimus’s accent. “Want...to. I...want to!”

“Well, come on then,” Septimus told him, impatient to catch up with the

Palace servants whose chatter was fast fading away.

Hugo trotted after him. “Buzzoff!” said the boy, running behind Septimus like a small bee. “Buzzoff, buzzoff, buzzoff!”

Septimus half ran, half walked beneath the rushlights that lined the wide brick tunnel that branched off toward the Palace. The small bee running behind kept pace with him and, apart from the occasional “buzzoff,” did not make any attempt at conversation. As the voices of the Palace servants became clearer, Septimus concentrated on maintaining some distance from them while still keeping them in sight, for as they approached the Palace, numerous small turns appeared and the tunnel began to resemble a rabbit warren.

After a few minutes, the servants took one of the small tunnels and Septimus was just in time to see them disappear through a narrow red door. He turned to Hugo. “You ought to get back now,” he said, and then, seeing Hugo’s puzzled look, he said, “Prithee, begone. I pray you do not disclose our journey, for I go about the Master’s secret affairs.”

Hugo put his head to one side like a parrot wondering whether it was worth repeating what he had just said. “Buzzoff?” he asked.

“Yes, buzz off. Hop to it. Go on, *shoo!*”

Hugo got the message. His face fell and he set off dejectedly back along the tunnel. Septimus felt a stab of remorse. No one else had shown the remotest interest in being with him ever since he had been stuck in this dump of a Time. “Oh, come on then,” he called out.

Hugo’s face lit up. “Not buzzoff?”

“No,” sighed Septimus, “not buzzoff.”

A few minutes later Septimus and Hugo were standing in the main kitchen corridor in the middle of what appeared to be frantic preparations for a banquet. A wave of servants swept past them while the boys stood like two rocks in the middle of a fast-moving stream, watching the great stacks of plates, trays of goblets and tubs of golden knives pass by. Two servants almost bumped into them as they staggered past with a massive silver tureen between them; they were followed by a swarm of girls, each carrying two small silver bowls. From each bowl, the head of a duckling poked out.

Septimus was amazed. He was used to the Palace being a quiet and almost empty place. He had expected to be able to sneak in and find his way to the turret that housed the Queen's Room unnoticed. His plan was to follow the Queen or Princess into the Room while the invisible door was still open. He would then sneak down to the Robing Room and try to go through the Glass once more. Septimus knew it was a desperate plan with little chance of succeeding but it was worth a try. But now he could see that if the Palace was this crowded everywhere, he had no chance, especially standing out as he did in his gold-emblazoned Alchemie tunic.

In fact, Septimus's strange attire was already attracting glances. Servants were slowing their pace and staring at him. Soon a jam of people began to build in the corridor, causing a large and impatient footman, who was trying to get out of a linen cupboard just behind Septimus and Hugo, to push his way forward and barge into them. Angrily, the footman grabbed Septimus's collar. "Thou art a Stranger here," he said suspiciously.

Septimus tried to pull away, but the footman held on tight. Suddenly Hugo piped up, "Sire, we are but Messengers, come with urgent tidings for the Pastry Cooke." The footman looked at Hugo's earnest expression and let Septimus go.

"Take you the third Turning and then the second Entrance. Madame Choux may be found therein. Treadst thou softly, for she did burne four dozen Pies but one houre past." The footman winked at Septimus and Hugo, stepped into the stream of servants and was carried away.

Hugo looked at Septimus, trying to understand what he wanted to do. Hugo liked him, for Septimus was the only person he knew who did not shout at him or order him around as if he were no better than a dog. "Buzzoff?" asked Hugo as three fat women bearing great baskets of bread rolls pushed past.

Septimus shook his head and glared at the women who had all turned to stare at him. "Not buzzoff," he replied. "There is something I have to do." In Old Speak, Septimus said, "I have...a Queste. Here, in the Palace."

Hugo understood Questes. All knights and pages had them and he didn't see any reason why an Alchemie Apprentice should not have one too. He had never heard of a Queste starting in a Palace, but anything was possible with the Alchemists. He took Septimus by the hand and pulled him into the flow of servants. Following the smells of hot water and soap suds, Hugo soon found what he was looking for: the laundry room.

Several minutes later—and two groats poorer—two new Palace servants, dressed in clean servants' attire, slipped out of the laundry room and set off, the small sandy-haired one trotting behind the taller one with tangled curly fair hair. They had gotten no farther than the corner when a large woman in a stained apron stepped out of the sauce-kitchen doorway carrying two ornate gold jugs. She thrust the jugs, which were full of hot orange sauce, into their hands, saying, "Make haste, make haste," and pushed them off to join a long line of other boys, each carrying an identical golden jug.

Hugo and Septimus had no choice. Under the eagle eye of the sauce cook, and followed by a large Palace footman carrying a crisp white cloth in case any boy might spill the sauce, they followed the line of boys up the long and winding back stairs and emerged into the gloom of the Long Walk. As they progressed slowly, the chatter and clatter of a banquet beginning in the Ballroom drifted toward them. Suddenly the great doors to the Ballroom were thrown open and a roar swept over them. The long line of boys began to file inside.

Septimus and Hugo trailed into the Ballroom at the end of the line and the footman closed the doors behind them. Open-mouthed, Hugo stared at the sight before him. He had never seen such a huge room packed full of so many people wearing such rich and exotic clothes. The hubbub was almost deafening and the rich smells of the food made the boy's head swim, for no one ever remembered to feed Hugo very much.

Septimus, who was more used to such occasions—Marcia was a generous hostess at the Wizard Tower—was also open-mouthed but for another reason. Sitting at the top table, a familiar figure surveyed all before her and, as ever, Queen Etheldredda wore her usual expression of disapproval.

28

IMPOUNDED



Snorri Snorrelssen's Trader's barge had just tied up at the Traders' Dock at the Port. Alice Nettles, Chief Customs Officer, stood on the quayside looking at it suspiciously. Alice was a tall, gray-haired woman with an imposing manner acquired during her time many years ago as Judge Alice Nettles. But now she wore the official blue robes of a Customs Officer with two gold flashes on the sleeves. People at the Port did not mess with Alice, or at least not more than once.

"I'd like a word with your skipper," Alice told Snorri.

This was not a good start to any conversation with Snorri. She glared at Alice and did not deign to reply.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" demanded Alice, who was sure that Snorri did. "I want to speak to your skipper."

"I am the skipper," Snorri told Alice. "You will speak to me."

"You?" asked Alice, shocked. Surely the girl was no more than fourteen at the most. She was far too young to be skippering a Trader's barge on her own.

"Yes," said Snorri defiantly. "What do you want?"

Alice was nettled. “I want to see your Castle Inspection Papers.”

Glowing, Snorri handed them over.

Alice perused them and then shook her head. “These are incomplete.”

“They are all that I was given.”

“You have failed to comply with the emergency Quarantine regulations. I am therefore impounding your boat.”

Snorri flushed with anger. “You—you cannot do this,” she protested.

“Indeed I can.” Alice motioned to two Customs Officers who had been hanging around in the shadows in case of trouble. They produced a great roll of yellow tape and proceeded to cordon off the *Alfrún*.

“You must leave your boat immediately,” Alice told Snorri. “It will be towed to a dock in the Quarantine area until the emergency is over. You may then reclaim it on full payment of dock dues and inspection fees.”

“No!” said Snorri. “No! I will not let you!”

“Any more trouble and you will be spending time in the Customs House lock-up,” Alice told her sternly. “I shall give you five minutes to pack a bag. You may bring your cat if you wish.”

Five minutes later, Snorri Snorrelssen was homeless. From their perch up the mast, Stanley and Dawnie watched Snorri trudge off with her bag slung over her shoulders, Ullr trailing at her heels.

“That’s a bit much,” Stanley muttered to Dawnie. “Nice kid like that. What’s she going to do now?”

“Well, at least we’re in time for a late lunch,” said Dawnie. “I fancy something from that nice pie shop over there.”

Stanley didn’t fancy anything, but he followed Dawnie down the mast and scuttled off after her to the pie shop.

Snorri wandered away, lost in her thoughts. It had been one long disaster ever since she had arrived at the Castle. She must have seen nearly all the ghosts in the Castle—except for the one she had really wanted to see. She had been thrown out of the Castle just before the Market was due to start and

nearly sunk by a dragon. She had only just got rid of the wretched creature and now *this* had happened. Snorri was so annoyed that she did not at first hear Alice Nettles calling after her. And when she finally did, Snorri made a point of ignoring the Customs Officer.

But Alice was not to be put off. “Wait—I say, wait a moment!” She ran after Snorri and caught up with her. “You are young to be alone in the Port,” said Alice.

“I am not alone. I have Ullr,” muttered Snorri, glancing down at her orange cat.

“It is dangerous here at night. A cat may be company but it will not protect you—”

“Ullr will,” Snorri replied stonily.

“Here,” said Alice, pushing a piece of paper into Snorri’s unwilling hand. “This is where I live. Warehouse Number Nine. Top floor. There is space for you and Ullr to sleep comfortably. You would be very welcome.”

Snorri looked unsure.

“Sometimes,” explained Alice, “I have to do things in my job that I do not like to do. I am sorry about your barge but it is for the good of the Port. We cannot risk the Sickenesse spreading here. Boats bring rats and rats bring disease.”

“Some say,” said Snorri, “that it is not rats that spread the Sickenesse. They say it is another kind of creature.”

“People say many things.” Alice laughed. “They say that great chests of gold have mysteriously appeared on their ships without their knowledge. They say that barrels of water must have miraculously turned to brandy during the voyage. They say that they will return to pay the duty on their cargo. It does not mean that what they say is true.” Alice was aware of Snorri’s clear blue eyes under their pale, quizzical eyebrows. She met Snorri’s gaze and said, “But what I said to you was true. I hope you will stay.”

Snorri nodded slowly.

“Good. It is Warehouse Number Nine. You will find it on the fifth street on the left past the old dock. It is best to arrive before nightfall, for the old

dock is not safe after dark. Go in the blue door set into the green, take a candle from the tub and walk through the lower warehouse. Take the iron steps at the back to the top. The door is always open. There is bread and cheese in the cupboard and wine in the jug. Oh—and my name is Alice.”

“I am Snorri.”

“I will see you later, Snorri.” With that, Alice was off to a small boat waiting for her at the foot of the harbor steps. Snorri watched the oarsmen row Alice toward a large ship at anchor about a half mile out from the Port, and Ullr rubbed against her tunic and meowed. He was hungry—and so, Snorri realized, was she.

Tucked away between the Traders’ Dock Customs House and an abandoned loft was the Harbor and Dock Pie Shop. A welcoming yellow light glowed from its steamed-up windows, and the wonderful smell of hot pies drifted out the open door. Neither Snorri nor Ullr could resist it. Soon they had joined a line of hungry workers waiting for their supper. The line moved slowly but at last it was Snorri’s turn.

A boy came out of the kitchen carrying a tray of newly baked pies and Snorri pointed to them. “I shall have two pies,” she said.

The young woman behind the counter smiled at Snorri. “That will be four groats, please.”

Snorri handed over four small silver coins.

Maureen—ex-kitchen maid, ex–Doll House skivvy and brand-new owner of the Harbor and Dock Pie Shop—wrapped up the pies and added some scraps from a broken pie. “For your cat,” she said.

“Thank you,” said Snorri, hugging the hot pies to herself and thinking that the Port was not such a bad place after all. As she left the shop she heard Maureen scream.

“Rats! Quick, Kevin, *Kevin!* Get them!”

Snorri and Ullr sat at the Traders’ Dock harbor wall eating their pies. Ullr, who always got very hungry just before nightfall, quickly ate the scraps from Maureen and then finished off the pie that Snorri had bought for him. As the

sky darkened and gray rain clouds began to blow in from the west, Snorri and Ullr watched a tug tow the *Alfrún* out of Traders' Dock and take it on its way to the Quarantine Dock, which was in a bleak marshy area on the other side of the river mouth. Despite the warmth of her pie, the company of Ullr and Alice Nettles's offer, Snorri felt desolate as she saw the *Alfrún* leave the protected waters of the harbor and pitch to and fro as she entered the black waters of the Port tidal race. Her mother's words came back to her: "You are a fool, Snorri Snorrelssen, to think that you can Trade on your own—what makes *you* so special? It is no life for a woman, let alone a girl of fourteen. Your father, Olaf, rest his soul, would have been horrified—*horrified*, Snorri. The poor man did not know what he was doing when he left you his Letters of Charter. Promise me, for the love of Freya, that you will not go. Snorri—Snorri, come back here *right now!*"

But Snorri had not promised, she had not come back *right now*. And so here she was, stranded in a strange port, watching all her trading hopes be towed away before being left to rot in some pestilential dock in the middle of nowhere. Snorri got to her feet with a sigh. "Komme, Ullr," she said.

With the first few drops of a cold autumn rain falling, Snorri set off. Alice's directions should have been easy to follow, but Snorri was still preoccupied with her thoughts and soon found herself lost in a bewildering maze of derelict old warehouses and decrepit old ghosts. Snorri had never known such disreputable-looking ghosts. The streets were crowded with old smugglers and muggers, drunkards and thieves all jostling, cursing and spitting, just as they had done when they were Living. Most of them paid no attention to Snorri, for they were too busy fighting one another to notice the Living or to bother to **Appear** to them, but one or two, aware that Snorri could see them, began to follow her along the streets, enjoying the anxious look on her face as she turned to check if they were still there.

The rain began to fall heavily and Snorri's spirits sank even lower. She felt trapped. She had no compass, no chart, and everything looked the same to her: street after street of great black shapes looming overhead, blocking out the sky. Snorri would far rather have been adrift in the towering gray waves of the northern sea in the *Alfrún* than lost among these menacing old warehouses. Looking all around, desperately searching for a blue door in the green—or was it a green in the blue?—Snorri began to panic. She stopped to try to get her bearings, but the entourage of ghosts closed in and Snorri could no longer see where she was. She was surrounded by mocking faces sporting rotting teeth, broken noses, cauliflower ears and blinded eyes.

“Go away!” screamed Snorri, her shout echoing along the chasm of a street and bouncing back to her.

“You lost, sweetie?” said a soft voice nearby. Anxious to see who had spoken, Snorri **Passed Through** the circle of ghosts to a chorus of curses and protests. A young woman, dressed in various shades of black, stood in the shadows of a doorway a few yards away—a blue doorway within a big green warehouse door. Cut into the brick arch above the door was the number 9.

“No, I am not lost, thank you,” said Snorri, heading gratefully for Alice’s door. Seeing where Snorri was headed, the young woman stepped forward and put her arm across the little door, barring Snorri’s way. With a stab of fear, Snorri saw the young woman’s shining black eyes with their flashes of brilliant blue. She knew she was dealing with a **Darke** Witch.

“You don’t want to go in there,” the Witch told her.

“I *do* want to go in there,” retorted Snorri.

The **Darke** Witch smiled and shook her head as though Snorri had not understood what she had meant. “No, sweetie. You *don’t*. You want to come with me. Don’t you?” A spark of blue flashed across the Witch’s eyes and Snorri felt herself weakening. Why did she want to go into some horrible old warehouse anyway?

“That’s right, you come back with Linda now. Come on.” Linda, trainee Coven Mother of the Port Witch Coven, took hold of Snorri’s hand, and Snorri felt her viselike grasp close over the bones in her hand and squash them together,

“Ouch,” protested Snorri, trying to pull her hand away while Linda’s grip tightened even more, rolling her bones across one another. “Ouch, you’re *hurting*.”

“*Surely* not. A strong girl like you is no match for little ole me.” Linda giggled, knowing that she had Snorri in her power. Linda had been out on what the Witches called a Twilight Trawl; she needed to replace their maid-of-all-work after the girl’s irritating accident in the coven’s cauldron earlier that day. They had eventually fished the girl out but it was too late. Now Linda was determined to bring back what looked like a promisingly strong maid who would probably last more than the usual couple of months.

However, Snorri was not being as cooperative as Linda had expected. The

witch roughly tugged her away from the doorway and Snorri resisted. Linda crunched her hand hard. Snorri gasped with pain, but suddenly Linda loosened her grip and Snorri saw a flicker of fear in the Witch's black eyes. She followed Linda's gaze and almost laughed with relief.

Ullr was transforming.

The scrawny orange cat at which Linda had just surreptitiously aimed a kick was no longer scrawny or even particularly orange. As Linda stared, unwilling to release her catch, she saw the NightUllr beginning to appear. The black tip at the end of Ullr's orange tail was spreading over the cat like the darkness of an eclipse traveling across the land. Ullr's fur was becoming sleek, short and shiny; it covered his new muscles, which rippled under his skin, forming and reforming as he grew slowly and steadily, becoming a full-sized panther.

But still Linda kept her grip tightly on Snorri's hand. Enthralled, she stared at Ullr, a brilliant plan forming in her mind. With this great black beast at her side there would be no arguing about her rightful place as Coven Mother—not with a Familiar such as this. He would get rid of old Pamela with no trouble, not to mention any of the other Witches who gave her trouble and, come to think of it, that old nurse next door. The Coven could take over the nurse's place, which would pay old nursie back for setting fire to the bridge. Linda smiled. What fun this was going to be.

And then Ullr underwent his final nighttime transformation: His eyes became the eyes of the NightUllr. Linda looked into Ullr's night eyes and something inside her went cold. She knew she was no match for this creature. Something of the **Darke**, far **Darker** than Linda had ever known, stared out from Ullr. She dropped Snorri's hand as if it had bitten her and backed away, murmuring, "Nice kitty, nice kitty cat."

A long, low menacing growl rose from Ullr's throat; the great black cat's lips retracted in a snarl, baring his sharp white teeth. Linda turned and ran, racing through the throng of watching ghosts. She did not stop until she had reached the Port Witch Coven, where she had to hammer on the door for at least half an hour before anyone bothered to let her in.

Nursing her sore hand, Snorri pushed open the small blue door and she and the NightUllr stepped into Warehouse Number Nine.

29

WAREHOUSE NUMBER NINE



S*norri was fast asleep* when Alice Nettles returned much later that night. The Chief Customs Officer was cold, tired and wet after a rough crossing back from a particularly uncooperative ship, but as she pushed open the little blue door, Alice was smiling, for stepping through the door with her was the ghost of Alther Mella.

Alther had had a difficult day at the Palace. By the afternoon, Marcia had joined Jillie Djinn in the Hermetic Chamber with the words “No, Alther, I do not wish to see anyone—not even you. No, I *don’t* know when I shall be out again. Not for months probably. Now go *away*.” Alther had continued to search the Palace for Jenna and Septimus but there was no sign of them anywhere. There was, however, an endless supply of stories about what had happened to them. It seemed to Alther that Spit Fyre was definitely involved, especially since the dragon had disappeared too, but apart from that he could not make any sense of it. Alther could not bring himself to believe that the note Marcia had found was really from Septimus. He still hoped that Jenna and Septimus had gone to see Aunt Zelda, although as the day wore on and darkness began to fall, he realized that he was clutching at straws, for he knew that Aunt Zelda would not allow either of them to stay away so long.

Silas, meanwhile, grew ever more despondent. By nightfall, Alther finally admitted to himself that Septimus's letter was genuine. He had told Silas that he "still had a few leads to follow up" and would be back the next morning. Alther left Silas and Maxie, both sitting gloomily by the Palace door, awaiting the arrival of Gringe.

What Alther meant was he needed to talk to Alice Nettles.

And so, as Alice was being rowed back across the choppy dark seas toward the welcoming lights of the Port, she had seen the ghost of Alther Mella standing patiently on the harbor wall, as she had once seen Alther many years ago when he was still a Living ExtraOrdinary Wizard. On that memorable day, Alice had been returning from the Castle Court's annual Mystery Winter Picnic. Alther had found out where the picnic was—a windswept affair on Sandy Isle a few miles south of the Port—and had come especially to meet her. Alice had never before, or since, felt as happy as she had at the moment when she had recognized Alther's purple-robed figure gazing out to sea, waiting for her. Two weeks later Alther was dead, shot by an Assassin's bullet.

Alice picked up a candle from the tub, struck the flint and lit it. Alther followed Alice through the warehouse as she threaded her way through narrow canyons precariously carved out between the great teetering stacks of ancient cargo. The light from Alice's candle threw dancing shadows across the piles of old wooden chests, furniture, assorted junk and even an ornate carriage with huge red wheels and two stuffed tigers in the harness. Alther jumped at the sight of the tigers' glittering glass eyes, which seemed to stare reproachfully at him as if he was somehow responsible for their fate.

Alice's warehouse was one of many in the old part of the Port, stuffed full with the contents of ships long rotted, brought to the Port by seafarers long dead who had neglected, or refused, to pay the duty on their goods. Now it never would be paid, for much of it was centuries old and the interest on the duty amounted to many times the value of the items.

After many twists and turns, Alice and Alther arrived at the staircase at the back of the warehouse. Alice's clattering footsteps echoed on the steep iron steps as she climbed past the floors, each crammed to the ceiling with its dusty and cobwebbed mix of treasure and junk.

"Can't think why you live in this dump, Alice," said Alther, teasing,

“when you could have the Chief Customs Officer’s stately pile on Dock One.”

“Can’t think why either,” said Alice, a little breathless, as they were now on the fifth floor and still climbing. “Must be something to do with an old ghost who insists on following me around.” Alice stopped on the sixth floor landing to catch her breath, leaning for a moment against a frighteningly tall stack of Chinese willow pattern plates before thinking the better of it. “Pity you never went to the Customs House parties, Alther,” she puffed. “It would have saved a lot of trouble.”

“You wouldn’t be in such good shape though,” Alther replied, smiling. “You look good with all this exercise, Alice.”

“Why, thank you, Alther. I do believe I get more compliments from you now than I ever did when you were...well, you know.”

“Living, Alice. It’s all right, you can say the word. Well, I was a fool then. Didn’t realize what I had until it was too late.”

Alice Nettles did not trust herself to reply. She turned and ran up the last flight of steps to the seventh floor, pushed open the door to her warehouse aerie and busied herself lighting the huge stove in the middle of the floor.

Alther floated in a few moments later, following in some of the footsteps that he had once taken many years ago, after Aunt Zelda had discovered some letters hidden behind the chimney in Keeper’s Cottage. She had paid Alther a surprise visit, insisting that there was *something* important in Warehouse Number Nine and she wanted him to help her find it. When Alther had asked Aunt Zelda exactly what was so important, she would only say that she would know it when she saw it. After much arm-twisting from Aunt Zelda, Alther had reluctantly agreed to do a **Search**. The **Search** had taken him three weeks, during which he had become allergic to dust, fallen out with Aunt Zelda and found nothing important as far as he could tell, apart from a nest of rare and very bad-tempered tropical spiders behind the hot water pipes. By then Aunt Zelda had stopped speaking to him. Later, when they had made up their quarrel, Aunt Zelda had told him what she had been looking for. Alther had always meant to go back and search for it again, but like many things in his life, he had never quite gotten around to it.

And so Alther had considered the whole episode a complete waste of time until many years later, when Alice had tried to find somewhere in the Port to live, where the ghostly Alther could visit her. Alther had not frequented many

places in the Port when he was Living, so when Warehouse Number Nine came up for sale, he and Alice were thrilled. Alice had bought Warehouse Number Nine, with contents included, and moved into the top floor. Now Alther could visit Alice and wander freely through the entire warehouse without any fear of being **Returned**, which he loathed.

Up in her aerie, Alice put her candle down on the big table beside one of the small windows looking out over the Port, Alther joined her and together they sat side by side in companionable silence. In a far, shadowy corner, Snorri stirred but she did not wake. Alice glanced at the small figure lying on a thick pile of Persian rugs, snugly covered in a large wolfskin, and smiled. She was pleased to see Snorri safe but...what was *that*?

Forgetting for a moment that Alther was a ghost, Alice grabbed his arm. "Alther," she whispered, as her hand clung to thin air. "Alther, there's something in here. An animal. It's big. Oh, my goodness, *look*."

Two green eyes were reflected in the candlelight. They stared at Alice and Alther.

"Good lord, Alice," gasped Alther. "You've got a panther up here."

"Alther, I do *not* keep panthers up here. Or anywhere. I don't even *like* panthers. Oh, no, listen to it..." A low growl filled the top floor of Warehouse Number Nine as the NightUllr got to his four padded feet, the fur on the back of his neck bristling. Snorri woke up.

"Kalmm, Ullr," she murmured, seeing Alice and Alther silhouetted against the moonlight and knowing that she was safe. The NightUllr gave one last growl just to make a point. Then he lay down beside his mistress, rested his great black head on his paws and regarded Alice Nettles and her ghostly companion through half-closed eyes. Snorri laid her arm across his warm smooth back and fell into a deep sleep.

"I didn't know she had a panther as well as a cat," muttered Alice. "She might have told me. These Traders are an odd bunch."

Alther looked at the Customs Officer with an affectionate smile. He loved the way Alice, who appeared so tough on the outside, was really nothing of the sort. If you were in trouble, then Alice Nettles was not one to stand aside and watch. "Another of your waifs and strays, Alice?" he asked.

"Just a girl whose boat I had to impound for Quarantine. I felt bad about

it, but what could I do? The Sickenesse is spreading through the Castle like wildfire. We can't risk it coming here."

"Ah, yes...that reminds me." Alice's mention of the Castle brought Alther unwillingly back to reality, for he would have happily stayed sitting with Alice beside the little window, looking out at the lights of the Port, all night long.

"What is it, Alther? Why do I have the feeling this is not going to be a romantic evening spent talking in the moonlight?"

Alther sighed. "I'd really like it to be, but something has happened."

It was Alice's turn to sigh. "Really? Something always does, doesn't it?"

"Please, Alice. This is bad. I need your help."

"You know you don't even have to ask. What can I do?"

"I need to **Search** the warehouse from top to bottom. There is something in here that I need to find. Zelda and I never found it many years ago, but now I'm a ghost I think I can." Alther sighed. "I shall have to **Pass Through** everything."

Alice looked shocked. "But you *hate* **Passing Through**, Alther. And—well, you know how much stuff there is here. Mountains of junk and who knows what. It will be *horrible*. Goodness, this must be serious."

"It is, Alice—very serious. You see, this morning Septimus and Jenna—say, what *is* going on out there?"

A loud banging way down in the street was rattling Alice's windowpanes. As they listened, the noise became louder and more insistent, until it turned into a regular *thump, thump, thump* that shook the floor and reverberated through the table.

"Sometimes I worry about you living in such a rough neighborhood," said Alther.

"Just late-night revelers, Alther. I'll tell them to be quiet." Alice stuck her head out the window and said, "Oh. Goodness me. Well, at least it's not a panther, I suppose."

“What’s not a panther?” asked Alther.

“A dragon.”

“A dragon is not a panther?” Alther repeated slowly. He felt as though Alice was talking in code.

“Generally speaking, no. A dragon is a dragon and a panther is a panther. That’s just the way things are. Don’t ask me why. I suppose I had better go and let them in before it smashes the door to pieces.”

“Who? What?”

“The *dragon*, Alther. I told you, there’s a dragon at the door.”

SACRED SHEEP

All right, all right, I'm coming!" Alice yelled as the great warehouse door shuddered under the force of the blows. Alice, watched by a frustrated Alther, who longed to help her but could only stand by, pulled back two great iron bolts and, using all her strength, pushed the huge green warehouse door along its rusty runners. The door moved slowly but, with the help of Jenna and Nicko pushing from outside, it creaked and groaned its way open until there was enough room for a fifteen-foot dragon to squeeze in.

Spit Fyre galumphed inside. "Careful!" shouted Alice—too late. A great stack of boxes marked *fragile* crashed to the floor accompanied by the sound of tinkling glass. Spit Fyre was unconcerned. He sat down and looked around him expectantly as if he was waiting for someone to bring him supper, which was not far from the truth since Spit Fyre spent most of his time hoping for supper—or breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch, tea, or dinner. Spit Fyre didn't mind what it was called as long as he could eat it.

“Jenna!” Alther gasped with relief. “What are *you* doing here?” The ghost smiled broadly as Jenna and Nicko, looking pale and tired, stepped inside. “Ah, and the master boatbuilder too. Hello, lad.” Nicko gave Alther a brief smile, but did not seem to be his usual cheery self. More in hope than expectation, the ghost peered out at the dark, rainy street and said, “Septimus with you?”

“No,” said Jenna—unusually curtly.

“You both look worn out,” said Alice. “Come upstairs and get warm.” Spit Fyre banged his tail with a loud crash.

“Quiet, Spit Fyre,” said Jenna wearily, patting the dragon’s neck. “Go lie down. Come on. Lie down. Sleep.” But Spit Fyre did not want to sleep. He wanted dinner. The dragon sniffed the air. It did not smell promising, just dust, moldering cloth, wormy wood, rusting iron, sheep bones...mmm, *sheep bones*.

Spit Fyre pushed his nose into a tall tower of finely balanced wooden boxes, which stretched about twenty feet high into the darkness. The tower wobbled precariously.

“Out of the way, everyone!” Alice yelled, pushing Jenna and Nicko back out on the street with herself and Alther, who did not want to be **Passed Through** by a load of dead sheep. A deluge of boxes crashed to the ground, bouncing off Spit Fyre and landing all around him.

When Alice, Alther, Jenna and Nicko peered warily inside, the dragon was almost buried in boxes. He lifted his head, shook off a shower of dust and splinters and set about crunching open the first smashed box. A pile of yellowing bones and what looked like an old sheepskin rug fell out.

“Ugh!” said Jenna, who had recently developed a particular dislike of bones. “What has he got there?”

“Sheep,” said Alice, raising her voice over loud crunching, cracking sounds as Spit Fyre bit into the contents of the first box. “It’s sheep bones. He’s eating one of the Sarn herd. Oh, well.”

Gingerly, Alice, Jenna and Nicko stepped back inside and picked their way through the boxes. Jenna could just make out the words written on the side of one of the still-intact boxes in an old-fashioned scrawl that had turned brown with age: SACRED HERD OF SARN. BOX VII OF XXI. URGENT. FOR IMMEDIATE

DELIVERY. They were almost obliterated by two more words stamped over them in a commanding, unfaded red: DUTY UNPAID.

“Spit Fyre!” Jenna shouted, pushing her way through to reach the dragon. “Stop it! Give that to me. *Now!*” Spit Fyre looked down at Jenna out of the corner of his eye and carried on crunching through sheep number VII. It was *his* food and he was not giving it to anyone else—not even to his **Locum Imprinter**. She could go and find something of her own to eat.

“It doesn’t matter,” puffed Alice as she and Nicko pushed the door closed and the warehouse became shrouded in darkness.

“But they’re *sacred* sheep,” said Jenna. Spit Fyre cracked another bone and gulped it down with a loud gurgle.

“That I doubt very much.” Alice chuckled. “I reckon they’re most likely part of the Sacred bones scam that the Customs Office stamped out about a hundred years ago. I wouldn’t worry about it. Best use for them, if you ask me. They’ve not been much good to anyone else. In fact, I did hear that a farmer from the High Farmlands had bought them thinking that they were a live flock. When he came down to pick them up and realized that he’d bought a load of boxes full of old bones he refused to pay the duty and threw the Customs Officer into the harbor. Spent thirty days in the Customs House lock-up for his trouble.”

With firm instructions to Spit Fyre that he must behave himself and go straight to sleep when he had finished the sheep, Jenna and Nicko left the dragon crunching his way through the Sacred Herd of Sarn and followed Alice and Alther to the top of the warehouse.

The NightUllr growled as Jenna and Nicko walked in.

“Ouch!” Nicko gasped. At the sight of the panther’s green eyes shining in the light of Alice’s candle, Jenna had grabbed his arm hard. Which was, thought Nicko, unusually jumpy for Jen.

Snorri sat up, woken by Ullr’s rolling growl. Her sleepy eyes focused with surprise on the two newcomers, “Kalm, Ullr,” she said.

“Snorri?” asked Jenna, recognizing the white blond hair in the dark.

“Jenna? It is you?” Snorri untangled herself from the wolfskin and, with the NightUllr padding at her side, she stumbled across the rough wooden floor

to greet Jenna.

“Hello, Snorri.” Nicko’s voice came out of the dark and gave Snorri a shock. “Nicko...I...I did not know you were coming to the Port also?” she said in her singsong accent that Nicko liked so much.

“Neither did we,” said Nicko grimly. “Stupid dragon circled above the Port for hours. Thought we’d never land. Freezing cold up there.”

“I would rather be in my boat.” Snorri smiled.

“So would I,” said Nicko. “Give me a boat anytime—even a paddleboat. I saw Wolf Boy paddling over to the Forest and I’d have swapped that dragon for one of those any day—even a pink one.”

“I don’t think Wolf Boy’s right about Septimus being lost in the Forest,” said Jenna.

Nicko shook his head in agreement. “He may as well look, though, since there was no way he was going to get back on Spit Fyre.”

“Did he get to the Forest all right?” Jenna asked Snorri.

Snorri nodded. “He whistled and a boy came to meet him.”

“That will be Sam,” said Nicko. “He’d have been fishing.”

“Sam?” asked Snorri.

“Yes, Sam. He’s my—”

“Brother!” Snorri laughed.

“How did you know?” asked Nicko, puzzled.

“They always *are*,” said Snorri, and just kept on laughing.

Alice returned with some blankets from a pile tumbling out of a chest marked PRODUCIA DE PERU. DUTY UNPAID. IMPOUNDED. “Well, well, so you all know one another,” she said. “Here, Jenna, Nicko, wrap yourselves up in these and get warm, you’re both shivering like a couple of jellyfish on a plate.”

Wrapped in the brightly patterned blankets, which smelled strongly of

goat as the damp from their tunics crept in, Jenna and Nicko stood steaming in the heat of the briskly burning logs inside Alice's stove. While they slowly warmed through, they watched Alice place a pot of water to boil, mix up some chopped oranges, cinnamon, cloves and honey in an earthenware jug and then pour the boiling water over the mixture. A warm spicy smell filled the air.

"You must be hungry too," said Alice. Nicko nodded. As he slowly became warm and forgot about the hours he and Jenna had spent on Spit Fyre circling in the drizzle above the Port, he realized that he was ravenous. Alice disappeared into the shadows at the far end of the space that she called home and returned with a tray laden with a huge fruitcake, a large loaf of rough Port bread, great chunks of Port herb sausage and half a spiced apple pie.

"Now everyone, *eat*—you too, Snorri." Alice noticed that Snorri, unsure, was hanging back.

Snorri took her place at the table. She sat next to Alther and smiled at him. "I...I think I have seen you at the Castle," she said.

Alther nodded. "You are a Seer?" he asked.

Snorri blushed. "I do not always wish it, but it is so," she replied. "Like my grandmother."

"And like your mother?" asked Alther.

Snorri shook her head. She was *not* like her mother. No way.

After the fruitcake, bread, sausage and most of the pie had disappeared and Alice had made two more jugs of spiced orange, she looked at Jenna and said gently, "Would you like to tell us what happened today? Alther and I... well, we would like to know."

Alther smiled. He liked the sound of "Alther and I" and he liked the way Alice considered his concerns to be hers too. He reflected that just then he would have felt perfectly content if it had not been for the awful business of Septimus.

Jenna nodded. It was a relief to tell them. She took a deep breath and began her story, starting from when Queen Etheldreda had **Appeared** in her bedroom the previous night. Alice and Alther listened somberly, and when Jenna told them about Septimus and the Glass, Alther became almost

transparent with concern.

Then it was Alther's turn to tell bad news. When Jenna heard what Marcia had found in the *I, Marcellus*, she gasped and put her head in her hands. Septimus was gone. Forever. And it was *her* fault.

Nicko put his arm around Jenna's shoulders. "You mustn't blame yourself, Jen."

Jenna shook her head. She did blame herself.

"Well, *I* think..." said Alther suddenly. Everyone looked at the ghost, who was sitting between Snorri and Alice, his purple robes becoming surprisingly substantial in the candlelight as a small ray of hope flickered in Alther's mind. "I think there might—just—be a way to find him. It's a long shot, of course, but..."

And so, on the top floor of Warehouse Number Nine, one Night Creature and four Living humans sat in the firelight, listening to a ghost as he began to explain how they might, *possibly*, be able to rescue Septimus.

On the ground floor of Warehouse Number Nine, the Sacred Herd of Sarn was slowly disappearing—gnawed, crunched and gulped down until there was nothing left but a few empty boxes and a long, satisfied sheepskin-smelling burp.

Not so very far from Warehouse Number Nine, a Royal Barge made its stately progress over the Marram Marshes, floating in on a ghostly flood from more than five hundred years before. It drew up at a long-gone landing stage and lay shimmering in the moonlight, rocking gently, while its occupant stepped ashore and, with a disapproving expression, picked her way up a muddy path that led to a little thatched cottage.

Queen Etheldredda **Passed Through** the door and the cottage's inhabitant—a comfortable-looking woman dressed in a large patchwork tent—looked up from her seat by the fire, puzzled at the **Disturbance** she had felt blow into the room. She shivered as Queen Etheldredda drifted by, sending the candle flames guttering. Aunt Zelda got to her feet and, through half-closed bright blue witch's eyes, she surveyed the cozy room, which suddenly no longer felt *quite* so cozy. But for all Aunt Zelda's **Looking**, she could not make out the ghost of Etheldredda as she drifted about, searching for Jenna.

Aunt Zelda was spooked. She could see a **Disturbance** pass across the walls of books and potion bottles as Etheldredda inspected them for signs of a hidden door, but found only a cupboard hiding a giant flask. And as Etheldredda ascended the steep stairs to the attic, her pointy nose leading the way, Aunt Zelda followed, though she did not know why.

Convinced that Jenna was there, Etheldredda searched the little attic room from top to bottom. Etheldredda **Blew** back the covers on all three beds, fully expecting to find Jenna hidden under one of them—but found nothing. Then she stuck her pointy nose under the beds—there was nothing—and looked in Aunt Zelda’s closet, which was full of identical patchwork dresses—and still found nothing.

Aunt Zelda was, by now, frantic. She knew there was an UnQuiet Spirit in her cottage. She ran downstairs to find her **Expell Spell**, leaving Etheldredda poking around the attic. It was then that Etheldredda found something that Aunt Zelda had promised to keep safe for Jenna: her silver pistol. With a great effort of will, Queen Etheldredda picked up the pistol, while downstairs Aunt Zelda began to chant the **Expell**. In a rush of stale air—for Aunt Zelda’s spell was old and had been kept in a damp cupboard—Queen Etheldredda was **Expelled** from the cottage and hurled into the low-tide mud of the Mott. Etheldredda picked herself up, and clutching the pistol, she reembarked on the Royal Barge.

Sitting in her cabin, away from the prying eyes of Aunt Zelda, Etheldredda inspected the pistol. Then she drew out the small silver ball that she had taken from Jenna’s room. Holding the bullet in her increasingly Substantial hand, Etheldredda inspected it closely and smiled a grim smile. It was inscribed with the letters I.P.—short for Infant Princess—and had been Named for Jenna when she was a baby. It had been a stroke of luck, thought Etheldredda, bumping into the ghost of the spy who had betrayed the Heaps all those years ago. If the UnQuiet Spirit of Linda Lane had not crawled out of the river and hauled herself up onto the Royal Barge, Etheldredda would never have known about the power of a Named bullet. And luck was still on her side, because now she had the silver pistol to go with it—all she needed was the princess to point it at.

The ghostly Royal Barge drifted away from Keeper’s Cottage, leaving a very unsettled Aunt Zelda in its wake. Lounging on her cushions, rocked by the slight swell of an ancient storm, Queen Etheldredda closed her eyes and dreamed of the day soon to come when the Princess would be no more and the Castle would revert to its rightful Queen—Queen Etheldredda the

Everlasting.

31

DRAGO'S HOARD



T*he pale light of a frosty autumn morning* was trying to shine in through the high windows at the back of the ground floor of Warehouse Number Nine. It was not helped by the thick green glass in the tiny windows or by the layers of grime that covered them, but it did its best and eventually emerged as long shafts of feeble brightness swimming with great shoals of dust.

“*Where did you say this wretched mirror was, Alther?*” asked Alice crossly, as she negotiated her way out from underneath a stuffed elephant. Alther was sitting on an ebony chest, which was firmly bound with thick iron straps and secured with a huge lock. **DUTY UNPAID: IMPOUNDED** was stamped all over it in bright red, as though some past Customs Officer had lost his temper and taken it out on the chest.

Alther looked ill; he felt as if he had eaten a bucketful of dust and washed it down with the slime from a bag of moldy carrots. He had spent the last hour

Passing Through the most dusty, mildewed and decrepit pile of junk it had ever been his misfortune to **Pass Through**. There were so many large objects tied up in sacks, sealed in trunks and stuck at the back of inaccessible stacks that the only way to check every single piece in the warehouse was for Alther to **Pass Through**. So far he had found nothing and he had only checked maybe one thousandth of the available junk and rubbish piled up in Alice's warehouse. Alther could not even think straight, for the loud snores and foul-smelling burps—and worse—that were emanating from Spit Fyre stopped his dusty, muddled thoughts from making any sense at all.

“It's a *Glass*, Alice, a Glass—not a mirror,” Alther corrected grumpily. “And if I knew where it was, I wouldn't be sitting here feeling like I'd been trampled by a herd of Foryx, would I?”

“Don't be silly, Alther,” snapped Alice. “Foryx don't exist.”

“Are you sure, Alice? You've probably got a whole stash of 'em stored up here somewhere,” said Alther testily.

“When I was little, I used to think Foryx existed,” said Jenna, hoping to help things along. “Nicko liked to scare me with bedtime stories about them—all half-decayed and slimy, horrible warty faces, huge feet with great claws running forever around the world and crushing everything in their path. I used to have to watch the boats from my window for hours before I forgot about them.”

“That's not a very nice thing to tell your little sister, Nicko,” said Alther.

“Jen didn't mind, did you, Jen? You used to say that you wanted to be a Foryx.”

Jenna gave Nicko a push. “Only so that I could chase *you*, you horrible boy.” She laughed. Snorri watched the brother and sister together and wished that she had a brother like Nicko. She would never have left home and come to this crazy place if she had.

Alice clambered over a pile of sacks containing seventy-eight pairs of backward-pointing joke shoes. Her foot went through one of the sacks and a cloud of leather-beetle droppings rose into the air. She succumbed to a coughing fit and slumped down on the chest beside Alther. “Alther, are you quite sure—*cough*—that this Glass—*cough*—is actually—*cough, cough*—here?”

Alther felt too full of dust to reply. The ghost was sitting in a shaft of light, and Jenna could see that he was full of millions of minute swirling particles. The dust cloud inside him was so thick that it made Alther appear almost solid and strangely grubby.

“But you think it *could* be here, don’t you, Uncle Alther?” asked Jenna, coming over to sit beside the disconsolate ghost.

Alther smiled at Jenna. He liked it when she called him Uncle Alther. It reminded him of happy times when Jenna was growing up in the Heap household in their chaotic room in The Ramblings.

“Yes, Princess, I do think it could be here.”

“Maybe we should ask Aunt Zelda to come help?” Nicko suggested.

“Aunt Zelda had *no idea* where it was,” said Alther grumpily, remembering his trying time with the White Witch in Warehouse Number Nine. “She just stood in the middle of the floor waving her arms like this”—Alther did an impression of a windmill in a hurricane—“and saying there, Over *there*, Alther. Oh, you *silly* man, I said *over there!*” Jenna and Nicko laughed; Alther did a surprisingly good imitation of Aunt Zelda.

“But I am *sure* that the Glass is here. Marcellus himself says so. One hundred and sixty-nine days after he had his first success with what he calls the True Glass of Time, which he made a great palaver about and had gold doors for it and all the works, he completed two more Glasses of Time. A matched pair this time, which would be portable. These worked very well, apparently. It’s these I am looking for. I reckon one of them is here.”

“Wow...” Nicko whistled under his breath and looked around as if expecting to suddenly see a Glass of Time looming out of the junk.

“Are you sure, Alther?” asked the ever-skeptical Alice.

The dust particles inside Alther were beginning to settle and the ghost was feeling better. “Yes,” he said, more definitely now. “It’s all in Broda Pye’s letters, even though Marcia says they’re a load of old claptrap.”

“Sep told me about Broda once,” said Jenna. “She was a Keeper, wasn’t she? Oh, I so miss Sep, he used to tell me so much stuff about all sorts of useless things...and I used to tell him to stop going on like a dumb parrot... and I wish I hadn’t. I really *do*.” Jenna sniffed and wiped her eyes. “It’s just

the dust,” she mumbled, knowing that if someone said anything remotely comforting to her she would burst into tears.

“Ah, well. I expect Septimus was interested in Marcellus’s **Physik**,” said Alther. “It worried Marcia sick. She got jumpy every time he went near the **Sealed** section in the Library. I wonder where he found out about Broda?”

“Aunt Zelda told him,” said Jenna.

“Did she now? Well, well...and did she tell him about the stack of letters she found behind the fireplace when she was making the cat tunnel for Bert?”

Jenna shook her head. She was sure Septimus would have told her *that*.

“Well, those were the letters from Marcellus Pye to his wife, Broda.”

“But Keepers aren’t allowed to get married,” said Jenna.

“Right,” agreed Alther. “And this goes to show why.”

“Why, Uncle Alther?”

“Because Broda told Marcellus all the Keeper’s secrets. And when things got tough for Marcellus, she let him use the Queen’s Way as a shortcut to the Port. He brought all sorts of **Darke Alchemical** stuff through there. There are still pockets of **Darkeness** hanging around. You must always take care going through there, Princess.”

Jenna nodded. She wasn’t surprised. She always felt a little scared on the Queen’s Way.

“So Marcellus told Broda that he’d put the Glass in this warehouse?” asked Nicko.

“No. He wrote and said he’d been swindled out of it. Apparently he had taken it through the Queen’s Way, got it to the Port on a succession of stubborn donkeys and finally put it on a ship. He planned to take it to a small but powerful group of Alchemists up in the Lands of the Long Nights, but he was double-crossed by the ship’s captain. As soon as Marcellus was out of the way, the captain sold the Glass to a certain Drago Mills—a merchant in the Port who was in the habit of buying a load of old tat without paying too much attention to where it had come from. Anyway, some months later Drago fell out with the Chief Customs Officer over a small matter of unpaid duty for

another cargo and got the whole contents of his warehouse impounded for his trouble. No one, not even Marcellus, could get into the warehouse without the say-so of the Chief Customs Officer, whom Marcellus referred to as an Officiouse Tubbe of Malice, and the Officiouse Tubbe never did give the say-so.”

“So *this* was Drago Mills’s warehouse?” said Nicko.

“You’ve got it, Nicko. Warehouse Number Nine. Even more junk has been added over the years, of course, but at the core of it is Drago’s hoard. And somewhere, hidden away under all this stuff, there is a Glass that should take you through Time—one hundred and sixty-nine days after Septimus arrived.”

There was silence as Nicko, Jenna and Snorri took this in.

“We have to find it,” said Jenna. “It must be here somewhere. Come on, Uncle Alther.”

Alther groaned. “Give an old ghost a rest, Princess; I still feel like the inside of a carpet sweeper. Just a few more minutes and then I’ll get back to it. Aha...that dragon of yours is stirring. I’d see to it quickly if I were you. And you might want to take a shovel with you from that pile of old garden tools over there.”

A pungent smell filled the air. “Oh, Spit Fyre!” Jenna protested.

Ten minutes later, a large pile of dragon droppings was steaming outside Warehouse Number Nine, and Spit Fyre was gulping his way through a barrel of sausages that Jenna had bought from a passing cart on its way to market. The dragon downed the last sausage, sucked up the contents of a bucket of water that Nicko had fetched and snorted, sending a great lump of dragon spit slamming into a pile of novelty fake brass candlesticks and melting the paint off them.

Spit Fyre was content—a fire stomach full of bones, a food stomach full of sausages. Now he just had to complete the **Seek**. With a purposeful air, the dragon thumped his tail down, sending a great cloud of dust up in the air, and closed his eyes, **Seeking** the way to his **Imrintor**.

Ever since Spit Fyre had been **Seeking**, he had felt drawn to the Port, and

apart from the irresistible call of breakfast on Snorri's boat, he had not been deflected from his purpose. He had circled for hours above the Port, **Seeking**, until at last he had felt something. He had landed on the old dock and followed the faint callings of the **Seek** all the way to the great green door of Warehouse Number Nine. But now, with a full stomach, Spit Fyre could think clearly—and the Seek was stronger, much stronger.

Suddenly, with a loud snort, the dragon reared up and crashed his way into the depths of the warehouse, sending the pride and joy of Drago Mills flying in all directions. Jenna, Nicko, Snorri and Alice saw him coming, but Alther, pale and full of dust, did not. In a moment, the ghost was tossed into the air, **Passed Through** by a dragon on a mission and thrown to the ground, where he lay feeling worse than he had ever felt in his entire ghosthood.

As Alther lay dusty and trampled on the floor, Spit Fyre ripped into the ebony chest that the ghost had been sitting on. In seconds the iron bands were peeled off, the giant lock snapped and the lid of the chest flipped open by a large, sharp dragon claw.

Inside the chest, lying in soft velvet folds, was a Glass.

32

THE DARK POOL



A *strange silence fell over Warehouse Number Nine.* Even Spit Fyre stopped his excited snorting and became unusually still. Everyone stepped a little closer, gingerly peered into the black ebony chest and shivered. It had a ghastly coffinlike look to it. The Glass lay like a dead body within, held secure and cushioned from the world for the past five hundred years in dark red padded velvet, which was shaped perfectly to every little swirl and twirl of its gold frame. Silently, four people, one ghost, a dragon and a thin orange cat gazed into the depths of the chest, trying to see into the dark pool of Glass, over which a dim white mist hung suspended as though it lay over still water on a fall morning.

The Glass was horribly enthralling. Spit Fyre stared into it, his tail slowly swishing from side to side, clearing the way through the debris of ten dozen smashed novelty gnomes and a hundred pounds of crushed wax fruit like a great windshield wiper. Nicko wanted to jump in and see how deep it was, and Snorri wondered if she could **See** her great-aunt Ells. Alice wanted to see exactly what it was she had bought in the job lot of Warehouse Number Nine—for the Glass belonged to her now and she felt responsible for it.

Alther was fascinated to see the very thing that he had read about in Marcellus Pye's letters, written all those long years ago. It looked exactly as

he had imagined it would. As Alther stared deep into its depths, he had the sensation of gazing into a bottomless pit, a pit into which he would love to lose himself forever. Stop it, you old fool, Alther told himself sternly. With some difficulty, he shook himself out of his reverie.

“Funny you didn’t notice that you were sitting on the Glass all that time, Alther,” said Alice.

“Not particularly funny, Alice,” said Alther huffily, “since the chest is lined with solid gold. Soaks up most stuff, does gold. No wonder Marcellus was complaining to Broda about the weight of the Glass—what on earth did he expect?”

Jenna stared at the Glass, gathering her courage. If Alther was right, then here was the way to Septimus. Here was her chance to make amends for the harm she had done to him; all she had to do was jump into the Glass and find him, wherever he may be. She had no choice. Taking them all by surprise, Jenna scrambled onto the edge of the chest.

“Get back!” Alther shouted. Jenna jumped at the sound of alarm in the ghost’s voice, lost her balance and fell toward the Glass.

Nicko was there in an instant. “Jen!” he yelled, but he was too late. Jenna tumbled forward, awkwardly, arms outstretched like those of a diver who has misjudged her dive, and plunged through the liquid blackness of the Glass. All that was left were a few ripples, which soon subsided, leaving the surface undisturbed as before.

A horrified silence was broken by Nicko yelling, “Jen, Jen!” He threw himself into the chest, but was hauled out, just as his boot touched the Glass, by a hefty heave from Alice Nettles.

“No, Nicko, it’s too dangerous,” puffed Alice, keeping a tight hold on his arm.

“*I don’t care,*” said Nicko fiercely, unable to take his eyes off the *thing* that had just swallowed his little sister. “Let go of me. Jen’s in there on her own. Let me *go!*” Alice hung on like a ferret with a rabbit, but Nicko was very nearly as tall as she was, and three months’ hard work in Jannit Maarten’s boatyard had made him strong. With a desperate twist he wrenched himself away, and before Alice could do anything, Nicko threw himself forward once more. This time he succeeded.

It was cold going through the Glass. Nicko felt as though he was falling through liquid ice. The surface of the Glass passed over him like a tight, frozen band and let him go, as if it was no longer concerned with what happened to him. And then Nicko was in free fall, tumbling, twisting and turning like an autumn leaf on the still night air, until he was pulled into another sheet of coldness, which ran over him and let him go, leaving him to drop into a pile of old coats. Nicko got up, hit his head on something and was sent flying by the advent of a small orange cat with a black-tipped tail hurtling into his back.

“Ullr...Snorri?” asked Nicko, rubbing his head. He was sitting half in and half out of a large green cupboard, which was full of dusty old coats. As he twisted around to see where Ullr had come from, he saw Snorri tumble from an old looking glass—just like the one he had just jumped through—which was propped up at the back of the cupboard.

“Hello, Nicko.” Snorri stepped out of the UnderCooks’ coat cupboard—no longer used due to the UnderCooks having taken over the second footmen’s coatroom after a bitter power struggle. Snorri looked at Nicko uncertainly. What would Nicko think of her following him like that? Her mother had always told her that a girl must never chase a boy.... Snorri shook her head to get rid of the thought of her mother. Well, she told herself, her mother never said anything about not jumping through a Glass after a boy. Never.

The UnderCooks’ coat cupboard was in a deep recess at the junction of two passageways. Warily, Snorri and Nicko crept out and looked around. The place was pervaded with a strong smell of roasting meat, which immediately made Nicko feel hungry, but there was no sign of Jenna. None. The place was deserted. Nicko suddenly realized how stupid he had been. Jenna could be anywhere. Who was to know where the Glass would have taken her?

Something lying on the passage floor caught Snorri’s eye. She bent down and picked up a delicate gold pin in the shape of a J. Nicko went pale. “That’s Jen’s,” he said. “I gave it to her for her birthday.”

“She was with this pin until a few minutes past,” said Snorri. “I feel it. I *know* it.”

Nicko smiled and held out his hand. “Come on, Snorri,” he said. “Let’s go find her. She can’t be far.”

Back in Warehouse Number Nine, Alice Nettles was readying herself to follow Jenna, Nicko and Snorri through the Glass. They could not, she told Alther, be left to face the dangers alone. Whatever might happen, she was determined to go.

Alther shook his head, horrified at the turn that events had taken. He had lost Jenna, Nicko and Snorri through the Glass, and now he was about to lose his beloved Alice. Alther held out very little hope of seeing any of them again. He would have given anything to be able to go with Alice, but he knew that as a ghost, he could not go.

Wretched, Alther watched Alice gingerly step into the chest. He saw her stand delicately on the frame of the Glass, gathering her courage for the plunge and resisting a strong urge to hold her nose, which Alice always did when she jumped into water. As Alther tried to fix the last sight of Alice in his mind, a sight that would have to last him forever, Spit Fyre finally located the **Seek**.

Spit Fyre, whose dragon nerve endings had yet to catch up with his growth spurts, had no idea what size gap he might or might not fit through. He flung himself at the Glass, expecting to go through, just as he had seen Jenna, Nicko and Snorri do. Alice Nettles was thrown back out of the chest and fell beside Alther, where she lay winded, unable to stop the dragon from smashing the Glass into a thousand dark, glittering fragments of nothingness.

PRINCESS ESMERALDA

Two Palace Guards had just come off duty and were making their way toward the kitchens, where one of their wives worked as a Stewer of Meates and the other as a Keeper of the Gravie Boate. The smaller guard, a chubby man with a stretched, shiny face and little piggy eyes, had been discussing exactly how many kidneys should go into a steak and kidney pie. His thinner, rather ratty companion, who was beginning to feel queasy, almost stepped on a dazed Jenna as she stumbled out of the UnderCooks' coat cupboard. In a moment she found herself grabbed by her arms.

“Well, well, well, what be here?” asked the piggy-eyed guard, whose eyesight was none too good in the dim light of the lower reaches of the Palace. “Where be thy Palace livery, my girl?”

Jenna stared at the guard. She had the oddest feeling that she *almost* understood what he had said.

“Thou’rt a Stranger here,” the piggy man growled. “A trespasser upon the Royal Ground. ’Tis a grave offense. Thou wilt have to answer for this.”

Jenna had the distinct feeling that it was better not to say anything just then. She was aware of the ratty guard staring at her. She glanced up at him and saw a look of panic in his eyes.

“Let her loose, Will. Do you not see she wears the garb of a Royal Princess?”

The piggy guard peered at Jenna so intently that his eyes became little slits in the rolls of fat in his face. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, and he let go of Jenna’s tunic as if he had just had an electric shock. “Why didst thou not say?” he hissed angrily to the ratty one.

“Forsooth, I *have* said. If thou didst not prate on so with Kidneys and Stewes and Gravies until my stomach revolts against me and my mouth fills with bile, then thou wouldst have seen with thine own tiny eyes.”

Jenna’s head was spinning. What were they saying? She had heard *Royal Princess* and she had an uncomfortable feeling that she had been recognized. She found herself taken firmly, but this time respectfully, by each elbow and propelled along the passageway.

Jenna listened to the guards’ excited talk, catching some of the words and trying to make sense of it.

“There will surely be a reward for us, Will. To have found our lost Princess will be truly marveled at.”

“’Tis true, John. And what a great joy for the Queen, to be reunited with the daughter she had feared drowned. Perchance we might see a queenly smile once more.”

“Maybe. Though I do not know that we did ever see a queenly smile, Will, if truth be told.”

Will grunted in agreement and Jenna was respectfully asked to climb the stairs, if she pleased, up to parts of the Palace “more Fitt for her Royal Person.”

Soon they emerged into the Long Walk and it was only then that Jenna became sure that the Glass had not only transported her back to the Palace,

but back through time as well. The Long Walk was just as Sir Hereward, one particularly talkative evening, had once described to her. It was full of ancient treasures—not the strange, exotic finds that Milo Banda had strewn along the Long Walk, but a rich array of history that belonged in the Palace and told its story. There were beautiful tapestries, finely detailed paintings of Princesses and their nurses, Palace dogs, visiting Magicians and Soothsayers, even a great bronze of a rare blue dragon, which had a look in its eye that reminded Jenna of Spit Fyre.

The Palace was not the quiet, hushed place that Jenna was used to; it was buzzing with activity. The Long Walk reminded Jenna of rush hour at The Ramblings. Hundreds of Palace servants—all immaculate in their Palace livery of a gray tunic or dress with a deep red stripe around the hem—were bustling to and fro on important business. Some were carrying trays of small covered silver dishes; some had stacks of documents. Many were clutching Palace message bags, which were small red folders with the Palace crest stamped upon them in gold. But the strangest thing was that the air was filled with the tinkling of bells, for outside every room a small bell was poised, ready to be rung by a higher servant to summon a passing lower servant to do their bidding. The bells rang incessantly, and generally their only effect was to cause the nearest servants to rush past and pretend not to notice.

Jenna's progress was slow. As each servant realized who was walking between the guards they stopped in surprise, causing others to bump into them. Some gasped in shock, others curtseyed or bowed, and many smiled and quickened their pace, anxious to be the first to tell the news that the drowned Princess was **Returned**.

It was some time later when the guards finally made it to their destination: the Throne Room. The Throne Room was the one room in the Palace that Jenna had never been in, and had no wish to go into either, for it was the room where her mother and Alther had been assassinated, and the room where she too had nearly lost her life—and would have done so had not Marcia Overstrand taken her to safety. When Jenna had returned to live at the Palace, she had decided that she wanted the Throne Room locked, and Alther, who had no love for the place either, had readily agreed.

At the sight of the drowned Princess, the two door pages' eyes widened in shock, and the smaller boy squeaked in surprise. Both pages bowed low, and in a well-practiced maneuver, they pushed open the great doors to the Throne Room and ushered Jenna in. The Knight of the Day, a rotund, friendly faced man who was the Queen's personal knight for that day, looked astonished at

the sight of Jenna, then made a low and extremely elaborate bow, which involved a lot of arm waving and hat doffing.

While this was going on, Jenna's attention wandered to the Throne Room itself. The Throne Room was huge. It was the second biggest room in the Palace and took up the front five windows of the building, which looked out over the Palace Gate and straight down the old Alchemie Way. To the left was Wizard Way and in the distance, behind the Great Arch, Jenna could see the Wizard Tower soaring into the pinkish late-afternoon sky. The golden Pyramid at the top was almost lost to view in what Jenna recognized as a **Magykal** haze, which was drifting out the windows of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's rooms and swirling up into the sky.

The Knight of the Day, having finally finished his bow, had been a little put out to find that the person it had been directed at was staring out the window. He gave a discreet cough. Jenna's attention snapped back to the Throne Room. It was richly hung with thick tapestries depicting the lives and adventures of various Queens. At one end, a blazing fire roared in the huge fireplace; at the other, on an ornate golden throne, sewing her tapestry with short, vicious stabs of her needle, sat the living, breathing, greatly disapproving Queen Etheldredda.

"Oh, *no*," gasped Jenna.

The Knight of the Day stepped forward and addressed the Queen, who had still not bothered to look up. "Your Majesty," said the Knight, who took hours to say what most people said in minutes, if they bothered to say it all. "Your most Gracious and Royal Majesty, may I present a Joy to Your Heart, a Succor to Your Mother's Grief, a Great Returning, the Wondrous Thing for which we all Hoped but yet did Fear may never come?"

"Oh, get on with it, man," snapped Queen Etheldredda, breaking a thread with her teeth and crossly tying a complicated knot.

"Your own drowned *daughter*, Your Highness," the Knight continued, allowing what Jenna thought was a slight air of disapproval to color his words. "Your very own Flesh and Blood, Madam. That Delicate Rose for whom the Castle has Pined these long months gone, those dark months of Grief and Pain are now but a painful Memorie—"

Queen Etheldredda flung her tapestry to the floor in exasperation. "Oh, for goodness' sake, man, cease your brainless wittering, else I will have your head perched upon the Palace Gate this nightfall." The Knight of the Day

turned ashen and subsided into a fit of coughing. “And cease your foul splutterings—*what is this?*” Queen Etheldredda had at last seen Jenna.

“I-It is your lost daughter, Your Majesty,” the Knight of the Day ventured timidly, unsure whether this would be considered brainless wittering or not.

“I can see that,” said Etheldredda sourly, peering down the length of the Throne Room, seeming for once almost lost for words. “But...*how?*”

“These two fine guards, Your Majesty”—the Knight of the Day waved an expansive arm at the two Palace Guards who were now standing respectfully to attention on either side of Jenna—“found your Heart’s Delight a-wandering, lost and a-wailing in the depths of the Palace.”

Jenna was annoyed but said nothing. She most definitely had *not* been wailing.

“Then take them away to the dungeon!” Etheldredda barked. Two burly soldiers stepped from the shadows and grabbed the two guards. Before they had time to catch their breath, they were frog-marched from the Queen’s presence, whisked down to the Palace basement and thrown into the dungeon—a nasty damp pit below the offal kitchens, dripping with rancid fat and filthy water from the wash-up overflow.

Without the strangely reassuring presence of Will and John, Jenna suddenly felt very alone. The physical presence of Queen Etheldredda as flesh and blood was horribly intimidating in a way that her ghost had not been. And the snake-tailed creature that clung to the Queen’s skirts, staring at Jenna with its malevolent red eyes while it clicked its retractable single tooth in and out of its pointy jaw, made her want to turn and run. But there was no escape. Jenna could feel the meaty breath of the Knight of the Day on the back of her neck.

“And you,” said Queen Etheldredda, addressing the anxious Knight, “*you* can take Esmeralda to her room and lock her in until suppertime tomorrow. She will know not to run away from her mama in the future.”

The Knight of the Day bowed to the Queen; then he gently took Jenna by the arm, murmuring, “Allow me, Princess, to accompany you to your Chamber. I will instruct the Cooke to provide you well with victuals.” Jenna had no choice but to let the Knight of the Day escort her along the corridor and take the familiar route to her own room.

The ghost of Sir Hereward was leaning against the wall gazing into space, looking bored and listless. At the sight of Jenna he looked amazed. He snapped to attention, bowed respectfully and then, smiling broadly, said, “Welcome home, Esmeralda. ’Tis a *most* Happy Outcome, for we did Fear thee Drowned. Now, I have some merriment for thee, for thou seemest to mine eyes a little pale and distressed. What, pray, be the difference betwixt the Griffin and the Pomegranate?”

“I don’t know, Sir Hereward. What *is* the difference between a Griffin and a Pomegranate?” Jenna smiled.

“Ah, I shall not send *thee* forth upon my marketing. Hur hur!”

“Oh. Oh, I see. Very funny, Sir Hereward.”

As the Knight of the Day ushered Jenna into her room, Sir Hereward peered at her. “Thou art changed, Esmeralda. Changed in thy speech. ’Tis the shock, no doubt. Rest well, Princess. I shall guard thee from harm. Thy mama shall not enter.” The ghost bowed, the Knight of the Day closed the great doors to Jenna’s room, and Jenna found herself alone in her room—or rather, alone in the drowned Esmeralda’s room.

Princess Esmeralda’s room had a creepy feeling to it. Not only was it cold, damp and growing interesting crops of furry green spots in various places, but there was a miserable, even malevolent, atmosphere about the place. Jenna wandered around the room, which was surprisingly decrepit for a Princess’s bedchamber. The floors were rough and bare, with splintery pieces of wood coming off the boards. The meager curtains were threadbare and did not even reach to the bottom of the tall windows. Great chunks of plaster were missing from the ceiling. There was only one small candle beside the bed, and of course there was no fire in the grate.

Jenna shivered—and not just from the deep chill in the musty air. She sat on what she thought of as her bed, and discovered that it felt nothing at all like her own bed. But Jenna hardly noticed the lumps; she was too busy thinking about Septimus. How was she going to find him? She had somehow expected him to be waiting for her as soon as she had come through the Glass, but now she saw how foolish that had been. She was in a whole new world and Septimus could be anywhere in it, anywhere at all. He could even be much older—so much older that she would not recognize him. In fact, he could even be...dead. Jenna shook her head to try to get rid of such pointless thoughts. Alther had been quite clear about this—the Glass she had **Gone Through** was completed one hundred and sixty-nine days after the Glass that

Septimus had **Gone Through**. One hundred and sixty-nine was an important Alchemical number, being thirteen times thirteen. Jenna was good at math and soon she had worked out that Septimus would already have been in this Time for about five and a half months—if Alther was right. But where *was* he?

She lay back on the bed and tried to figure out how to find Septimus while she watched a large spider rappel down one of the bedposts. Being the true Princess that she was, Jenna was quick to feel something sharp digging into her back, and she wondered how Princess Esmeralda had ever got any sleep at all in such a lumpy bed. What could possibly be causing it? Exasperated, Jenna tipped the mattress up to see if she could find the problem.

Underneath the damp old feather mattress, which smelled strongly of chickens, there was a large leather-bound book with sharp metal corners. On the cover was written: THE VERIE PRIVATE AND PERSONALLE DIARIE OF PRINCESS ESMERALDA. NOT TO BE OPENED OR READE BY ANY PERSON. ESPECIALLY MAMA.

Jenna picked up the diary and let the mattress go with a *thud*, sending up a cloud of dust and mold spores. “Atchoo!” she sneezed. “Atchoo, atchoo, *atchoo!*” Eyes streaming, Jenna sat down on the now considerably less lumpy bed and, ignoring the instructions on the cover, began to read Princess Esmeralda’s diary.

PRINCESS ESMERALDA'S DIARY

Princess Esmeralda's diary was written in the same flowing, old-fashioned script that adorned the cover. The ink was black and clear—as was the awful story it had to tell.

MoonDay

Today has been a most Foul and Fearful Day.

Upon the orders of Mama (who maketh me to toil in all the Lowly places of Our Palace so that “You will knowe, Esmeralda, what it is to Work”), I didst go to the Meate Kitchens today. I was set to work to pull all manner of Innards and Gizzards for the Meate Cooke, who is a foul-mouthed Manne who doth sweat like an overripe Cheese. He hath a Face like unto a Cheese also, the kind that Mama doth eat: white and pitted with blue Veins upon his Nose. Methinks that if Mama didst eat the Meate Cooke's Nose she would not knowe the difference. And if she didst knowe it to be the Meate Cooke's Nose, methinks Mama wouldst still eat of it. But I must not write of Mama, for it is dangerous Business so to do.

When I didst return to my Chamber from the Meate Kitchens, and the Servant had given me a Bowle of sweete cleene Water to take the Blood and Gristle from under my Fingertips, then Mary didst come a-knocking at my

Door as frantically as if the Wendron Witches of the Forest were hard upon her Heels. Mary, whom I love dearly, near as much as I do love my little baby Sisters, was in the most Distressed State.

I didst ask her, as I always do (for Mama does not allow me to see my dear Sisters near as oft as I wouldst like), how fared my little Cherubbs this day. Whereupon Mary didst wail like the Pigs do wail when they see the Meate Cooke's Cleaver. I sat her down beside my small Fyre (for which my Servant doth steal me a few Coals upon frosty Nights) and I heated some Water over it, for poore Mary's Teeth were a-chattering like a loose Windowpane in the Winde.

I put my question about my little twinne Sisters once again with, I confess, some Feare in my Heart. "They are Gonne!" Mary didst cry with such heart-wrenching grief that deare Sir Hereward did come a-running (or a-floating, rather, I shouldst say) and didst aske of us "Wherefore the Teares?" For by the time the deare Ghoste was by our side I knew the true tale of my Sisters' Fate. They were Gonne.

Early this Morn, Mary didst take my baby Sisters to see our mama, for Mama had ordered that it be so. Mary was told by the Bumptious Barrelle of Larde to leave the Babies in the Throne Room to await Mama. They didst run after her, crying, "Mary, Mary," but the Bumptious Barrelle didst push her from the Chamber and barre the Door.

Now Mama and the Bumptious Barrelle do saye that Mary never brought the Babes to the Throne Room and that she hath loste them. Poore Mary's feet are like fat pigs' Bladders, swelled from a day walking the Palace to find them, and I believe she is losing her Mind. I fear 'twill fare ill for poore Mary. And how will it fare for my poore Sisters?

Tir'sDay

A most Dismal Day. My Spirits are low. There is no word on my little Sisters and of Mary there is no trace. I am alone in the Worlde.

Woden'sDay

I knoweth not myself today. My Mind is in Turmoil. I am returned to my Chamber from another foul day in the Meate Kitchens and something is wrong. I do not know what. I have a great Feeling of Dread.

Thor'sDay

At dawn Sir Hereward did go to fetch my deare Brother. All last night I didst heare a great lamenting and crying behind the Wainscoting at all hours. It was the Voices of my baby Sisters. I care not what my Brother or Sir Hereward may say, but I do know the Cries of my Sisters. I did beg my Brother to remove the Wainscoting and he, fearing for my Mind, did do so. There was nothing there, but even now I heare their little Voices crying for me to set them free.

Freya'sDay

My Brother came. I am to stay with him awhile. I am grateful, for I cannot bear to heare the Crying a moment longer. Mama would not allow it at first but he hath Gainsayed her. I leave this afternoon and I shall take my little Booke with me.

Loki'sDay

Today Mama didst call upon my deare Brother, for there is some Business between them. My Brother is uneasy on this count for he didst saye to me, "I will not do this, Esmeralda. Although I do wish Mama well, as I must for I am her Sonne, I do not wish for her to live Forever." Although I understood not what he meant—for how can any person live Forever?—I didst reply that most certainly I did not wish it either and we laughed. It is good to laugh with my Brother.

SunnDay

Mama didst call again today. My Brother locked his Chamber and didst saye to me, "Begone, Esmeralda, for this is not Business upon which you should thinke." But tho' I should have obeyed my deare Brother, I didst not. I didst listen at the Door, though I needed not to press my Eare so close, for Mama's voice did drille into my Eare through the great oake Door like a woodpecker's Beake. "I tell thee now, Marcellus, I shall not rest until I have it!" Mama didst scream. I heard not my Brother's reply for Mama didst not stop her Torrent of Words.

As she didst leave, her creature, which doth bite all who displeaseth her and cause them to Sicken and Die, didst bite my little cat. Tonight poore Puss doth aile and moan most piteously.

MoonDay

My Brother's Chambers are most darke and gloomy for there is a great Storm howling through the Castle, but I care not, for it mirrors my Mind. My poore little cat is no more.

Mama didst call yet again. When she had departed with her Retinue, which was the Bumptious Barrelle of Larde and Six Armed Guards, my deare Brother didst come to me and tell me all that has transpired. My Brother was forced to agree to provide Mama with a Potion for Eternal Youthe. She will Live Forever. I didst Remonstrate and ask, with what Dangers doth he sport? I DO NOT wish Mama to Live Forever, for I do wish to be Queen one Day and how shall I be Queen if Mama does not die, as all of us must do? And my deare Brother didst smile grimly and Saye that though there was a Potion, it was not for her, ha-ha! It was for him and he hath drunk of it many monthes past.

Tir'sDay

Why cannot I too have a Potion for Eternal Youthe? It is not fair. I am most poorly used.

Woden'sDay

My Brother has today a new Apprentice. Though he hath a pleasing countenance he is a most peculiar boy. When he didst see me he laughed and shouted out some strange name that I knew not. I spoke to him most Pleasantly even though he is but a common Apprentice, yet when I didst speak, he ran away. My Brother is still much troubled. He doth say over and over, "I didst see myself in the future. I didst see my terrible fate. Oh, Esmeralda, I am a fool. I wouldst not wait. What have I done?" But I do not know what he hath done, for he will not saye.

Freya'sDay

A Day of Great Foreboding. Mama did come for me today. I am no more to stay with my deare Brother for she said, "He has important work to do, Esmeralda, and with your great moanings you do distract him from his task." I begged to stay—and my Brother begged also, but to no avail. Now I sit in my Most Dismal Chamber. Mama is sending the Bumptious Barrelle of Larde for me at dawn tomorrow. I am greatly afraid.

And there the diary ended. Jenna slowly closed the book and sat on the edge of Esmeralda's bed, trying to take it all in. What had happened to Esmeralda? And what—now that everyone thought that she was Esmeralda—would happen to *her*?

35

KNIGHTS



Later that afternoon, Jenna sat wrapped in a damp bedspread on Princess Esmeralda's lumpy bed. Beside her were the remains of a large pie, crusty bread, cheese, apples, cake and milk that the Knight of the Day, true to his word, had the Cooke bring to her. She had lit the small candle beside the bed, and as she sat warming her hands over the feeble candle flame, she heard a faint knocking on the wooden paneling of the room. The sound came and went in bursts, sometimes frenzied, sometimes weary and despairing. The hairs on the back of Jenna's neck rose: It was the little Princesses and they were *still alive*.

Jenna knew she shouldn't, but somehow she could not help but put her ear to the panel where the knocking was coming from. To her dismay she was sure she could hear the faint snuffling, hiccupping sounds of exhausted sobbing—*children's* sobbing. It was too much. Jenna ran to the door and

hammered loudly with her fists, calling out, “Sir Hereward, Sir Hereward! They’re here. I can hear them—we’ve got to get them out! Oh, Sir Hereward, *please* find someone to help!”

To Jenna’s surprise, the ghost **Passed Through** the bedroom doors. Sir Hereward did not **Pass Through** doors for many people, but sometimes it had to be done. He stood next to Jenna, shaking his head to get rid of the unpleasant sensation of being full of wood.

“Princess,” said the knight, leaning on his sword and regarding Jenna with a puzzled air, “forgive my confusion but it seemeth to my poor brain that though thou art most assuredly a Royal Princess, thou art not the poor Princess Esmeralda, e’en though thou hast her looks to a strange degree.”

Jenna nodded. She knew she could trust Sir Hereward but she was not sure if he would understand what she was about to tell him. “I am Princess Jenna,” she said very quietly, just in case anyone was listening. “I have come from a Time in the future...” She trailed off, unsure if Sir Hereward would understand what she meant.

The old knight was quicker than Jenna expected. “Ah, so thy speech is that from times yet to come,” Sir Hereward mused. “’Tis a strange sound to be sure, so quick and sharp to the eare, like the rattling of a bird’s beake upon the bars of its cage. What a cacophony must sound through *your* Palace, Princess Jenna.”

Jenna was about to say that her Palace was quiet and empty compared with this one when the knocking inside the wall started up again. “Th-there it *is*,” she whispered.

“’Tis the poor baby Princesses, Princess Jenna.” Sir Hereward sighed mournfully.

“But we have to get them out before they suffocate,” said Jenna, frustrated by Sir Hereward’s lack of action.

“They are already suffocated,” murmured Sir Hereward, staring at his rusty feet.

“But—”

“’Tis their UnQuiet Spirits that you do hear, Princess. As indeed didst poor Esmeralda. Perchance, if I had known the true nature of our Queen...I

might have saved the Babes.”

“But they were her *daughters*,” said Jenna. “How could she...”

“Methinks it was for the very reason that they *were* her daughters,” said Sir Hereward gravely. “I didst hear something most strange...but I dare not believe it to be so.” The ghost shook his head as if to clear the thought away.

“What? *What* don’t you believe?” asked Jenna. And then realizing that the way she spoke must sound almost rude to the knight, she added a little self-consciously, “Pray, tell me, if you will, Sir Hereward, what it is thou darest not believe.”

Sir Hereward smiled. “Why,” he said, “now thou seemest e’en more like Princess Esmeralda.” Jenna was not sure if this was a particularly good—or safe—thing to seem like, but she took it as a compliment.

“It is said the Queen doth seek eternal life upon this Earth. That, indeed, she is close enough to it that she desireth no heirs, for she will hold the Queenship forever more.” Sir Hereward heaved a sigh. “So it seemeth that throughout eternity our Queen will ever be Queen Etheldredda.”

“No, she won’t!” cried Jenna.

Sir Hereward looked at Jenna with a faint ray of hope in his eyes. “Will she not, fair Jenna? Methinks to make certain of such a thing, thou must escape thy many-times-great-grandmama,” he said, “for thou art no safer here than the little Princesses and poore Esmeralda were. I am but a ghost but even a ghost may **Cause** a lock to open.” Sir Hereward placed his only hand with its battered and rusty gauntlet on the door. After some minutes, and a great deal of huffing and puffing from the old ghost, Jenna heard the lock click open.

“Thou art free, fair Jenna. Fare thee well. I trust we will meet again.”

“We will, Sir Hereward,” said Jenna.

Jenna was free, but she knew she would never truly be free until she found Septimus. She decided to head for Wizard Way; there was a saying in the Castle that if you stood under the Great Arch long enough, all who lived in the Castle would pass by. It was as good a place as any to start looking, and

the sooner she got there the better. With a wave to Sir Hereward—who raised his arm in a respectful salute—she set off.

The Palace corridors were bright and busy, much to Jenna’s surprise. She was used to the night being dark. In *her* Palace the night was lit only by a few candles, for Sarah Heap found it hard to leave her frugal habits behind. The candles were placed at long enough intervals from one another to provide plenty of deep shadows in which a fugitive Princess could hide. But *this* Palace was a different matter; Bertie Smalls, the Royal Candle Trimmer saw to that. Bertie, a tall thin man, waxen pale with a mop of flame-red hair, patrolled the nighttime corridors with great dedication. It was a matter of honor for Bertie that not one candle ever went out under his guardianship.

Although Jenna was tempted to take one of the myriad shortcuts and servants’ passageways through the Palace, she decided it would be too risky, for a Princess would never dream of using them and she would quickly be noticed. Jenna decided that she would have to brazen it out; after all, who was to know that Queen Etheldreda had made a prisoner of her? And so, head held high, hoping that people would assume that Princess Esmeralda had a perfect right to walk the Palace corridors, Jenna set off.

She made good progress, and was even beginning to enjoy people curtsying and bowing to her and the excited whispers that followed in her wake, when she had the misfortune to see the Knight of the Day coming toward her. The good-natured knight smiled and bowed, and then to his horror remembered that he had been told to keep Princess Esmeralda locked in her room. With a sudden vision of his head stuck on the North Gate gatepost, the Knight of the Day stepped in front of Jenna to bar her way.

“Prithee, Princess Esmeralda, allow me to escort thee to your Chamber before thy deare Mama doth—”

“Sorry,” muttered Jenna, “I’ve got to go.” She ducked under the Knight of the Day’s outstretched arm and ran.

Faced with what he was sure was a straight choice between letting Jenna go and keeping his head, the Knight of the Day chose his head. He chased after her, shouting out to passing servants and officials for help. Soon Jenna was being pursued by a long and ever-growing line of servants. Now was the time to use those shortcuts. Jenna dived behind a thick brocade curtain, which still hung, although in tatters, in her own Palace. She dashed down a short flight of steps, along a three-cornered passageway, threw herself inside a small doorway and stopped by a flight of spiral steps to catch her breath and

listen for her pursuers. The great clattering of feet along the three-cornered passageway told her she had not escaped them.

Jenna knew what she had to do. She rushed up the steps, her legs burning with the effort, and hurtled across the small landing at the top, all the while fumbling to unclip the large emerald and gold key from her belt. Behind her, the thud of heavy boots on the steps made her hand tremble as she placed her key in the central keyhole of the emerald and gold door to the Queen's Room. Her pursuers arrived just in time to see the Princess apparently walk through a solid wall. A great cry of amazement came from the overcrowded landing.

The Knight of the Day sank to the floor with a groan and put his head in his hands, which only had the effect of reminding him of how very attached he was to his head—although not, he feared, for very much longer.

36

BRODA PYE



Jenna stepped into the Queen's Room with a feeling of relief. She knew she was safe, no one could follow her. The room was just as it always was, the same small fire burning in the grate, the same old armchair and rug beside it—except for the ghost sitting in the chair. Instead of the ghost of her mother, whom Jenna had yet to see, the chair was occupied by the ghost of Queen Etheldredda's mother. Queen Etheldredda's mother was as different from her daughter as it was possible to be. The elderly ghost had been slumbering in her chair, her crown slipped forward over her wispy white hair, and a contented smile on her face as she dreamed of the happy times she and her husband had had at the Palace and all the friends she had known. If a frown did occasionally flicker across her brow, it was when the teenage tantrums of the young Etheldredda intruded into her dreams, but they soon vanished, replaced by the many good memories the much-loved old Queen had stored up. As Jenna came into the Room, the Queen opened her eyes and, thinking she was seeing her granddaughter, smiled and returned to her reveries.

Jenna was about to sit down in the old chair by the fire and wait until everyone outside had given up and gone away, but there was something about the chair that told her that it was not hers to sit in—not yet. She wandered around the tiny room while the old Queen slumbered, oblivious to the presence of her great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter.

Interested to see if the Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard had changed in any way, Jenna peeked inside. To her surprise, instead of the bare shelves she was used to, the cupboard was full of exquisite little bottles in a hundred different shades of blue, green and red glass, which sparkled in the glow of the firelight. In each bottle was a gold-topped cork, and the long lines of gold corks twinkled like a precious golden chain.

Intrigued by the bottles, Jenna slipped inside the cupboard, and the door closed behind her. To Jenna’s surprise, when the door closed, a line of tiny candles on the bottom shelf burst into flame and filled the cupboard with light. Jenna was curious to see what was now kept in the little mahogany drawers, so she opened the top drawer. It was full of what looked like thick gold coins, but they smelled like mint chocolates. Jenna picked one up, scraped away some of the thin gold leaf and tentatively licked the dark, bitter chocolate. Unable to resist, she popped the rest of the mint into her mouth. It melted in the most wonderful mix of mint and chocolate that she had ever tasted. Jenna closed the drawer before she was tempted to take another and, one by one, opened the rest of the drawers, which were neatly packed with yet more bottles lying on soft unspun wool.

Preoccupied by deciding whether to have just *one* more mint chocolate after all, Jenna opened the bottom drawer, and—too late—she heard the telltale *click* as the door to the cupboard locked itself and the Queen’s Way was set in motion. Everything went black and then someone trod on her toe—and screamed. Very loudly.

“Aargh! Broda, Broda! Mama is in the closet. She hath **Come Through. Brodaaaaa!**”

The cupboard door was thrown open with a bang, and a girl rushed out, still screaming. Ears ringing, Jenna nervously peered out of the cupboard and was confronted by the bizarre sight of what appeared to be her twin hurling herself at a very beautiful young woman with long, dark curly hair and brilliant witch-blue eyes.

“There, there, Esmeralda,” shushed the young woman, gently stroking

Esmeralda's hair, "cease thy Din. Thou art safe now, and thy mama will not Dare to venture through the Way, for thou knowest thy grandmama will forbid it. Shh...there now. *Oh!*" Broda Pye gasped at the sight of another Esmeralda stepping out of the Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard.

"Uh...hello," said Jenna uncertainly.

Esmeralda stared at Jenna, and Jenna returned the stare—unable to believe that she was not looking in a mirror and seeing her own reflection. They were the same height, their brown hair was the same length and they both wore identical gold circlets. Suddenly Esmeralda started sobbing. "My Time Is Come. I see my Doppelgänger. All is *lost*—aieeeeeeee!"

"Cease now, Esmeralda!" said Broda Pye, rather more sternly. "'Tis not your Doppelgänger—behold her boots, Esmeralda."

Esmeralda stared at Jenna's brown boots, and her nose wrinkled up disapprovingly in an expression that showed she was indeed her mother's daughter. "They are but common brown boots," said Esmeralda, as though Jenna was not there.

Jenna looked down at her boots. She *liked* her boots, and she didn't think that Esmeralda had any room to talk, considering the stupid shoes she was wearing: the weirdest shiny red things with points so long that two pieces of ribbon were fixed to the ends and tied to her ankles to stop her from tripping over them.

"Who art thou?" Broda interrupted Jenna's thoughts on Esmeralda's footwear.

"My name is Jenna," said Jenna.

"By thy golden circlet and thy red robes, thou dost appear a Princess, despite thy boots," said Broda. "But how can this be?"

"I *am* a Princess," said Jenna crossly. "And in my Time we wear boots."

Broda Pye was used to many strange things happening in her cottage, for the Marram Marshes were even more untamed than in Jenna's Time; all manner of Spirits and Creatures lived there and would sometimes wander into the Keeper's Cottage. Broda decided that Jenna was one of these—a Spirit of a long-dead Princess wandering the marshes, maybe searching for the Dragon Boat. Broda could see that Jenna was one of the more substantial Spirits with

a bit of a temper and thought it would be wise to appease her by offering food and drink.

Broda disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Esmeralda and Jenna together. There was an awkward silence between them, and then Esmeralda, who was a practical person and had decided that Jenna looked far too solid to be a Spirit, said, “Thou art truly a Princess?”

Jenna nodded.

Esmeralda knew something of Marcellus’s experiments. “Art thou from a Time Yet to Come?” she asked.

Jenna nodded again.

Esmeralda was thinking hard. “Tell me...is Mama Queen in thy Time Yet to Come?” she asked.

Jenna shook her head. “Not when I left,” she said. “But last month her ghost suddenly **Appeared**. Now I am afraid that if I don’t return, she will become Queen.”

“Then thou *must* return,” said Esmeralda as if that settled the matter. “See now, Broda hath brought forth her sweetmeats—thou art truly honored.”

Broda had returned carrying a tray of tall glasses filled with a hot misty-looking drink and a gold plate of delicate pink and green squashy sweets covered in a dusting of soft sugar. She offered them to Jenna, who took a pink one. It was like nothing Jenna had eaten before—smooth and chewy at the same time, and it tasted of a wonderful aromatic mixture of rose petals, honey and lemon.

The misty drink was less wonderful. It tasted bitter, but it was hot, and Jenna was enjoying sitting beside Broda’s fire. She felt safe and warm, just as she always did at Keeper’s Cottage, but she knew she had to go. She would not find Septimus here.

“I must leave now,” said Jenna, getting used to the more formal ways of speaking. “But I thank you for your hospitality.”

Broda Pye bowed her head, relieved that the Spirit Princess was satisfied. Then, as was considered prudent in Spirit visitations, she asked, “Prithee, fair Princess, do not depart from this house empty-handed. Ask of me what thee

will and I will be honored to meet thine every desire,” said Broda, hoping that Jenna would not ask for her nice new pearl necklace that Marcellus had recently sent her, which she wished she had tucked out of sight inside her tunic while she was in the kitchen. It was too late now, and Broda held her breath while she waited for the Spirit Princess’s reply.

There was something that Jenna wanted more than anything else—apart from finding Septimus—and she knew this was the one place where she might be able to find it. “I desire…” she said slowly, trying to find the right words.

“Yes?” asked Broda Pye on tenterhooks, anxiously fingering her necklace.

“I desire to know how to **Revive** the Dragon Boat.”

Broda Pye breathed an audible sigh of relief. “From death?” she asked.

“From half death, half life. She breathes but does not move.”

“She speaketh?”

“But weakly. Like a whisper on the breeze,” said Jenna, really getting into the old way of speaking and rather enjoying it.

“Stay thee a few minutes longer and I will fetch you the **Remedie**,” said Broda, and before Jenna could change her mind, she rushed into the Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard. Jenna heard her open the trapdoor and climb down the old ladder, on her way to the Dragon Boat in her dark and lonely underground temple.

There was a silence, and then Esmeralda said, “Mama liketh not the Dragon Boat, but *I* shall like her. I know that she will talk to *me*, when the Time Is Right, e’en though she will not speak to Mama, though Mama doth shout and cajole every MidSummer Day.”

Jenna smiled; she knew that the Dragon Boat had good judgment.

Broda returned, breathless and smelling of the musty passageways below the ground. She placed a battered old box on her desk and beckoned Jenna over. On the box was written the words LAST RESORT. Broda muttered an **UnLock** over the box and then lifted the lid. Inside was a small leather pouch that Jenna recognized.

“That’s the **Transubstantiate Triple**,” she said, disappointed. “We tried that before.”

Broda looked impressed. “Thou art a Wise Spirit for thy tender Years,” she observed, taking out the three small hammered gold bowls with blue enameling around their rims that Jenna remembered. Broda laid out the bowls on the desk, and then to Jenna’s surprise, she also brought out a small green bottle.

Jenna picked up the bottle. On the label was written TX3 REVIVE. “I have not seen this before,” she said.

“Then you have not seen the **Transubstantiate Triple**,” said Broda simply. “It will not work without, though with strong **Magyk**, some may do good.”

“May I take just the bottle?” asked Jenna.

Broda bowed her head. “Surely you may. There are many more in the Queen’s cupboard to be had. You are most welcome, Princess.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Broda stood waiting for the Spirit Princess to depart. She was afraid that she might ask for something else; some Spirits could get greedy. Broda had once had a Spirit of a merchant who had taken her entire thimble collection, and then come back for her best needles.

Jenna knew Broda wanted her to go, but she said, “There is one more thing....”

Broda’s face fell. So this *was* a greedy one. She didn’t look it, but you could never tell with Spirits. “What?” said Broda rather sharply.

“Do you have a Boggart?” she asked Broda.

Broda looked surprised. “You want a *Boggart*?” she asked in disbelief, but a Spirit Princess must not be denied. Broda threw open the cottage front door. The dank smell of the marshes drifted in, and Jenna breathed in the smell that she loved—then jumped with shock. At least a dozen little Boggarts were grouped on the doorstep watching her, their brown eyes and wet muddy noses glistening in the light of the lantern.

“Which Boggart do you want?” asked Broda.

“I don’t want one, I just wanted to see one again,” explained Jenna. “Aren’t they lovely? Look at their great big eyes and their huge flippers.”

Patience at an end, Broda shook her head at the craziness of Spirits. “Shoo!” she said, flapping her arms wildly at the baby Boggarts. “*Shoo!*” The Boggarts stared at Broda, unblinking, and showed no sign of even beginning to be shooed.

“They try my patience most unmercifully,” said Broda, slamming the door. “’Tis the breeding season, and I declare there must be a dozen litters upon the island.”

“In my Time there is only one Boggart,” said Jenna.

“Then in your Time, you are truly fortunate. Now, fare thee well, Princess,” Broda said, holding open the door to the Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard.

Jenna got the hint. “Fare thee well, Broda. Fare thee well, Esmeralda,” she said politely, and stepped into the cupboard.

Broda Pye firmly closed the door.

Jenna slipped out of the Queen’s Room and was relieved to find the landing empty. She tiptoed down the turret stairs and—

“Princess!” The Knight of the Day pounced.

The Knight of the Day had not quite given up all thoughts of keeping his head. He took hold of Jenna’s arm and marched her off, saying, “Thy mama will worry, fair Esmeralda. Thou must *not* stray from thy Chamber. ’Tis past six of the clock and all Princesses should be abed. Come now.”

Jenna could not escape the Knight’s steely grip. At top speed, he propelled her along the corridor, and before she knew it, she was hurtling toward her bedroom doors—and a surprised Sir Hereward.

Sir Hereward was not alone. A short fat man with a bright red face and a bulbous nose was banging furiously on the bedroom door. The man was almost swamped in his gray silk Palace livery, which had five very long gold

ribbons dangling from each sleeve, plus two large gold epaulettes, which had been added at his own request. “Open!” he shouted. “Open up in the name of her most Gracious Majesty, Queen Etheldredda. Open up, I say!”

The Knight of the Day saw his chance to hand over his troublesome charge. “Percy,” he said loudly over the din of the banging, “cease thy bellowing. I have here Princess Esmeralda.”

The red-faced man wheeled around in surprise. “Why is she not abed?” he demanded.

The Knight of the Day thought fast. “Princess Esmeralda is a most delicate flower, Percy. She didst have a Fitte of the Vapors and I, mindful of her *dear* mama’s concerns for her Most Precious and now her *Onlie* daughter, did—”

“Oh, cease thy mitherings,” snapped the beribboned man. He turned to Jenna and gave her a curt bow. “Princess Esmeralda, her most Gracious Majesty, your *deare mama*, requests your Royal Presence at a banquet held this night to Celebrate your Safe Return from the Cold Waters of the River. Follow me.”

Jenna glanced in panic at Sir Hereward, who whispered, “It be the Queen’s Steward. He will not be gainsaid. Thou hast best obey.”

“But, she—I mean, Mama—said that I must stay here,” protested Jenna. The Steward shot Jenna a questioning look. Esmeralda had certainly changed for the worse since he last met her. She was far too daring, and he didn’t like the way she spoke one bit.

“I do not think thou truly wishest to disobey thine own deare mama,” said the Steward stonily. “I myself would not wish it, if I were in thy place.”

“Thou best go,” whispered Sir Hereward. “I will stay by thy side. He will not see, for I do not choose to **Appear** to this Bumptious Barrelle of Larde.”

Jenna smiled gratefully.

With a horrible sinking feeling in her stomach, but with the faithful Sir Hereward by her side, she followed the Bumptious Barrelle of Larde along the candlelit passageways, cutting a swath through the bustle of servants and sweeping down the great stairs toward the ominous sounds of preparations for the banquet.

37

THE BANQUET



Sit here!” Queen *Etheldredda* barked sharply at Jenna, pointing to a small, uncomfortable gold chair. The chair had been set next to Queen *Etheldredda*’s generously upholstered throne, which dominated the top table set up on the dais of the banquet hall. Queen *Etheldredda* was not a generous hostess and gave as few banquets as possible. She considered them a waste of both good food and precious time, but sometimes they had to be done.

The Queen had been taken by surprise at the speed at which the news of the **Return** of the drowned Princess had spread not only through the Palace, but also through the entire Castle. However, along with the news, a certain opinion put about by the Knight of the Day was gaining a worrying foothold. Many thought that the Queen was displeased to see her poor **Returned** daughter and had locked her away, and what was *worse*, from the look upon her face when she had first beheld her dear drowned one, anyone would have thought that she had wished her daughter *dead*. Or, and this was delivered in hushed tones after much looking over the shoulder to check for eavesdroppers, people whispered that the Queen had drowned the child *herself*. The imparting of this news was invariably accompanied by gasps of

dismay and amazement followed by an overpowering wish to find someone else to tell it to and enjoy the dismay and amazement all over again.

The gossip had spread faster than a forest fire and by nightfall Queen Etheldredda knew she had to do something—fast. And so the Palace Scribes were set to work on writing the invitations to:

A Magnificent Banquet, being

*A ThanksGiving for the Safe **Return***

Of our Beloved Daughter,

Princess Esmeralda.

Bring your own plates.

The hastily assembled throng gathered outside the great doors to the Ballroom—the largest room in the Palace where all banquets were held. Jenna nervously perched on the wobbly gold chair and surveyed all before her. She shook her head, trying to get rid of the bizarre feeling she had had ever since she had jumped through the Glass, that she was actually at home in her own Time and in the middle of one of Silas’s extended practical jokes. Jenna still remembered fondly her sixth birthday when she had woken to find that she was on board a ship bound for, as Silas had put it, Birthday Island. The whole room had been made to look like the inside of an extremely untidy ship. Her brothers were dressed as pirates and Sarah as the ship’s cook. When Simon had shouted out, “Land ahoy,” everyone had climbed down a rope ladder hung precariously from the window to a real boat waiting for them below in the river, which had taken them to a small sand spit upriver, where Jenna discovered a treasure chest with her birthday present inside it.

However, Jenna thought ruefully as she stole a look at the Queen, she could not imagine the mother of poor Esmeralda and the little Princesses pretending to be a ship’s cook for a day. It seemed to be almost too much for her to pretend to even *like* her supposed daughter. Jenna turned around and stole a quick glance at Sir Hereward. She felt better seeing the old ghost standing behind her, still on guard. He caught Jenna’s eye and winked.

Jenna watched Queen Etheldredda take her place on the throne. The Queen sat down as if she was expecting a nasty surprise to have been left on the chair. Sitting bolt upright, as though someone had tied her to a plank,

Etheldredda settled herself onto the throne: a lavishly gilded chair upholstered in deep red velvet and dripping with gemstones. The Aie-Aie scuttled under the throne and curled its tail around one of the carved legs, flicking its tooth in and out and staring at the tasty ankles passing by. Stonily the Queen's hooded violet eyes stared at the great doors at the end of the Ballroom, which were still firmly closed against the rising hubbub outside. Jenna stole a glance at the living Etheldredda. She thought that the Queen looked remarkably like her ghost: the same steely gray plaits were coiled tightly around her ears, and the same pointy nose sniffed the air in the familiar disapproving manner. The only difference was that the living Etheldredda smelled of old socks and camphor. Suddenly, the unforgettable voice drilled out, "Let the rabble in!"

Two little boys, Door Pages for the night and up well past their bedtime, ran and heaved on the golden door handles, pulling the doors open in unison as they had practiced under the stern eyes of the Royal DoorKeeper for the last four hours.

A most exotic and highly polished group of people began to file into the Ballroom, two by two, each one clutching a plate. As each pair came through the doors, their gaze turned immediately to the **Returned** Princess, and even though Jenna had become used to being stared at during her walks around the Castle in her own Time, she began to feel very self-conscious. She flushed bright pink and could not help but wonder if anyone was going to notice that she was not Esmeralda.

But no one did. A few people thought that Esmeralda appeared in much better health than she had been, and looked, not surprisingly, much happier for her time away from her mama. Gone was the drawn look to her face, the anxious frown that always hovered over her eyes. She had filled out a little too, and no longer looked in need of a good meal or two.

For having sent an invitation with such short notice, Queen Etheldredda had rustled up an impressive-looking group of guests. Everyone wore their very best set of clothes; most wore their wedding clothes, although the more scholarly ones, particularly the Ordinary Wizards and the Alchemists, wore their graduation gowns adorned with fur and richly colored silks. The Royal courtiers and officials, noses in the air, strutted importantly through the Ballroom doors in their ceremonial robes. These were made from dark gray velvet edged in red and were adorned with long gold ribbons that hung from the sleeves, the number and length of which depended upon the status of the officials. On the robes of important officials, the ribbons reached the floor, and on the robes of *extremely* important officials, the ribbons trailed along on

the floor and were often—accidentally on purpose—stepped on. It was not unusual to see a long gold ribbon lying forlornly in the Palace corridors, and some officials had even taken to carrying spare ribbons with them, for the number of ribbons on one’s sleeves was highly significant, and it would not do for a five-ribbon official to be seen with only four or, perish the thought, *three*.

Jenna watched the sumptuous stream of guests pour in and find their places at the three long tables that were set down the length of the Ballroom. After much fussing and treading on ribbons, all were finally seated. A small, nervous page was pushed onto the dais by the Steward; the boy ran to the middle, stood on his spot in front of the Queen and rang a small handbell. The tinkling sound immediately brought complete silence. Everyone stopped their chat in mid-sentence and looked expectantly at Queen Etheldredda.

“Welcome to this feast.” Etheldredda’s voice rang through the Ballroom like fingernails being dragged down a blackboard. Some people winced, others ran their fingernails across their front teeth to get rid of the nasty sensation. “Held in honor of the safe **Return** of my *deare* daughter, Princess Esmeralda, whom we all did think sadly drowned. Who was Much Mourned by her *deare mama* and who has been welcomed home with Most Great Rejoicing and Motherly Affection, for we have not been out of each other’s sight since her **Return**, have we, my *Darling One*?” Queen Etheldredda gave Jenna a sharp kick on the shins under the table.

“Ouch!” gasped Jenna.

“*Have we, my Darling One?*” Etheldredda’s eyes bored into Jenna and she hissed under her breath, “Answer *No, Mama*, you little fool—else it shall be the worse for thee.”

With all eyes upon her, Jenna did not dare refuse. “No, Mama,” she muttered sulkily.

“*What was that, my most Precious One?*” asked Queen Etheldredda silkily, with steel in her eyes. “*What did you say?*”

Jenna took a deep breath and said, “No, Mama. Indeed, the sight of you is...haunting.” and then immediately she wished she hadn’t, for all eyes were now upon her at the sound of her strange accent and her odd way of speaking. But Queen Etheldredda, who had made a habit of never listening to a word that Princess Esmeralda said, appeared not to notice. Bored with having to think about the wretched Esmeralda for longer than she had ever had to

before, the Queen stood up.

With much scraping of chairs, everyone in the Ballroom rose to their feet and turned their respectful gaze away from the odd Esmeralda to their more familiar Queen.

“Let the banquet begin!” Etheldredda commanded.

“Let the banquet begin!” responded the guests. After making quite sure that the Queen was already seated, the throng sat down and an expectant buzz of chatter began again.

Jenna had been worried about the prospect of having to talk to Queen Etheldredda, but she need not have concerned herself, for the Queen did not look once in her direction for the rest of the banquet. Instead, she directed her attention to the dark-haired young man sitting to her left. The man, Jenna noticed, did not wear the Royal Red but wore a striking black and red tunic emblazoned with a dazzling amount of gold. He kept glancing at Jenna with a puzzled look, but with Queen Etheldredda between them, the young man seemed unwilling to say anything. With little else to do—for the Bumptious Barrelle of Larde sat on her right and, taking his cue from the Queen, was also ignoring her—Jenna occupied her time listening to the acrimonious conversation between Etheldredda and the young man and was amazed to hear him call the Queen “Mama.”

A gong sounded.

An expectant silence fell upon the hungry crowd. This was the announcement of the first of fifteen courses. They licked their lips, shook out their napkins and, almost as one, tucked them under their chins. The little Door Pages heaved open the doors, and a long line of serving girls in pairs, each one carrying two small silver bowls, filed in. On entering the Ballroom, the girls divided up, one line to serve each table. In a tide of gray, the girls swept along the tables, each depositing a bowl in front of an eager diner. The last two girls to enter the Ballroom made their way up to the dais, and soon Jenna too had a small silver bowl in front of her.

Curious, Jenna looked down at the bowl and gasped in horror. A young duckling, scarcely big enough to be out of the egg, lay in a puddle of thin brown broth. The duckling had been marinated in wine, plucked, and its little naked, goose-bumpy body was slumped in the bowl. Its head rested on a small ledge that stuck out from the special duckling bowl and gazed with terrified eyes at Jenna. *It was still alive.* Jenna was nearly sick on the spot.

Queen Etheldredda, on the other hand, looked very pleased at the sight of her duckling. The Queen licked her lips, remarking to the young man on her left that this was one of her favorite dishes—there was nothing like a tender young duckling freshly scalded in hot orange sauce.

The gong sounded for the second time, announcing the arrival of a long line of boys carrying jugs of boiling hot sauce. Jenna watched the boys enter the Ballroom two by two, one line going to the right and one to the left, each boy stopping to pour some of the orange sauce into the waiting bowls of the diners. The two boys at the end of the line with the hottest jugs of sauce were ordered straight up to the dais. Quickly, before the sauce boy reached her, Jenna picked the duckling out of her bowl and thrust it into her tunic pocket, where the tiny creature lay in the soft fluff at the bottom of her pocket, rigid with terror.

Jenna watched the boys thread their way through the throng. Eyes down, trying to avoid spilling the brimming jugs of hot sauce, they stepped up onto the dais, where a burly footman hissed in their ears, “Tarry not, serve the Queen and Princess Esmeralda first.” And so it was that when Jenna looked up to politely thank the boy who had just poured orange sauce into her duckling-free bowl, she found herself looking into the haunted eyes of Septimus Heap.

Jenna looked away. She did not believe it. This boy with the long straggly hair, thin in the face and somewhat taller than she remembered, could not possibly be Septimus. Not in a million years.

Septimus for his part had expected to see Princess Esmeralda—so that was who he saw. He was annoyed with himself for thinking for a few hopeful seconds that the Princess could possibly be Jenna. He had already been fooled like that once before when Princess Esmeralda had stayed with Marcellus just before she disappeared. He wasn’t going to let it happen again. Carefully, Septimus poured the orange sauce into her bowl, grateful that for some reason she did not have a small, live duckling in there.

Suddenly there was a loud crash and a collective gasp of horror mixed with glee rose from the Ballroom. At the sight of the duckling in Queen Etheldredda’s bowl, Hugo had dropped the jug, and the boiling orange sauce had spilled into the Queen’s lap. Etheldredda leaped to her feet screaming, the Bumptious Barrelle of Larde threw back his chair and grabbed Hugo by the neck and lifted him bodily off the ground, half throttling him. “You little

fool!” yelled the Barrelle of Larde. “You will pay for this. You will regret this moment for the rest of your life—which will not be long, boy, mark my words.”

Hugo’s eyes were wide with fear. He dangled helplessly from the Barrelle of Larde’s pudgy hands, which were tightening around his neck. Septimus saw that his lips were turning blue, Hugo’s eyes rolled up and a great expanse of white began to show, Septimus leaped forward. Using more strength than he knew he had, he pulled the boy from the pudgy hands, yelling, “Let him go, you fat fiend!” The sound of Septimus’s voice rang through the Ballroom with more effect than he had intended.

Jenna jumped from her seat. She had been watching the Steward throttle Hugo with as much horror as Septimus had been, and now she knew. It was Septimus—it was *his voice*. She knew his voice anywhere. It was *him!*

At the same time, the young man sitting on the other side of Queen Etheldredda also jumped up. He too knew his Apprentice’s voice—what was the boy doing here dressed as a Palace servant?

Jenna and Marcellus Pye collided in the melee on the dais. Marcellus slipped on the puddle of orange sauce and crashed to the ground. The Bumptious Barrelle of Larde lost his battle with Septimus and let go of Hugo, who dropped to the ground dazed from his grip. Seizing her opportunity, Queen Etheldredda, dripping with orange sauce, aimed a swipe at the boy; she missed and caught the Barrelle of Larde a stinging blow across his ear. The Barrelle of Larde, who was an aggressive man, automatically gave Etheldredda a slap in return—much to the glee of those assembled in the Ballroom, who were watching enthralled, ducklings poised midway to their gaping mouths.

The Barrelle of Larde suddenly realized what he had done and turned white, then ashen gray. He gathered up his sauce-stained robes and fled the banquet, tearing down through the tables, his ten precious gold ribbons flying out behind him. The Door Pages saw him coming, and thinking that this happened at every banquet, they ceremoniously opened the great doors for the fleeing Barrelle and bowed as he shot past them. As they pushed the doors closed, the pages grinned at each other. No one had told them a banquet was this much fun.

Hanging on to the dazed Hugo with one hand, Septimus grabbed Jenna by the other. “It is you, Jen, isn’t it?” he asked, his eyes shining with excitement. A wonderful feeling of hope and happiness at seeing Jenna again swept over

Septimus; he felt as if he had been given back his future.

“Yep, it’s me, Sep. Can’t believe it’s *you* though!”

“Marcia found my note, didn’t she?”

“What note? Come on, let’s get out of here while we can.”

No one noticed the two serving boys and Princess Esmeralda leave the fray. They left behind them a bevy of Palace servants attending an angry Etheldredda, who was barking at Marcellus Pye, demanding that he “get up this very minute.” To the tumultuous sound of the Ballroom in an uproar, they tiptoed out a small door in the paneling at the back of the dais that led to a retiring room for Royal ladies who wished to rest from the effects of eating and drinking too much.

Jenna bolted the door and leaned against it, looking at Septimus in disbelief. The duckling stirred and a small puddle of dampness leaked through her tunic pocket. There was no doubt about it, thought Jenna, the duckling was real—and so, amazingly, was Septimus.

THE SUMMER HOUSE

That bolt won't last long, Jen," said Septimus, looking at the flimsy filigree bolt designed to grace the Royal Ladies' Retiring Room door. "We'd better get out of here quick."

Jenna nodded. "I know," she said, "but the Palace is stuffed full of people. Sep, you wouldn't believe it, it's so different. You can't go anywhere without someone seeing you and curtsying to you and—"

"Bet they wouldn't curtsey to me, Jen," said Septimus, smiling for the first time in one hundred and sixty-nine days and suddenly looking like the Septimus Jenna remembered.

"Not with your hair looking like a rat's nest. What *have* you done to it?"

"Won't comb it. Don't see the point really. And certainly won't let them cut it into that stupid pudding bowl shape. Anyway, it's something to irritate Marcellus with. He's a bit of a fussbudget about things like—*what*, Hugo?" Hugo was tugging at Septimus's sleeve.

"Harken..." the boy whispered, eyes bloodshot and face still deathly white from his near strangling. Someone was rattling the door handle.

Sir Hereward barred the door with his battered sword and **Appeared** to Septimus and Hugo, causing the already scared Hugo to leap into the air with fright. “Princess Jenna, I shall protect you and your faithful followers to the end,” the knight said gravely.

“Thank you, Sir Hereward,” said Jenna. “But we’ve got to get out of here fast. Sep, you open the window while I make them think we’ve gone this way.” Jenna ran to a small door that led into the Long Walk, opened it and left it swinging. “Come on,” she said, pushing the dazed Hugo toward the window. “Out you go, Hugo.” The three of them squeezed out the window and dropped down onto the path that ran around the back of the Palace. Very quietly, Jenna closed the window.

Sir Hereward **Passed Through** the glass and was soon standing next to them. “Whither may I offer thee safe conduct?” inquired the ghost.

“Anywhere away from here,” whispered Jenna, “and fast.”

“Many use the river for such purposes,” Sir Hereward said, pointing to the riverbank, which was lined with an unfamiliar row of cedar trees.

“The river it is,” said Jenna.

If anyone from the Ballroom had bothered to look—which no one did, for the guests were all too busy excitedly discussing the happenings of the last few minutes—they would have seen two Palace serving boys and the Princess racing across the long lawns that led down to the river. There were no Spirit-Seers among the guests that night to see the battered old ghost, armor in tatters but his broken sword held high, leading the three at full tilt as if on a battle charge. Protected by a great dark cloud that had drifted in front of the night’s full moon and cloaked the lawn in darkness, the battle charge ran as fast as they could.

A sharp frost crackled under their feet and left three sets of dark footprints in the white grass for anyone who wished to see, but they were lucky, for—as yet—no one had thought to look for footprints in the grass. As they reached the river, a search party led by Queen Etheldreda’s hasty replacement for the Bumptious Barrelle of Larde—a man as short of temper as he was of brains who had had his eye on the Royal Stewardship for many years and could not quite believe his good fortune—was staring at the door and coming to exactly the conclusion that Jenna had wanted them to. The search party threw themselves at the narrow door, each eager to be the first to catch Princess Esmeralda and win favor with the Queen, but the new Steward had the most

eagerness—and nastiness. He scratched and kicked his way to the front of the search party and got out the door first. Soon they were rushing after him down the Long Walk, shouting out to anyone to ask if they had “espied the poore deluded Princess.” Anxious to oblige the frightening new Steward and his sidekicks, many people gave them completely fictitious directions, and the search party was sent on a wild goose chase.

By now Jenna, Septimus, Hugo and Sir Hereward were standing on the landing stage where the Royal Barge was moored.

“The boat will convey us safely hither,” said Sir Hereward. “’Tis a fair, still night and the water runneth slow.”

Septimus looked at the Royal Barge and whistled between his teeth, an irritating habit that he had unknowingly picked up from Marcellus Pye. “Don’t you think they might notice us in that?” he said.

“Not that one. Sir Hereward means the dinghy, the little rowboat.” Jenna pointed to Sir Hereward, who was now hovering above a small, and equally richly painted, rowboat that was tied up behind the Royal Barge and used for ferrying passengers to and from the barge when it could not get to the shore.

Just then the full moon sailed out from behind a cloud and the frosty lawns were bathed in a brilliant white light; it felt as if someone had switched on a searchlight and pointed it straight at them. Sir Hereward knew only too well the dangers of moonlight, for he had entered ghosthood due to a particularly badly timed appearance of a full moon and a well-aimed arrow. The ghost leaped from the boat with the words “We will be discovered—hie we to the summer house!” Dodging between the shadows of the great cedar trees, Sir Hereward shepherded everyone over to the Palace summer house—the very same octagonal building with the golden roof that Jenna knew from her own Time.

From behind the cover of the summer house, Jenna watched the windows of the Palace light up one by one, as each empty room was invaded by the confused search party and a lit candle left to show that the room had been searched.

Suddenly, with a distant crash, the great windows to the Ballroom were thrown open and the new Steward was out on the terrace. Frustrated with his fruitless tour of the Palace, he had left the search party to their bickering and

had returned to the Ladies' Retiring Room for a closer inspection. There he had found the window unlatched and his prey gone in quite a different direction. Outside the Ballroom, his hectoring voice carried through the frosty night air as he instructed his new, handpicked search party of thugs.

"Take thee three each to a party. Forsooth, man, art thou an *imbecile*? Ay, thou art. Fool, I didst say *three*. They are but children, surely one each will quell them. Do thee as thou wilt with the serving boys, they matter not, but Esmeralda must be returned to her grieving mama. Now, hie thee to the Great Gates, *thee* to the stables and thou, fools, take thy great flat feet to the river. Tarry not—begone!"

As Jenna, Septimus and Hugo cowered behind the summer house, a yell went up from the large-footed search party. "Behold! 'Tis their imprints upon the frost. I declare, we have them. They are ours!"

The search party, closely followed by the Steward, thundered across the lawns toward them. Frantically, Septimus tried the door of the summer house. It was locked. "I'll break a window, Jen," he said, wrapping his fist in the white serving cloth that had covered the jug of orange sauce.

"No, Sep," hissed Jenna. "They'll hear. Anyway, if you break the window, they'll know we're in here."

"Allow me, young man," said Sir Hereward, still flushed with the earlier success of unlocking Jenna's bedroom door. The knight placed his hand over the lock. They waited anxiously, listening to the search party's arrival at the Royal Barge.

"Please hurry," Jenna whispered urgently.

"My powers are not what they were," said a flustered Sir Hereward. "This lock doth not turn easily."

"Sir Hereward, let me try something," said Jenna. Wishing that she had listened more to the droning of Jillie Djinn, Jenna took the key to the Queen's Room off her belt. With chilled and trembling fingers that were about as much use as a package of frozen sausages, she fumbled and dropped it. It lay on the frosty grass, glinting gold and emerald in the moonlight. Septimus snatched it up, pushed it into the lock and turned it, and the next moment they were all tumbling inside. Septimus locked the door behind them and they stood listening to the hollow thud of footsteps running beneath the cedar trees, and shaking the ground beneath them.

Suddenly Hugo grabbed hold of Septimus's arm—hard.

Two green eyes glinted in the darkness, and a long, low growl began to fill the summer house.

“Ullr?” whispered Jenna into the dark. But then she remembered where she was. How could it be Ullr?

Out of the dark came a voice that Jenna knew. “Kalmm, Ullr. Kalmm,” said Snorri, breathless. But Ullr was not calm. The big cat, spooked by the strange smells and sounds of this different Time, had been startled by the shriek of a late-night kitchen maid and had taken off down a warren of passages. Snorri had, to her relief, just caught up with him. Now she held the panther back and stroked his neck where the fur had risen along with his growl.

“It's okay, Sep,” Jenna whispered. “It's only Snorri and the NightUllr.”

Septimus did not understand a word of what Jenna said, but if a growling panther did not bother Jenna, then he wasn't going to let it bother him either. There were other things to worry about just then, like the harsh voice of the new Steward saying excitedly, “The trail is clear. Our quarry awaits us in the Queen's summer house, men.”

A sharp rattling on the door handle was followed by an exclamation, “'Tis locked and barred, my lord Steward.”

“Then batter it down, thou Namby-Pamby Mither of Mischance—*batter it down!*”

A great crash resounded against the flimsy wooden door and the summer house shook. Sir Hereward brandished his sword at the door and declared, “Fear not, they shall not pass.” Jenna glanced in panic at Septimus—the Steward's search party would not even notice Sir Hereward; he would be **Passed Through** as if he wasn't there.

“We can escape to the kitchens from here,” said Snorri quickly, “but they will follow. I have an idea. Jenna, give me your cloak, please.” Any other time Jenna would have been reluctant to give up her beautiful cloak, but as another crash sounded against the door and a thin panel splintered behind her, she tore off the cloak and thrust it into Snorri's hands. Jenna could hardly bear to look as Snorri ripped the cloak from end to end, stamped it into the dirt of the summer house floor and then gave it to Ullr, saying, “Take, Ullr.” The

panther took Jenna's mangled cloak in his mouth and clamped it between his great white incisors.

"Stay, Ullr. Guard." Ullr obeyed. The great panther stood by the door, his green eyes flashing as another blow sent a shower of dry timber splintering over his broad muscled back.

"Come," whispered Snorri, beckoning to Jenna, Septimus, Hugo and Sir Hereward. "Follow me."

Snorri disappeared into the gloom but the shine of the moonlight on her white-blond hair made it easy to follow her, and soon they were squeezing down a steep flight of spiral stone steps. As they fled, they heard the summer house door finally collapse under the weight of the blows. Then came Ullr's threatening rumble of a growl, followed by a piercing shriek of terror from the Namby-Pamby Mither of Mischance, who had the mischance to be the first through the door.

"Get thee back inside," came the Steward's harsh voice.

"No, no, I pray you, sire. Upon my life I dare not."

"Then, fool, thou art truly cursed, for thou hast no life left to dare upon, unless thee enter and bring out the Princess."

"No—*no, sire, I beg you!*"

"Stand aside, fool. I shall show thee how a man should be—"

At that, a snarl such as no one—not even Snorri—had ever heard from Ullr before filled the narrow stairwell and sent shivers down their spines. A terrified yell pierced the air, and the sound of thudding footsteps could be heard overhead as the Steward's search party ran away, leaving the Steward to show the NightUllr all on his own how a man should be.

The search party arrived back at the Ballroom in disarray, and the few stragglers who had stayed behind to finish their—and their neighbors'—ducklings heard the terrible story of how Princess Esmeralda had been eaten alive by the Black Fiend. No one knew what had become of the new Steward, although they all feared (and hoped—for it greatly improved the story) the worst.

With the NightUllr guarding the summer house and possibly eating the Steward (although no one wanted to think about that), Septimus, Jenna, Hugo and Snorri emerged at the bottom of the flight of spiral steps and bumped straight into someone. “Nik!” Septimus yelled in amazement.

At the sound of Septimus’s voice, Nicko nearly dropped his candle. A flicker of puzzlement briefly clouded his features as he took in the subtle changes that one hundred and sixty-nine days marooned in a foreign Time had wrought upon Septimus, but it soon cleared, for Nicko could see that underneath the matted hair and the skinny, slightly taller frame, it was the same Septimus, and not only that—behind him was Jenna.

“Come quick,” said Snorri, “they may soon send others to defeat Ullr. He will not be able to hold them back forever. We must be gone.” Snorri took the candle from Nicko and strode off purposefully. They followed Snorri and the flickering light from her candle along the thoroughfare of the lower kitchens, which was deserted, apart from three tired serving girls disappearing in the distance. The kitchens were filled with the familiar, and to Jenna and Septimus repulsive, smells of the banquet. Glancing about them to check for inquisitive servants, they crept on. They were lucky, these were the few quiet hours of the night when no one but the Palace baker was at work in the kitchens—and he was safely far away on the upper floor.

Jenna knew where they were heading. Not far ahead, she could see the recess that hid the UnderCooks’ coat cupboard. She squeezed Septimus’s hand and said, “We’ll be home soon, Sep—isn’t that great?”

“But how?” asked Septimus, puzzled.

Behind him Nicko held up the candle and their shadows were thrown across the old coat cupboard. “That’s how,” he said. “Don’t you recognize it?”

“Recognize what?”

“Where you came in, dillop.”

Septimus shook his head. “But this isn’t where I came in. I came into the Alchemists’ Chamber.”

Nicko didn’t see why Septimus was being so fussy. “Oh, it doesn’t matter, Sep. Let’s just go back this way, okay? Getting home is what counts.”

Septimus said nothing. He did not see how he could possibly get back

home through an old cupboard. At the mention of home, Hugo began to snuffle. Septimus crouched down beside the boy. “What is it, Hugo?” he asked.

Hugo rubbed his tired, sore eyes. “I...*I* want to go home,” he mumbled. “See Sally.”

“Sally?”

“My dog. See Sally.”

“All right, Hugo. Don’t worry, I’ll take you home.”

“Sep!” exclaimed Jenna, horrified. “You *can’t*. You’ve got to come back with us. *Now*. We’ve got to go before someone catches us.”

“But, Jen...we can’t just leave Hugo here on his own.”

Sir Hereward coughed politely. “Princess Jenna. I trust you will allow me to escort the boy back to his household.”

“Oh, Sir Hereward,” said Jenna, “would you?”

The knight bowed. “It will be an honor, Princess Jenna.” The knight extended a rusty-gloved hand to Hugo, who took it and held on tightly to the thin air. “I shall take my leave, fair Princess,” said Sir Hereward, bowing low. “Fare thee well, for I shall not see thee again.”

“Oh, but you will, Sir Hereward. I will see you tonight and tell you all about it.” Jenna grinned.

“I trust not, Princess, for I think you will not be safe here tonight. I wish you and your brave companions Good Speed and a Safe Homecoming. Come, Hugo.” With that the ghost walked out the door, Hugo trotting beside him.

“Bye, Hugo,” said Septimus.

“Good-bye, Apprentice.” Hugo turned and smiled. “Perchance I shall see thee tomorrow.”

Perchance you will, thought Septimus gloomily.

“Come *on*, Sep,” said Jenna impatiently, and she pulled him toward the cupboard.

Snorri took a silver whistle from her pocket and put it to her lips. She blew but no sound came out. “It is for Ullr,” she said. “He will come now.”

Jenna opened the door to the coat cupboard. “See,” she explained to Septimus, “there’s a Glass at the back, behind the coats.” She threw back the layers of coarse gray wool to reveal the dusty gold frame of the Glass. “There it is!” she said excitedly to Septimus.

“Where?” asked Septimus, as the padding of Ullr’s feet came softly toward the four figures crowded around the cupboard.

“*There*,” said Jenna, annoyed. Why was Septimus being so awkward?

“It’s just an empty frame, Jen,” said Septimus. “Just a stupid old empty frame.” He kicked it angrily. “That’s all.”

“No! No, it can’t be!” Jenna put her hand up against the Glass, and she saw that Septimus was right. The frame was empty, and of the Glass that had been inside it there was not a trace at all.

“We’re *all* trapped in this horrible place now,” said Septimus grimly.

THE UNDERFLOW

Nicko untied the dinghy from the Royal Barge, and under the cover of the giant cedar trees, they slipped away from the Palace landing stage. It was a tight squeeze in the small boat. The NightUllr stood at the prow, his green eyes shining in the dark with Snorri squashed in beside him. In the middle sat Nicko, steadily rowing them upstream, away from the Palace. Jenna and Septimus huddled together in the stern, shivering in the chill that rose from the water, brushing off the fat, lazy snowflakes that were drifting down from the sky. They were all wrapped up in an assortment of UnderCooks' coats, but the cold air easily found its way through the cheap thin wool—for Palace UnderCooks did not get paid enough to buy decent outerwear.

They were on their way to the Great Chamber of Alchemie and **Physik**. Septimus knew it was their only chance to return to their own Time and he didn't hold out much hope. He was not in a good mood. "This is not going to be easy," he told them. "Only Marcellus has the **Keye** to the Great Doors of Time."

"Well, we will just have to lie in wait in the Chamber and ambush him when he comes in," said Nicko breezily. "It's four against one, not bad odds."

"You've forgotten the seven scribes," said Septimus.

“No, *you’ve* forgotten those, Sep. You didn’t say anything about seven scribes. Oh, well, four against eight then.” Nicko sighed. “Anyway, we’ve got no choice. Otherwise we’re stuck here forever.”

“Do not forget Ullr,” murmured Snorri, “if we arrive before daybreak.”

Nicko upped his pace. He’d rather have a panther on his side than a scraggly orange cat any day. Jenna turned back to look at the Palace, which was rapidly disappearing behind them. The fruitless search of the Palace had been completed, and each room now had a candle burning in it; the long, low yellow stone building was ablaze with light, its wide lawns spread out before it with their fresh snowfall like a crisp white cook’s apron. Despite knowing that Queen Etheldredda was somewhere within those walls, Jenna could not help but think that it was a wonderful sight to see the Palace so alive, and she decided that if, by some miracle, she ever returned to her Time, she too would light up every room—in celebration.

Jenna looked up at the windows of Esmeralda’s—and her—room. “I am glad Esmeralda got away,” she said.

“So am I,” said Septimus.

Jenna was amazed. “You knew Esmeralda?” she asked.

Septimus nodded. “She only just made it, you know. Marcellus took her through the Queen’s way, but they nearly got caught by the Steward. Then—and this is the good part—he threw her cloak into the water just above the Palace on an outgoing tide and made sure one of the footmen fished it out. Everyone thought she had drowned, and Etheldredda was thrilled, seeing as, according to Marcellus, she had been planning to throw Esmeralda into the bottomless whirlpool in Bleak Creek.”

“*Marcellus* took her?” asked Jenna.

“Well, he *is* her brother. Esmeralda came to stay with him and she was really nice to me. No one else spoke to me then because they were jealous that I was the Apprentice and they were still just scribes.”

Jenna remembered the diary. “So the new Apprentice...was *you*?”

Septimus nodded. He lifted up his servant’s tunic and showed Jenna his black, red, and gold Alchemie robes underneath. “See? Alchemie Apprentice stuff.”

With another pull on the oars, Nicko took them around the next bend, and the Palace was lost from view. They were now approaching a long-forgotten dockyard on the east side of the Castle. The river was deeper here than Nicko was used to in his own Time, the wind was picking up and the current was fast and strong. The little rowboat shot quickly past dozens of tall ships that were moored up for the winter along the shore. The ghostly hum of the wind in the ships' rigging sent even more shivers down the spines of the occupants of the Queen's dinghy, and the long beards of frost that had settled on the complicated trceries of rope and now shone in the moonlight like great silvery cobwebs did nothing to make them feel any warmer.

"Is it much farther, Sep?" Nicko inquired, his breath coming in rapid bursts of warm cloud on the frosty air. He brushed away the snowflakes settling on his eyelashes.

"It can't be far," said Septimus, peering at the piles of rubble and great towers of scaffolding that were springing up from the riverbank.

"If you've never been down this underground river, how do you know where it is?" asked Jenna, her teeth chattering.

"The UnderFlow comes out at the Alchemie Arch, Jen. There's a map on the wall showing where it goes. I've spent hours with nothing to do but stare at that map. And there's a gold Alchemie sign above the arch. A circle with a dot in the middle that's meant to be the Earth going around the sun. Then there are seven stars around that. Alchemists like sevens—worse luck." Septimus sighed heavily.

"Oh, do cheer up, Sep," said Jenna. "At least we're all in this together now."

As Nicko rowed, everyone stared at the wall that rose up from the river, hoping for a sight of the Alchemie sign. But all they could see was stones, scaffolding and half-finished walls that reared up into the cloudy night sky. One by one, Jenna, Nicko and Septimus realized what they were looking at.

"They're building The Ramblings," Jenna said very quietly.

"I know," said Nicko. "It's weird."

"We haven't even been born yet," said Jenna.

"Or Mum, or Dad. It makes my head go funny."

Septimus sighed. “Don’t even think about it, Nik. It makes you feel like you’re going crazy.”

Snorri took no part in the conversation. The Ramblings meant nothing to her and the Castle was as strange to her in this Time as it had been in her own Time. Also Snorri had grown up in a land where many people knew that Time could be long or short, go backward or forward, where Spirits came and went and where all things were possible. She sat quietly and scanned the walls for the Alchemie sign.

“Shh,” Nicko suddenly whispered. “There’s a boat behind us.” Jenna and Septimus turned to look. It was true. If they listened hard, they could hear the splash of the oars of a small rowboat. A voice reached them across the water.

“*Faster*, men. A shilling and a fine cloak to you all if we catch them. *Faster.*”

“Nicko,” whispered Jenna. “Nicko—*hurry!*”

But Nicko was getting tired. He tried to speed up his pace but found he could row no faster. Jenna and Septimus could do nothing but watch their pursuers draw ever closer until they could clearly see four large shapes precariously perched in a long, narrow rowboat, which was gaining on them quickly.

Snorri paid no attention to the pursuers, but kept her eyes on the wall below the beginnings of The Ramblings. All of a sudden, she said, “I think that the sign that you look for is there.”

“Where?” asked Nicko.

“It is there, Nicko,” Snorri replied, enjoying saying Nicko’s name. “See, it is above the dark archway where the stream runs out into the river. Below the wall with two windows.”

“Okay,” said Nicko. He did a quick turn and, finding a little extra energy, rowed at top speed into the dark archway, where he stopped to catch his breath. The sound of the approaching rowboat drew nearer, but Nicko dared not pick up his oars for fear of making a telltale noise. Everyone held their breath, watching the small gap in the darkness that showed the empty moonlit river. At lightning speed, their pursuers went past so fast that if anyone had blinked just then, they would have missed it.

“They’ve gone,” breathed Jenna, sinking back into the boat with relief. Nicko picked up the oars reluctantly. He realized that he was going to have to row the boat underground, and was none too happy at the thought. Trying to ignore the beginnings of a panic welling up inside him, he started to row deeper into the darkness.

“That plaque was like the one above the Dragon House, only not so worn away,” said Jenna.

“Anything under the Castle or in the walls is old Alchemie stuff, Jen,” Septimus said, his face eerily illuminated from below by the light from his Dragon Ring.

“Even the Dragon House?” asked Jenna.

“Especially the Dragon House.”

Jenna looked at Septimus. He did not return her glance but stared straight into the dark. He seemed distant, weighed down and much, much older than his extra one hundred and sixty-nine days. For a moment Jenna felt afraid of what Septimus had become while he had been away. “You know a lot of things now, don’t you, Sep?” she said rather than asked.

Septimus sighed. “Yeah,” he said.

Nicko hated the UnderFlow. The stream smelled odd for a start: kind of musty and rancid as though something had recently died in it, and there were things—soft, squishy things—floating in the water; he could feel the ends of his oars touching them. The tunnel was just not quite wide enough for the stretch of his oars, so with every stroke, the edge of the blades scraped along the side of the wall and a few times brought the boat to a halt. Nicko was forced to pull the oars farther into the boat and row in an awkward rhythm so that the ends did not hit each other.

Nicko could deal with the irritations of rowing, but what he could not stand was the feeling of going ever deeper underground. With every stroke he took, Nicko felt the panic rise higher in his throat. Icy water dripped from the roof of the arched tunnel, which he knew was no more than an arm’s length above his head. The whole tunnel was lit only by the dull yellow glow from Septimus’s Dragon Ring, and with every pull on the oars, Nicko imagined the walls closing in on him. It was only the presence of Snorri sitting behind him

that stopped him from dropping the oars and yelling “Get me out of here.” Nicko closed his eyes and tried to imagine he was rowing in the wide-open ocean, for it made no difference whether he could see where he was going or not. There was only one way to go.

About twenty minutes later, which to Nicko had felt more like twenty hours, he knew that even the thought of the ocean and of Snorri sitting behind him could no longer keep his panic at bay. Fortunately Septimus said, “Here we are, Nik, we’re in the UnderFlow Pool. You can open your eyes now.”

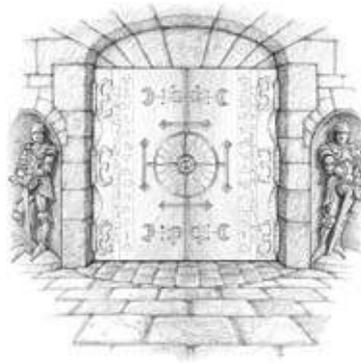
“They *were* open,” said Nicko indignantly. He opened his eyes and saw that they had come to a pool in a huge circular cavern. There was a long stone quay along one side, which was lit by a line of rushlights placed in holders on the walls. The water was inky black with flashes of orange reflecting the flames, and Nicko, who had an instinct for the depth of water, knew that it was very, very deep. But it was not the water Nicko stared at—it was the beautiful lapis lazuli arched roof that spanned the pool.

“The Dragon House,” said Jenna, “it’s the same as the Dragon House.”

“Shh,” whispered Septimus. “Someone might hear us, sound carries here.” Quietly, Nicko rowed to the quay and held the dinghy steady. Ullr took a flying leap and landed with a soft thud on the smooth stone. He was followed by Snorri, then Jenna and Septimus. Nicko got out and went to tie the boat to a nearby bollard but Septimus stopped him. “No, shove the boat back into the tunnel where no one can see it, Nik, and let’s get going.”

Very reluctantly, Nicko gave the dinghy a push into the tunnel and watched it float away. “We’re burning our boats, Sep,” he said. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

THE GREAT CHAMBER OF ALCHEMIE AND PHYSIK



Three small arches led from the Alchemie Quay. Septimus took a rushlight from one of the holders. “This way,” he whispered. “Better get a move on. It’s a bit of a trek from the Quay, because the only way to get into the Chamber from here is through the Labyrinth.”

“Labyrinth!” exclaimed Jenna. “But...do you know the way, Sep?”

“Shh!” whispered Septimus. “You don’t need to know the way through a Labyrinth, Jen. It takes you there. You just follow where it leads you and you will find what you look for. We go through the left archway.”

“So...where do the other ones go?”

“Oh, they’ll drop you down into the Great Pitte of Fyre,” said Septimus nonchalantly.

“Oh. Fine.”

“It’ll be all right, Jen.” Jenna did not look convinced.

Septimus beckoned to everyone to come closer. Silently they gathered around, a little overawed by the strange, crypt-like feel of the UnderFlow Pool and the flickering, unearthly blue light reflected from the lapis lazuli.

“Let’s get going,” said Septimus in a low voice. “We’ve got to keep quiet and stay together. There are other tunnels that run into this one and we don’t want anyone to hear us and come looking. Hang on to that panther, Snorri. Don’t let it growl, whatever you do. If anyone sees or hears us, we’ve had it. Got that?”

They all nodded. Ullr’s green eyes flashed and Snorri stroked him, saying, “Kalmm, Ullr. Kalmm.”

They followed Septimus through the archway and set off in single file with the NightUllr padding behind them. His great soft paws were silent as they crept through the narrow opening, but there were muted gasps of amazement as they entered the Labyrinth. In front of them, the flames from Septimus’s rushlight lit up great flashes of blue and gold. The Labyrinth was lined from top to bottom in finely jointed lapis lazuli interspersed with strips of gold.

Septimus set a fast pace and they followed behind him, walking upon the most brilliant hues of blue shot through with flashes of gold and deep green. The Labyrinth first took them outward, and then after many turns, Jenna was sure they had begun to walk toward the center. The deep blue of the lapis became almost hypnotic, and Jenna found herself feeling sleepy as she unfocused her eyes and gazed at the smooth blue walls. Every now and then she was woken from her almost trancelike state by the interruption of a dark archway, which signaled an entrance from a tunnel. Here Septimus would slow his pace and listen for other footsteps but they were lucky; it was by now the dead of night and even Alchemie scribes had to sleep sometimes.

Like a small and faithful flock of sheep, Jenna, Nicko, Snorri and the NightUllr followed Septimus through the blue haze of light, walking the long, slow curves, doubling back on themselves and walking the same curves in reverse, until everyone, particularly Nicko, felt dizzy and longed to be out in an open space once more. And then, just as Nicko was despairing of seeing anything but blue walls ever again in his entire life, they reached the center of the Labyrinth, and stepped into the Great Chamber of Alchemie and **Physik**.

“Whoa-ho.” Nicko whistled. “That is *amazing*.”

Septimus no longer thought of the Great Chamber as anything like

amazing. Every day he had sat in his Siege of the Rose next to Marcellus, whose Siege of the Sunne was at the head of the table set in the middle of the Chamber. Every day had been the same, just another working day for Septimus.

But to Jenna, Nicko and Snorri, the Great Chamber was dazzling. They felt almost blinded by the glinting of the multitude of shiny golden surfaces that caught the light from the dancing flames of Septimus's rushlight. But it was not the small pieces of gold that had caught their attention, it was the two massive chunks of the stuff set into the wall opposite the entrance to the Labyrinth—the Great Doors of Time.

“That’s where I came into this place,” Septimus whispered, glancing around the Chamber, half afraid that there might be a scribe lurking in the shadows.

On each side of the Doors, standing in a lapis lazuli-lined alcove, was a life-size statue holding a razor-sharp sword.

Jenna stared at the Doors. She thought about what Septimus had told her lay behind them, the True Glass of Time, and she felt a terrible longing to be home in her own Time, with everything back as it should be: Septimus in the Wizard Tower with Marcia, Nicko working down at Jannit Maarten's boatyard. She would be back in her *own* Palace, free of the living Etheldredda, at least, and once again the Palace would be a friendly place, home to Silas and Sarah pottering about and occasionally getting lost.

“We have to get the **Keye**, Sep,” she said. “We *have* to.”

Nicko, ever practical, was eyeing the Doors with a boatbuilder's eye. “I'm sure we could get them open somehow,” he said. “Those hinges look a bit weak to me.”

“They're not just ordinary doors, Nik,” said Septimus. “They're **Locked** with Marcellus's **Keye**.” Nicko was not convinced. He took his screwdriver out of his pocket and poked it into one of the hinges. The statues raised their swords and pointed them at Nicko.

“Whoa there,” protested Nicko. “No need to get excited.”

Ullr growled. “Shh, Ullr.” Snorri stroked Ullr's neck and pulled him close to her, but the NightUllr's orange-tipped tail was fluffed out like that of an irritated house cat, and his hackles were raised.

It is strange how voices carry through a Labyrinth. They find their way along the passageways and appear in the center as clear and bright as if the speaker was standing beside you, particularly if the voice has the penetrating quality of a dentist's drill. Which is why everyone in the Great Chamber of Alchemie and **Physik** suddenly jumped with fright as the shrill tones of Queen Etheldredda entered the Chamber. "I care not to hear thy troubles, Marcellus. I shall have the Potion *now*. I have tarried long enough. This night did show me not to suffer fools, and I will not suffer *thy* foolishness a moment longer. Oh, for how long does this lamentable Labyrinth wind its tedious way?"

"For as long as it must, Mother."

The sound of Marcellus's exasperated voice spurred Septimus into action. "They're coming," he whispered. "Quick—into the fume cupboard. We'll have to wait until Etheldredda's gone."

Septimus opened the door of a large cupboard in the wall and blew out his rushlight. With only the glow from his Dragon Ring to light their way, everyone squeezed into the foul-smelling cupboard and Septimus pulled the door closed.

"Oh, rats," muttered Septimus, his ring lighting up what Jenna had assumed was a coil of black rope on the shelf at the back of the cupboard, "I forgot the snake was in here."

"Snake?" whispered Jenna.

"Yeah. It's okay, it's not all that poisonous."

"So how poisonous would 'not all that poisonous' be then, Sep?" asked Nicko, who was fighting a longing to open the door and just get out of there.

But no one heard Septimus's reply. Queen Etheldredda made sure of that.

41 THE PHIAL



The door to the fume cupboard closed just as Queen Etheldredda's pointy left foot stepped over the threshold of the Great Chamber of Alchemie and **Physik**. She was closely followed by Marcellus Pye, who did not trust his mother to be alone in the Chamber for even a second. Marcellus looked tired and disheveled after a long night searching the Palace for his Apprentice and the girl his mother insisted was Princess Esmeralda. He was still wearing his formal Master of Alchemie robes that he had put on for the banquet—which were, to his dismay, now liberally splattered with orange sauce. Around his neck, as ever, hung his **Keye** to the Doors of Time.

Queen Etheldredda marched in, head held high, followed by her Aie-Aie, which clattered behind her, running on its long fingernails. She looked around with her usual expression of disgust. “Forsooth, Marcellus, thou dost a tawdry Chamber keep. So much gold that I hardly know where to rest mine eyes. ’Tis like unto a tinker’s bazaar, which is where I trow thou dost buy thy gold trifles and trinkets with which thee doth rattle like a broken cart.”

Marcellus Pye looked hurt at his mother’s insults.

Queen Etheldredda sniffed disdainfully. “Thou’rt a tender Plant, Marcellus. I shall have my Potion now before thee doth expire from a Fitte of the Vapors.”

“No, Mama,” came Marcellus’s determined voice, “thou shall *not* have it.”

“Indeed, I *shall* have it, Marcellus. Do I not see it in its glass cabinet awaiting me?”

“That is not yours, Mama!”

“Methinks thou art a Laggard with the Truth, Marcellus. Thou wert always a deceitful child. Indeed, I *shall* have it, and I shall have it *now*.” Etheldredda’s voice rose to a particularly unpleasant note. The Aie-Aie opened its mouth, showing its sharp, long fang, and screeched in sympathy.

Inside the fume cupboard, Ullr whined—the Aie-Aie’s screech made his sensitive ears hurt horribly.

“And thou shalt *not* mock me,” Etheldredda told Marcellus sharply.

“I mock thee not, Mama.”

“Thou doth whine like a baby.”

“Indeed, Mama, I do not,” said Marcellus sulkily.

“Thou *dost* whine and I will *not* allow it.” Etheldredda’s voice reached a new pitch and set the Aie-Aie off again. This time the creature did not stop.

Marcellus put his fingers in his ears and yelled, “For pity’s sake, Mama, make that creature cease its screaming ’ere my ears do *burst!*”

Etheldredda had no intention of making the Aie-Aie stop. It was upsetting Marcellus and that was fine by her. On and on it yowled like a cat caught in a trap. If the noise was painful for Marcellus, it was unbearable for Ullr. He let out a howl of pain and wrenched himself from Snorri’s grasp. The next yell from Etheldredda was one of sheer terror as the fume cupboard door burst open and a panther—hackles raised, claws extended, teeth bared—hurtled out.

Unfortunately for Ullr, he found that instead of escaping the noise, he had run straight into the middle of it, for at the sight of the panther, the Aie-Aie ran up Etheldredda’s skirts and continued screeching at panther ear level. The big cat’s ears felt as though someone was boring into them. Desperate to get away from the noise, he ran across the chamber and disappeared into the

Labyrinth.

“Ullr!” yelled Snorri, bursting out of the cupboard in pursuit of her beloved cat. She raced across the room, unhindered by a shocked Marcellus and a terrified Etheldredda, and disappeared into the Labyrinth, hot on the heels of Ullr.

Septimus felt Nicko’s muscles tense, and he knew that his brother wanted to chase after Snorri. He grabbed hold of Nicko before he could move. Inside the fume cupboard there was a terrible hush as the door slowly swung fully open, and the three remaining occupants came face-to-face with Marcellus and Etheldredda.

“Forsooth, thou hast some strange creatures in thy cupboard, Marcellus,” said Etheldredda somewhat hoarsely after her long screech. “But methinks the Princess Esmeralda has played her little game of hide-and-seek once too often. Fetch the child out, Marcellus. She shall vex thee no more.”

“She vexes me not, Mama. And if thee didst but know your daughter as a mother should, thou wouldst know that the child is not Esmeralda.” Marcellus glowered at his mother.

“Thou’rt a Fool,” retorted Etheldredda. “Who but Esmeralda could she be?”

“She will answer for herself, Mama.” Marcellus gave Septimus a wry smile. “I trust they paid thee well for thy services at the Palace?”

Sheepishly, Septimus shook his head.

Marcellus ushered them out, saying, “Come thee away now, for the black snake sleepeth there and thou dost discomfit it. Remember, we shall be taking the venom tomorrow—to add to the Tincture.”

“Knave!” cried Etheldredda. “Thou wouldst poison thine own mother!”

“As thou hast poisoned thine own poore daughters, Mama? No, indeed, I wouldst not.”

Seeing that she was getting nowhere, Etheldredda changed her tones to a sugary sweetness that fooled no one, least of all Marcellus. “Pray unlock the cabinet, Marcellus, and show me the pretty blue phial, for I do yearn to see at close hand the wonders that my Dearest Son hath wrought.”

“Thou hast but one son, Mama,” said Marcellus sourly. “’Twould surely be a strangeness if he were *not* your dearest son, when placed against an absence of other sons, though I doubt he would remain your dearest of *all* were you to include your hunting hounds in the reckoning.”

“Thou moans and mithers as well as thee ever did, Marcellus. Pray now, show me the phial that I may gaze upon it, for ’tis a pretty thing with *much* gold upon it.”

“Though there may be colloid of gold suspended within, there is no gold upon the phial, Mama,” said Marcellus, stung by Etheldredda’s sarcastic tone.

Etheldredda lost patience. Like a rat up a drainpipe, she darted across the Chamber and snatched up the phial. “I *shall* have this Potion, Marcellus, before thee defile it with the venom of the black snake. You shall deny me not.”

“No, Mama!” Marcellus yelled, horrified at seeing his precious Tincture about to disappear into Etheldredda’s gaping mouth. “It is not ready. Who knoweth what it may do!”

But Etheldredda was not about to break the habit of a lifetime and listen to her son. She did not heed the warning in his words. She tipped the sticky contents of the phial into her mouth and choked in disgust, then she doubled up in pain, coughing and retching. The stuff came back up from her stomach and swilled around her mouth, coating her teeth as if with blue tar. Determined, Etheldredda swallowed it again and straightened up, leaning against the bench, pale and weak as a sheet left too long in the bleach by a careless laundress. Unknowing of the effect the Tincture had had on its mistress, the Aie-Aie jumped onto the bench and drained the remaining drops. It licked its lips and ran a long fingernail around the inside of the phial to scrape out the last smears of slime.

Jenna, Septimus, Nicko and Marcellus Pye stared, aghast.

“Thou shouldst not have done that, Mama,” Marcellus said quietly.

Etheldredda swayed slightly, took a deep breath and regained her composure, though she still had sticky blue teeth. “I will not be denied, Marcellus,” she said as the Tincture began to enter her bloodstream and an exhilarating feeling of power whizzed through her veins. “For I shall rule this Castle *forever*. It is my right and duty. No other Queen shall take my place.”

“Thou must not forget thy daughter, Esmeralda, Mama,” muttered Marcellus. “For she must take thy place when the Time Is Right.”

Fixing Jenna with a poisonous glare, Etheldredda declared, “Esmeralda shall *never* have my crown! Never, never, *never*.” With the power of the unfinished Tincture now infusing her whole body, Etheldredda felt invincible. The Chamber began to distort before her eyes, her mealy-mouthed son grew smaller and the tedious Esmeralda became nothing more than unfinished business.

Jenna, transfixed by the sight of her ghastly great-great(and then some)-grandmother’s blue teeth and staring eyes, did not react quickly enough when Etheldredda’s hand suddenly snaked out and grabbed her arm.

“Let go!” she yelled, twisting away from the vise but succeeding only in hurting her arm even more. The Aie-Aie threw down the phial, leaped onto Etheldredda’s skirts and then wrapped its snake-tail around Jenna’s neck—once, twice, then three times, until she could barely breathe.

Septimus and Nick rushed to help Jenna but were swatted away by Etheldredda like a couple of irritating flies.

As Etheldredda and the Aie-Aie disappeared into the Labyrinth, dragging Jenna in their wake, Marcellus sank to his knees in despair at the loss of his Tincture, unseeing as Septimus and Nicko picked themselves up and hurtled into the Labyrinth in pursuit of Jenna.

“We’ll get her, Nik,” shouted Septimus. “She can’t have gotten very far. Can’t be more than just around the next bend.”

But Jenna wasn’t. Nicko and Septimus raced through the endless blue haze of the passageways and found only emptiness.

42

THE RIVER



T*hou shalt come with your mama, Esmeralda!*” Queen Etheldredda yelled as she pulled Jenna into a small unlit tunnel just off the Labyrinth. “*Thou shalt come with her, for we have a much-delayed trip to take, do we not?*”

With the Aie-Aie’s tail curled so tightly around her neck that she barely had breath enough to walk, Jenna could not escape Etheldredda’s grip. She was being dragged deeper and deeper into the darkness of the tunnel. The floor beneath Jenna’s feet was slippery, and a cold wind blew up through the tunnel, carrying with it the dank smell of river water. The combination of Etheldredda’s potion-powered strength and the downward slope of the passage, which was covered in a thin coating of ice, meant that Jenna was almost skating along in Etheldredda’s wake.

The darkness did not seem to bother Etheldredda. The Queen knew her way, for it was a route she often took to check up on her son, and she sped along the tunnel like a speed skater on a mission. After what felt like a lifetime, but was no more than fifteen minutes, Jenna thought she could see pale moonlight—or was it the beginnings of dawn?—shining on the icy tunnel floor and beyond that, the blackness of the river. A few moments later, she, Etheldredda and the Aie-Aie were out in the open air, on a small landing platform a few hundred yards upriver from the South Gate. The river swept by in front of them, swift, dark and freezing cold. Jenna pulled back from the

water. The landing stage was icy, and she knew it would take only a moment for Etheldredda to push her in.

“Thou art safe for now, Esmeralda,” hissed the Queen, keeping her grip on Jenna tight. “I wouldst not have some footman find thee a-bobbing by the Palace on the outflow of the tide this morn. Besides, I wish to show thee one of the wonders of our land: the bottomless Whirlpool of Bleak Creek. I shall call our barge and we shall make haste forthwith, for your mama is not so cruel as to make thee tarry here a moment longer when such delight awaits.” With that, Queen Etheldredda drew out a golden whistle from a pocket deep in her rustling silk skins and blew three short, shrill notes. The piercing noise cut through the icy air and carried all the way to the Palace landing stage, where it woke the bargee, who had been sleeping fitfully in his freezing bunk on board the Royal Barge, his porthole wide open just in case of such a summons.

But it was not only the Royal bargee that the whistle summoned. In the shadows of the landing stage, the NightUllr was crouching, waiting for his mistress to find him. As Etheldredda’s whistle shrieked, so did Ullr’s ears hurt. Almost deafened with pain, the panther sprang out of the night and knocked the whistle from Etheldredda’s lips. The Queen screamed out in surprise. The Aie-Aie unwound its tail from Jenna’s neck and leaped to its mistress’s aid, leaving Jenna free to wrench herself from the Queen’s clutches and throw herself clear of the edge of the water.

As Etheldredda slipped on the icy landing stage, her crown toppled from her head and she fell into the river with a surprisingly small, neat splash. There were no more screams, no more shrieks, and in a moment she had disappeared below the water, with nothing but a few black bubbles rising to the surface to show where she had fallen. The Aie-Aie, chattering with fear, skittered away into the darkness, and the last Jenna heard of it was a few stones dislodged from the wall as it climbed to freedom.

Very carefully, Jenna crept to the edge of the landing stage and peered into the water’s depths. It seemed impossible that Queen Etheldredda could disappear so thoroughly and with such little fuss. She looked behind to check that Etheldredda was not creeping up and about to push her in, but there was nothing there. She was safe. As the sun rose above a small line of pink clouds on the low horizon above the Farmlands, Jenna yawned—tired, cold and suddenly remembering that, even though she was safe from the murderous Etheldredda, she was still five hundred years away from home.

“Komme, Ullr,” said Jenna as she had heard Snorri do. She turned away from the sunrise, and to her surprise there was no sign of the panther anywhere. Thinking that he must have padded back up the tunnel, Jenna turned wearily into the tunnel entrance to retrace her steps back to the Chamber, for where else could she go?

“Meow...*meow*.” A strange orange cat with a black-tipped tail rubbed itself against Jenna’s leg.

“Hello, puss,” said Jenna, bending down to stroke the cat. “How did you get here?”

“Meow.” The cat seemed a little impatient with her. “*Meow*.”

And then Jenna remembered. “Ullr,” she murmured.

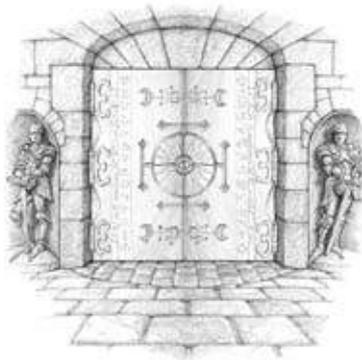
“Meow,” responded Ullr. The orange cat set off back up the dark and slippery tunnel. Tired and cold, Jenna trudged after him.

As Jenna left the landing stage, the Royal Barge—with eight sleepy oarsmen creaking at their places and the frozen bargee, teeth chattering and hand sticking to the ice on the tiller—rounded the bend. The barge was a beautiful sight in the winter’s dawn: candles hastily lit and burning bright at the portholes, the Royal Red canopy moving gently with the motion of the barge and the swirls of golden paintwork glinting in the long, low rays of the rising winter sun. Inside the cabin, a table was set with a jug of hot mulled wine and a plate of savory biscuits; around the table were comfortable seats covered in Royal Red rugs and cushions. In the middle of the cabin, a small stove was glowing with a blaze of seasoned apple logs and aromatic herbs, which filled the cabin with a warming and welcoming fragrance.

But there was no one left to welcome aboard. As the Royal Barge drew up to the deserted landing stage, the bargee and the oarsmen had no idea that far below the keel, weighed down by her great black skirts, the body of Queen Etheldredda floated a few inches above the muddy bottom of the river.

43

THE GREAT DOORS OF TIME



A *small orange cat sauntered* out of the tunnel that led to the Royal landing stage.

“Ullr!” gasped Nicko.

“Shh,” warned Septimus.

Nicko picked up Ullr. “Snorri?” he whispered into the tunnel. “Snorri?” But it was Jenna who came out of the darkness, not Snorri.

In the Great Chamber of Alchemie and **Physik**, Marcellus Pye was alone. He was sitting in his Siege of the Sunne at the head of the table, head in his hands. At the sound of approaching footsteps in the Labyrinth he panicked. He jumped up, ran into the fume cupboard and closed the door, trembling. He could not face his mother, not right now.

“What do you mean, she just fell in the water, Jen?” Nicko’s whisper carried

into the Great Chamber. “Didn’t she try to get out?”

“No, she just went sort of *plop* and disappeared. It was weird. Like...like she couldn’t be bothered to do anything about it. It was as if she thought it didn’t really matter.”

“Well, it wouldn’t, would it, if you thought you were going to live forever?” Septimus pointed out.

Inside the fume cupboard Marcellus heard every whispered word and the realization began to dawn on him that they were talking about his mother.

Jenna was still shaken from seeing her great-great(and then some)-grandmother drown. “But I didn’t wish her dead. Really I didn’t—”

Marcellus gasped and clutched at a shelf for support. Dead? Mama was *dead*?

“Aargh!” There was a sudden yell from inside the fume cupboard and the door crashed open. The cupboard’s previous occupants leaped with shock as Marcellus Pye rushed out, clasping a long black snake just behind its head between his thumb and forefinger. The snake’s mouth was open and its white fangs dripped venom down the front of Marcellus’s black tunic. “Forsooth, ’tis a vicious brute,” Marcellus gasped. He sped over to the bench where the phial of his Tincture had until recently been resident, pulled the top from a large glass jar, threw the snake in and slammed the top back on.

Then, carefully wiping the venom from his tunic—which had produced an interesting effect on the orange sauce—he surveyed his stunned audience. “Pray, Septimus,” he said quickly, “do not run from Here.”

Septimus sighed. So much for their ambush. Marcellus had ambushed *them*. Wearily, he pulled out his chair at the Siege of the Rose and made Jenna sit down. She looked pale and had red marks around her neck from the Aie-Aie’s tail. Still feeling shaken, Jenna scooped up Ullr and hugged the cat close for comfort. Suspicious of Marcellus, Nicko hung back; but Septimus, as was his habit when he had nothing to do in the Chamber, perched on one of the scribes’ stools and yawned. It would not be long before the working day in the Chamber of Alchemie and **Physik** started and the early-morning scribes began to arrive.

Marcellus caught Septimus’s yawn. It had been a long and difficult night. He sat down in his great high-backed chair at the head of the table and

regarded Jenna and Septimus with a thoughtful air. There was something he wanted to discuss.

Nicko hung back from the table. He was having none of this cozy conversation with the man he regarded as Septimus's kidnapper. It seemed to him that it would be easy to take Marcellus unawares. Nicko figured that with the muscles he had recently acquired working in the boatyard, he was a match for anyone, especially a lanky Alchemist who looked as if he had inhaled too many mercury fumes. The only thing that held Nicko back was Snorri. Where was she? What should he do? Nicko hovered, so enmeshed in his thoughts that he did not hear the offer that Marcellus Pye was making Septimus.

At the end of their conversation both Marcellus and Septimus were smiling. The decision made, Marcellus leaned back in his chair.

Nicko meanwhile had also made a decision. He would get the **Keye**. It was now or never. With skills learned from Rupert Gringe, he lunged at Marcellus from behind and grabbed him by the throat.

"Take the **Keye**, Sep—quick!" he yelled.

"Aargh!" Marcellus gurgled, half strangled as Nicko wrenched at the thick chain from which the **Keye** dangled.

"No, Nik!" shouted Septimus as Marcellus began to turn a nasty purple.

"We gotta do it now." *Tug*. "It's our last chance." *Yank*. "Come on, Sep, help me." *Wrench*. Marcellus's eyes started to bulge, and he began to resemble some of the pickled purple frogs on the top shelf of the fume cupboard.

"No, Nik!" Septimus pulled Nicko away, and Marcellus collapsed, gasping, back into his chair.

Nicko was furious. "What did you do *that* for?" he demanded. "You idiot!"

"He's just *offered* us the **Keye**, you dillop," said Septimus. "He's going to let us go—or he *was*."

Jenna poured Marcellus a glass of water from a jug on the table. He took it with a shaking hand and drank it down. "Thank you, Esmeral—er, Jenna.

Prithee take some for yourself, for I do believe you have as much need as I do.” Marcellus turned to Septimus. “Now, Apprentice, dost thou still wish to go through the Great Doors? Perchance thee might find less violent friends in thine own Time.”

“I do still wish,” said Septimus, “and I wish my friends to go with me.”

“Very well, if thy Friends so wish it—though ’tis an Unknown Danger to go forward to a Time not your own. All who have gone have never Returned. Which is why these Doors are Guarded at all times.” Marcellus got to his feet and regarded Septimus gravely. “So we are agreed?” he asked.

“Yes,” replied Septimus.

“I trust thee,” said Marcellus, “as I have never trusted any Person before. Not even my dearest Broda. My Life is in your hands, Apprentice.”

Septimus nodded.

“What’s going on, Sep?” Nicko hissed, who didn’t like the sound of this.

“The Conjunction of the Seven Planets,” Septimus told him.

“The *what?*”

“Marcellus can’t make another Tincture—one that will work—until the same Conjunction of the Planets happens.”

“So? Hard luck for Marcellus and all that, but what’s it to do with us?”

“Well, it happens tomorrow.”

“Good for them.”

“It happens tomorrow—in *our Time*.”

Nicko shrugged. He didn’t see what the planets had to do with going home.

“I have promised to make the Tincture in our Time, Nik. Tomorrow at the time of the Conjunction. I can make it so that Marcellus can be young in our Time, too. I am sure I can.”

“He’s coming with us?” asked Nicko, shocked. “But he *kidnapped* you.”

“No, he’s not coming with us. He’s there already, just really old and sick. I’m going to try and make him okay. Now, stop asking questions, Nik. Don’t you want to go home?”

The truth was that Nicko wanted desperately to—but not without Snorri. He kept glancing at the entrance to the Great Chamber in the hope that she would suddenly rush in, pale hair flying, eyes shining, and he could tell her that they were all going home.

Marcellus took the **Keye** from around his neck, inspecting the misshapen links on the chain that Nicko had very nearly succeeded in breaking. He went over to the Doors and began to make preparations for their opening. The statues sheathed their swords and bowed their heads as Marcellus placed his **Keye** into its mirror-image indentation in the center of the Great Doors. And then, deep within the Doors, Septimus heard a sound that made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle—the rumble of the bar inside moving, a sound that he had last heard when the Great Doors had closed behind him one hundred and seventy days before.

Slowly, silently, the Great Doors of Time swung open, the gold flashing in the candlelight as they moved apart to reveal the dark surface of the Glass, which stood patiently waiting beneath them. Septimus had forgotten how deep the Glass looked, and as he gazed into its depths he felt as if he were standing on the edge of a precipice. A familiar feeling of vertigo swept up from his feet and made him sway.

“Fare thee well, Septimus,” said Marcellus, “and thank you.”

“Thank you, too, for all you taught me about **Physik**,” replied Septimus.

“Now take thee this,” said Marcellus, to Septimus’s surprise, handing him the **Keye**. “It will open the Glass at the top of the lapis steps, which is where thee must Go Out. It is thine to keep, I shall make another for myself. I shall place thy **Physik** Chest sub rosa in the cloaks cupboard at the top of the steps to the Wizard Tower. Use it well, thou hast the makings of a great Physician.”

“I will,” Septimus promised. He took the **Keye** and placed it around his neck. It felt heavy and was still warm from Marcellus’s touch. “But how,” he asked, “shall I get the Tincture to you?”

“Fear not, I wouldst not ask thee to bring it through the Glass, for I know the horror thou hast of such a thing. Place the tincture, pray, in a gold Box marked with the Symbol of the Sunne and throw it into the Moat beside my

House. I will find it.”

“How will I know that *you* have found it?” Septimus asked.

“Thou shalt know by the presence of the Golden Arrow of **Flyte**, which I didst see upon my Ancient Person. I shall place it in the Box by return. Art thou a fisherman?”

“No,” replied Septimus, puzzled.

“Methinks thou wilt become one,” Marcellus chuckled. “The Golden Arrow of **Flyte** will be my thanks to you and will bring you great freedom.”

“It already has,” muttered Septimus, “until *you* took it.”

Marcellus did not hear; he had turned his attention to Jenna.

“Fear not that my mother should continue to **Haunt** thee in thine own Time,” he told her. “Although she hath drunk of my Tincture which, while incomplete, may give her Spirit some Substance, she shall not trouble thee. The ExtraOrdinary Wizard and I shall **Entrance** her into her portrait. Methinks I shall also hunt down the Aie-Aie, for did it not too drink of my Tincture? It truly is a most Poisonous Creature and doth carry a Pestilence in its bite, which Mama hath used to terrify all who displease her. So, Jenna, it is decided: I shall **Entrance** them both into the portrait and **Seal** them in a room that None shall find.”

“But Dad **Unsealed** it,” Jenna gasped.

Marcellus did not reply. Something in the Glass had caught his attention.

“Dad did *what*?” asked Septimus.

“He and Gringe **Unsealed** Etheldredda’s portrait. You remember. It was hanging in the Long Walk—”

Marcellus’s voice interrupted Jenna. With an unmistakable note of panic, he said, “Pray do not tarry, this Glass hath become Unstable. I can see cracks appearing deep within. It will not hold for long, I fear. Go you now—or never!”

Deep within the Glass Septimus saw what Marcellus had seen. Beyond long, lazy swirls of Time moving within it, fissures were materializing around

the edges of the Glass. It was indeed now or never.

“We’ve got to go!” yelled Septimus. “Now!” He grabbed hold of Jenna with one hand and Nicko with the other and ran at the Glass.

At the very last moment, Nicko wrenched away. “I’m not going without Snorri,” he said.

“Nik—you must come, you *must*,” said Septimus desperately.

“The Glass will not wait,” said Marcellus, urgently. “Begone, begone before it is too late.”

“Go!” yelled Nicko. “I’ll see you later. I promise!” With that, Nicko ran from the Great Chamber of Alchemie and **Physik**.

“No, Nicko. No!” Jenna yelled.

“Come on, Jen,” said Septimus. “We’ve gotta go.”

Jenna nodded and together, with a small orange cat, they stepped into the Glass and walked into the liquid cold of Time.

44

THE FIND



The *Great Doors of Time* swung silently closed behind them.

“Nicko,” sobbed Jenna. “*Nicko!*”

“It’s no good, Jen,” said Septimus wearily. “He’s five hundred years away now.”

Jenna looked at Septimus in disbelief. She had expected to walk straight out into the Castle—not find herself in a dingy tunnel lit with weird glass globes. “What...you mean we’re already back—back in our own Time?”

Septimus nodded. “We’re home now, Jen. This is the Old Way. It’s really, *really* old. It runs far below even the Ice Tunnels.”

“So where’s the old Marcellus?” Jenna asked wearily. “You’d think he’d be waiting for us, since he knows we’re coming.”

“Five hundred years is a long time to remember stuff, Jen. I don’t think he

knows what's going on anymore, really. He'll be around somewhere. Come on, let's get out of here."

With the air of a seasoned traveler, Septimus set off along the Old Way, with Jenna, clutching Ullr to her, trudging behind. They walked along in silence, each deep in their own thoughts about Nicko.

After a while Jenna said, "If Nicko ever does **Come Through**, how will he find his way back?"

"Nicko will find a way, Jen. He always does," replied Septimus, sounding more hopeful than he really was, for it was not long since Nicko had mistaken an ant for a footpath and gotten them both lost in the Forest.

"And Snorri..." said Jenna. "I really liked Snorri."

"Yeah. So did Nik. That was the trouble." Septimus sounded mad.

All the time, Ullr made no sound. The small orange cat with the black-tipped tail sat quietly in Jenna's arms, his spirit elsewhere—with his mistress in a distant Time.

Five hundred years away, Snorri Snorrelssen was sitting lost and miserable on a riverbank. But, as she gazed into the distance, she **Saw** the Old Way and the long lines of globes of Everlasting Fyre, and though she did not understand what it was she was **Seeing**, she knew that she was **Seeing** through Ullr's eyes.

It was bitterly cold in the Old Way. Jenna and Septimus pulled their UnderCooks' coats around them, but still the chill worked its way through and made them shiver. The rough fabric of the coats brushed along the wide, smooth pavement, and the faint rustling sounds filled the air like the flapping of bats' wings at twilight.

Marcellus was waiting for them at the foot of the lapis steps, slumped against the stone with his deep-set eyes closed. Jenna jumped at the sight of the ancient man and squeezed Ullr tightly to her—so tightly that far away, Snorri gasped at the sudden pain around her ribs.

"He...he's not *dead*, is he?" Jenna whispered.

"Not yet," came a quavery voice. "Though there is not much difference,

'tis true." Old Marcellus licked his dry lips and stared at Septimus as if trying to remember something. "You are the boy with the Tincture?" he asked, looking at them with his rheumy eyes. Septimus thought he could still see something of the young Marcellus's expression in those eyes.

"I am going to make it tomorrow at the Conjunction," said Septimus. "Don't you remember? You told me to drop it in the Moat inside a gold box marked with the sun?"

The old man snorted. "What care I for the sun?"

"I shall put it in the box, just as I said I would," said Septimus patiently. "And then—do you remember?—you will let me know you have it by returning the **Flyte Charm**."

Marcellus smiled and his tombstone teeth glowed red in the flames of the globes. "I remember now, Septimus. I do not forget my promises. Be you a fisherman?"

Septimus shook his head.

"Methinks you will become one." Marcellus chuckled.

"Good-bye, Marcellus," said Septimus.

"Fare thee well, Septimus. Thou wert a good Apprentice. Fare thee well, my dear...Esmeralda." The ancient man closed his eyes once more.

"Good-bye, Marcellus," said Jenna.

At last they reached the top of the long, winding lapis steps and came face to face with the Glass. Septimus remembered the last time he had stood there, and could hardly believe that this time he would be able to go through it. He looked at the Glass, hardly daring to place the **Keye** into the indentation above it. He could see that this Glass was not the same as the True Glass of Time. Gone were the heady sense of depth and the intricate swirling patterns of Time—this Glass looked dull and empty, seeming to be nothing more than a poorly silvered glass.

"Time to go home," whispered Septimus.

"So...we just go through here and come out into the Robing Room?" asked Jenna.

“I guess so. Come on, let’s go.” Septimus took hold of Jenna’s hand, but Jenna resisted, glancing behind her one last time. “Nik hasn’t **Come Through**, Jen,” Septimus said quietly. “I’ve been listening for him all along, and he’s not here. There is no human heartbeat in the Old Way apart from you and me and—about every five minutes—Marcellus.”

Septimus tentatively placed his hand against the Glass. It went through as easily as putting his hand into an icy bowl of water. “Come on, Jen,” he said, gently.

Taking Septimus’s hand, Jenna followed him into the Glass—and out to the world where they belonged.

They were welcomed by an ear-splitting shriek. Marcia leaped up from her place at the table in the Hermetic Chamber and dropped a huge book of calculation charts on her foot. Jillie Djinn came running.

“What is it, Marcia?” gasped Jillie, emerging from the seven-cornered passage into the Hermetic Chamber. “The mouse catcher caught them all yesterday, he *promised*. There can’t be any more—oh, my goodness, the *Glass!*”

“Septimus!” yelled Marcia, kicking the calculation charts away in abandon and rushing to the Glass. “Oh, Septimus, Septimus!” She swept up the emerging Septimus into her arms and swung him around, much to his complete amazement, for Marcia did not do hugs.

Jenna watched, happy that at last that she had put right the harm she had done Septimus. And then she remembered Nicko and burst into tears.

In the Manuscriptorium, twenty-one pale faces looked up as the tearful Princess, carrying a scraggy orange cat, and a disheveled boy, who looked a lot like the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice—but could not possibly be, because everyone knew that the ExtraOrdinary Wizard would never have allowed him to have his hair like *that*—came quietly out of the Hermetic Chamber with the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. No one had seen them go in, but some of the older scribes were used to that. People who went into the Hermetic Chamber did not always come out, and people who came out had not always gone in. It was just the way things were. The scribes also noticed that the ExtraOrdinary Wizard was smiling, which she most certainly had not been the day before

when she had gone into the Chamber. Most scribes had, in fact, thought that, as part of her job, the ExtraOrdinary Wizard was not *allowed* to smile and were quite shocked. But whatever any of the scribes happened to be thinking at that moment, they all suddenly stopped when a loud *crash* shattered the pin-drop silence of the Manuscriptorium—and the front window.

Foxy, who had taken over from Beetle after he had been rushed to the Infirmary with the Sickenesse, threw himself through the flimsy door that separated the front office from the Manuscriptorium, white-faced and yelling, “Help, help! There’s a dragon in the office!” Then he fainted.

There was indeed a dragon in the office—and not much else. The window was in a million pieces, the desk was firewood and the teetering stacks of pamphlets, papers, booklets and manuscripts were either trampled to the floor and covered in muddy dragon prints or were blowing down Wizard Way in the brisk early-morning breeze.

“Spit Fyre!” gasped Septimus, rubbing the dragon’s nose. “How did you know I’d be here?”

“We did a **Seek**,” said Jenna happily. “And it worked. Kind of.”

Jillie Djinn surveyed the wreckage. She was not happy. “I would ask you to keep your dragon under control, Marcia,” she said, “but it is obviously too late.”

“It is not *my* dragon, Miss Djinn,” snapped Marcia, her smile rapidly evaporating. “It belongs to my Apprentice here, who is a skilled and careful dragon keeper.”

Jillie Djinn snorted dismissively. “Not quite skilled enough, apparently, Madam Marcia. I shall be sending you the bill for the window and the multitude of lost and destroyed papers.”

“You may send as many bills as you wish, Miss Djinn. The nights are drawing in, and I shall take great pleasure in lighting the fire with them. Good day to you. Come, Jenna and Septimus, time to go home.” Marcia stepped disdainfully over the chaos and swept out the door. Once safely in Wizard Way, Marcia clicked her fingers at Spit Fyre, who jumped obediently through the smashed window, for there was something about Marcia that still made Spit Fyre think *Dragon Mother*.

Barely able to believe that his dream had come true, Septimus wandered

onto Wizard Way—*his* Wizard Way. He stopped and breathed in the air—the air of *his* Time, which smelled of wood smoke and baked pies from the meat pie and sausage cart that was approaching the Manuscriptorium just in time for the mid-morning break. He looked down the broad expanse of the Way, with the long, low Palace—*Jenna's* Palace—in the distance, and he could not stop smiling. This, thought Septimus, is where I belong.

But while Septimus was feeling glad to be alive and, after six months of near silence could not stop talking, Jenna was exhausted. “You are to come back with us and get some sleep,” Marcia told her. “I will send a message to the Palace.”

They walked through the Great Arch, Septimus closely tailed by Spit Fyre, who was suspiciously sniffing his strange-smelling tunic. “Ouch!” yelped Septimus as the dragon trod on the backs of his heels in an effort to keep as close as possible to his **Imprintor**.

“Goodness,” said Marcia, “what *have* you got on your feet, Septimus?”

Septimus felt quite silly enough in his shoes without explaining them to Marcia. He quickly changed the subject. “I wish Beetle had seen Spit Fyre come in through the window. He’ll be really sorry to have missed that. I wonder where he was?”

“Ah, yes,” Marcia sighed. “Beetle. Oh, dear. Septimus, there’s something you ought to know...”

THE PHYSIK CHEST

And another thing, Septimus,” said Marcia, sounding as stern as she could manage while they watched Catchpole, inexpertly wielding a large crowbar, try to lever up a dusty floorboard in the broom closet. “You are *not* to stay out at night on your own *ever* again.”

“What, *never*?” Septimus looked up, saw the smile in Marcia’s eyes and ventured, “Not even when I’m really old...like when I’m *thirty*?”

“Not while you’re my Apprentice you’re not—*oh for goodness sake, Catchpole, give me the crowbar and I’ll do it*—and don’t think that going out with an irresponsible old ghost will be all right either, because it won’t. Anyway—*oof, whoever nailed this board down made a good job of it*—I sincerely hope that by the time you’re thirty—*aha, I think it’s moving*—you will have an Apprentice of your own, and then it will be your turn to worry.” Marcia’s smile faded as she remembered. She straightened up and looked Septimus in the eye. “But I hope you never find a letter from them written five hundred years ago the way I found yours. *Never*.”

“No. I hope not too,” said Septimus quietly.

Marcia set to with the crowbar again, and a few moments later there was a loud *crack* as the nails finally gave up their struggle against the determined

ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Septimus helped Marcia lift the board.

“I had no idea that this rose was here,” said Marcia, closely inspecting the intricate rose that was carved deep into the wood. It was much worn away by hundreds of years of feet tramping over it—for the broom closet had previously been used as a cloakroom—but the delicate curves of its petals were still clearly visible.

“It was my symbol,” said Septimus almost proudly. Now that he was back safe in his own Time, Septimus was beginning to enjoy thinking about his time with Marcellus Pye. “It’s the old sign for a seventh son. Marcellus had it carved into his table years before I got there.”

“Wicked man,” said Marcia. “I’d like to tell him a thing or two.”

“He was okay really,” Septimus ventured.

“We’ll agree to differ on that subject, Septimus,” said Marcia huffily. “I am just about prepared to dig out this chest full of quackery, since even a remote chance of curing the Sickenesse is worth a try, but you will never find me agreeing that that man was ‘okay really.’ *Never.*”

Septimus and Marcia knelt down and peered into the dusty void under the floor. Gingerly, Septimus put his hand into the space and the glow from his Dragon Ring found an answering shine in the depths.

“I can see it,” he said, amazed. “Here it is, just like Marcellus said it would be—*sub rosa*. Hidden beneath the rose.”

“Oh, twaddle and tripe,” Marcia huffed. “Now come on, Catchpole, don’t just stand there gawking, we could do with a hand to get this thing out.”

It took more than the weedy Catchpole’s help to lift out the chest. It needed the combined efforts of five Ordinary Wizards—without Catchpole, who suddenly felt dizzy—to drag the chest onto the spiral stairs.

At the top of the Tower Marcia, Septimus and the five Wizards heaved the chest and dragged it along the landing. The great purple door to Marcia’s rooms swung open, and everyone pushed and pulled the small but amazingly heavy chest inside. Marcia stood up with a groan and rubbed her back. “Are you sure this thing isn’t just full of bricks?” she said. “What could it possibly have in it to make it so *heavy*?”

“Gold. It’s lined with really thick slabs of the stuff,” said Septimus.

“What on earth for?” asked Marcia indignantly.

“Because it’s the purest, most perfect metal. And **Physik** is all about that too, sort of trying to reach perfection with ourselves...” Septimus trailed off, noticing Marcia’s exasperated expression. It was not lost on the Ordinary Wizards either, who quickly scuttled away.

Marcia sighed. She looked down at the blackened old chest with its scraped gold corners and unbroken golden bands, and she just *knew* that it was going to be trouble. Not to mention the fact that it was making horrible dents in her best Chinese carpet. “It’s all very well, Septimus,” she said somewhat grumpily, “but how on earth do you intend to open this thing?”

“Easy,” said Septimus. He knelt beside the chest and took the **Keye** from around his neck. Marcia watched as he pressed it into its mirror image on the front of the chest, and slowly the lid silently opened.

Septimus looked inside and smiled. Everything was as he remembered, neatly laid out, clean and tidy. Lines of gleaming gold instruments lay in a tray; bottles of tinctures and mixes, remedies and fusions lay just as he had left them. And, at the bottom of the chest was what Septimus was looking for: his carefully written formula for the antidote to the Sickenesse.

“Here it is,” he said, triumphantly pulling out a ragged piece of much-folded vellum. “*Look.*” Septimus handed it to Marcia, who put her spectacles on. The hours of perusing Jillie Djinn’s prediction tables and calculations had done her eyesight no good at all, and she peered at the fine brown-ink scrawl that covered the vellum. Her face brightened; at least she recognized what it was: an example of late Etheldredda/early Esmeralda variant script with the typical reverse scrawl used by the Physicians of those days.

“Right, Septimus,” said Marcia briskly, glad at last to be able to take charge. “Get yourself down to the Manuscriptorium and have the Ancient Script Scribe write you an immediate translation—*immediate*, mind. No messing about. There’s no time to lose. Off you go. Well, go *on.*”

Septimus shook his head. “But I don’t need to do that—I wrote this myself.”

Marcia felt very odd. She had to go and sit down.

Some hours later, Septimus was carefully drawing up a colloid of silver with his pipette and dropping it into a large flask. Marcia, feeling rather unnecessary, sat watching her Apprentice finding his way around the old **Physik** Chest with an ease that amazed her.

Despite Septimus's long tangled hair, which she really *must* get him to do something about, and the fact that he was definitely a little taller and thinner, she found it hard to believe that he had really been away for nearly six months of his life, while only two days had passed at the Castle. And something else was different about Septimus too. He was more assured and—this was what Marcia found really strange—now he knew and believed things that she did not. *That* took a bit of getting used to.

“Do I add the valerian to this or add this to the valerian? What do you think?” Septimus's voice broke into Marcia's thoughts.

“You're the expert, Septimus,” said Marcia, trying to get used to her new role. “But as a general rule I would say add light to dark.”

“Okay.” Septimus added the greenish oil to the contents of his flask. “Now, could you pass me the balance, please?” he asked. Getting into her role of lab assistant, Marcia handed Septimus a small set of gold scales complete with tiny gold weights. She watched him pick up the smallest weight with a long-nosed pair of tweezers and place it on the balance. Then, taking out a tiny, round-bowled gold spoon, Septimus measured out a fine blue powder and poured it onto the other side of the scales until the two sides were delicately balanced, and then something caught his eye. He looked at the spoon more closely and frowned.

“What's wrong?” asked Marcia.

Septimus passed her the spoon. He pointed his blue-stained finger to some marks underneath the handle.

Marcia fished out her spectacles from her pocket and peered at the scratches on the spoon. “Sep...tim...us,” she read slowly.

“I remember writing that,” said Septimus. “It was the day after I...arrived. I wrote my name everywhere for a while. It was like writing messages forward to our own Time.”

Marcia folded up her spectacles and dabbed at her eyes with her purple silk handkerchief. “That powder stings,” she said. “You should put the lid back on.”

Several hours later, when the mixture had cooled, Septimus went back to complete the serum. He removed the large crystal that had formed, crushed it in a mortar and pestle and returned the powdered crystal to the flask. He put a stopper in the flask, shook the mixture for thirteen seconds until it became clear and poured it into a tall clear glass medicine bottle. Now Septimus lit a candle. Then he took his diving rod from the **Physik** chest, dipped it into the mixture, turned it seven times and held it up to the candle flame. It looked good. Septimus placed a clean piece of silk over the open top and pushed a cork down onto it, creating a tight seal.

“It’s finished!” he called up the stairs. Marcia hurried down. “Now for the final test,” said Septimus, a little nervously. Marcia watched her Apprentice pick up the bottle and hold it up to the light of the little arched window, turning it so that it caught a ray of sunlight. The sunlight struck the glass, traveled through the liquid and emerged as a blindingly blue streak of light. “It works—it *works!*” Septimus shouted.

“No more than I would expect.” Marcia smiled. “Now, get your cloak, Septimus, we have to get this to where it’s needed. There is no time to lose.”

As Marcia and her Apprentice quickly crossed the Wizard Tower courtyard, the dragon kennel shook as Spit Fyre hurled himself at the door. Septimus ran up to the door and said, “I’ll be back soon, Spit Fyre. Really, I will. Then you can come out. I *promise*. See you later, Spit Fyre!”

“Jenna will have to **UnDo** the **Seek**,” Marcia told him. “He’ll be a complete pest until then. He won’t leave you alone.”

“I know,” said Septimus, clutching the bottle of Antidote close and running to catch up as Marcia took the side gate out into a small alley. They were on their way to the Infirmary. Knowing Septimus’s dislike of heights, Marcia ignored the shortcut along the Castle walls and instead took the winding streets below. Septimus thought that he had never been so happy as he was now, except perhaps when he had returned to the Wizard Tower from the Manuscriptorium the previous day and the writing across the floor had said, WELCOME BACK TO YOUR TIME, APPRENTICE. WE HAVE MISSED YOU. That had been a good moment, a very good moment. Septimus loved the fact that once

again he was wearing the green robes of the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice, rather than the black and red robes of an Alchemie Apprentice, and it was *his* friends that called out and said hello, with no weird accents and strange words that you always had to think twice about.

Soon they reached the North Gate.

“Afternoon, your ExtraOrdinariness,” said Gringe, blocking their path.

“Oh. Good afternoon, Gringe,” said Marcia, a little curtly.

“You going anywhere nice?” asked Gringe as Marcia tried to squeeze around him and get onto the drawbridge.

“No. Would you mind getting out of the way, please, Gringe?”

“Oh. Sorry, Your ExtraOrdinariness. Of course.” Gringe squeezed himself against the gatehouse wall to allow Marcia and Septimus to pass. “Oh, hello,” said Gringe, noticing Septimus. “You gave your poor dad a couple of sleepless nights, you did.”

Suddenly Septimus remembered. Dad...Gringe...*Etheldredda’s portrait*. “Gringe—you have to go down to the Palace *right now*, and you have to tell Dad to put that picture back exactly where you found it. Then he’s got to **ReSeal** the room. Properly!”

Gringe’s eyes widened in surprise. “What?” he said.

“Put that portrait back *exactly* where you found it. The one of Queen Etheldredda.”

“Well, I’m not surprised he don’t like lookin’ at it—she’s a scary old bird, no mistake about it—but just in case you ’adn’t noticed, I got a gatehouse to run ’ere and I can’t just drop everythin’ an’ go rearrangin’ someone’s pictures for ’em.” Gringe turned away abruptly to take a silver penny from a returning Infirmary nurse.

Marcia saw Septimus’s look of dismay. She had no idea what it was about, but she had learned enough over the past few months to know that if something was bothering Septimus, she should take notice of it. She swept onto the drawbridge where Gringe was now passing time with a couple of boys coming back from the Forest with bunches of kindling.

“Gringe,” she said, towering over the Gatekeeper, her winter cloak blowing in the breeze and making Gringe sneeze, because he was allergic to fur. “You will do as you are asked, *now*. You and Silas Heap are to move that portrait and *I* will come and **ReSeal** the room. Mark my words, there will be trouble if I do not find that portrait exactly where it should be.”

“Atchooo! Can’t—atchooo—leave the Gate—atchooo, atchooo, *atchooooo*—unattended.”

“Mrs. Gringe can step in.”

“Mrs. Gringe is visiting her sister in the Infirmary. Got bit yesterday.”

“Oh. I’m very sorry. Well, Lucy then.”

“Lucy, in case you didn’t know, has run off after that no-good brother of your Apprentice, much good may it do her,” snapped Gringe. “But if it’s so important, I’ll go an’ do the picture after sunset once I got the bridge up. Awright?”

“No, Gringe, that will not be *all right*. You will just have to close the North Gate for the afternoon.”

Gringe looked horrified. “I can’t do that,” he protested. “That has never been done in my time as a Gatekeeper. *Never*.”

“There’s always a first time for everything, Gringe,” Marcia said in a steely voice. “Just as there will be a first time for a Gatekeeper being sent to the lock-up while still on duty.”

“Eh? You wouldn’t...”

“I would. Indeed, I *will*.”

“Very well then. Excuse me for a moment, Madam Marcia.” Gringe went over to the gatehouse door and yelled into the shadows of the drawbridge winding room. “Hey! Bridge Boy!” bawled Gringe. “Wake up, yer lazy lummo!”

The Bridge Boy appeared, bleary-eyed. “What?” he said grumpily.

“Promotion for you,” Gringe told him. “You’re taking over until Mrs. Gringe gets back. No pocketing the money, mind, be polite to the customers

and don't let no one over without paying, especially your good-for-nothing friends. Got that?"

The Bridge Boy, who was staring openmouthed at the sight of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard standing no more than a few feet away, nodded slowly.

"Good," snapped Gringe, "because I am on an important mission for the ExtraOrdinary and I don't want to be worrying about the bridge while I'm away on such a delicate matter." Gringe handed the Bridge Boy his money bag along with the warning "An' I know *exactly* how much is in there, so don't try any funny business." Then he turned and set off from the North Gate gatehouse with a sigh. *More* Heap trouble, he thought. Didn't he have enough already?

THE INFIRMARY



T*he Infirmary was a bleak* place, despite the best efforts of the healers who worked there. It was a long, low wooden building, hidden under the outlying trees of the Forest, covered with moss and mold after years of water dripping from the trees above and mists seeping up from the Moat below. The Infirmary was not often used, except for cases of sickness that were thought to be contagious, but there were now so many Castle inhabitants who had become ill that no one was taking any chances.

Marcia and Septimus approached the Infirmary along the now well-worn path on the far bank of the Moat. The afternoon light was fading, and as they approached, they could see the flicker of the first candles being placed in the tiny windows. The door was open, and with some trepidation, Marcia and Septimus went inside.

“Septimus! Is that you? What are *you* doing here?” Sarah Heap leaped up from her work. She had been sitting at a small table by the door, measuring out doses of ground-up leaves into rows of tiny pots neatly lined up in front of her. Sarah had not been out of the Infirmary since she had arrived and Silas had decided not to worry her about Septimus’s disappearance and just hope for the best, which, for once, had been the right thing to do.

Sarah looked at her youngest son. “What have you done to your hair?” she asked. “It’s a terrible mess. Really, Marcia, I know he’s getting to that awkward age, but you should make him comb his hair once in a while.”

“We haven’t come to discuss Septimus’s hairstyle, Sarah,” said Marcia, who guessed, with some relief, that Sarah knew nothing of what had happened. “We have come on urgent business.”

Sarah took no notice of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. She had not taken her eyes off Septimus and wore a puzzled frown. “You look...different, Septimus,” she said. “Have you been ill? Is there something you haven’t told me?” she asked, beginning to get suspicious.

“No,” said Marcia, far too quickly.

“I’m fine, Mum,” said Septimus. “Really fine. Look, I’ve made an Antidote to this Sickness.”

Sarah looked at Septimus fondly. “That’s very sweet of you, love,” she said, “but lots of people have tried and it’s no good, nothing seems to work.”

“But this *will* work, Mum—I know it will.”

“Oh, Septimus,” said Sarah gently, “I know how worried you must be about Beetle, I know how much you liked him—”

“Liked?” asked Septimus, suddenly scared. “What do you mean *liked*? I *still* like Beetle—lots. H-He’s okay...isn’t he?”

Sarah looked serious. “He’s not well, Septimus. He...oh, dear. He is very ill and we don’t have much hope. Would you like to see him?”

Septimus nodded. He and Marcia followed Sarah through some swinging doors into the Infirmary ward, a long room that occupied the entire building. A row of narrow beds lined each side of the ward. The beds were crowded close together and every single one was occupied. The figures lay still and deathly pale in their beds, some had their eyes closed and some gazed at the ceiling, seeing nothing. The ward was hushed and still, full of late-afternoon shadows, which were slowly being dispersed by a young helper, who moved down the ward carrying a tray of candles, placing one in each window to keep the night at bay a little longer, as well as any stray Forest creatures. Septimus found it strange that for so many people crammed together in such a small space, there was very little noise; in fact, the only sound that he could hear

was the occasional metallic *ping* as a drip of water found its way through the rotten shingles on the roof and hit one of the assortment of metal buckets placed at strategic points.

“Beetle’s over here,” whispered Sarah, putting her hand on her son’s shoulder and guiding him toward a nearby bed. “He’s near the door so that we can keep an eye on him.”

If Sarah had not taken them to Beetle’s very bedside, Septimus would never have found his best friend. The only thing that was recognizable was Beetle’s shock of thick black hair, which his mother, who had only just left, had lovingly combed flat in a particular way that Septimus just knew Beetle would hate. The rest of Beetle was a pale white rag of a boy with wide staring eyes that saw nothing.

Sarah looked with concern at Septimus. “I’m so sorry, love,” she said. “Would you like to sit with Beetle for a while? His mother will be back soon with his father, but you’ll have a little time with him before they get here.” Sarah brought an extra chair for Marcia, and she and Septimus sat down at Beetle’s bedside. “I must get on now, Septimus,” said Sarah. “I’ll come back in a few minutes.”

Septimus was suddenly horribly afraid that the Antidote would not work. He glanced nervously at Marcia, who whispered, “It *will* work, Septimus. You *must* believe in it.”

“**Physik** isn’t like **Magyk**,” said Septimus unhappily. “It doesn’t matter whether you expect it to work or not. Either it does or it doesn’t.”

“I doubt that very much,” said Marcia. “A little belief in something always helps. Anyway, you *know* this works, don’t you?”

Septimus nodded. He put the bottle on the rickety little table beside Beetle’s bed and took out a pipette from the pocket inside his Apprentice cloak. He drew up a small amount of the Antidote into the pipette and dropped three drops of the clear liquid into Beetle’s half-open mouth. And then, sitting on the edge of their seats, he and Marcia waited.

The last lit candle was just being placed in the window at the far end of the ward when Beetle blinked. And then he blinked again, frowned as if wondering where he was and suddenly sat up, wide-eyed, hair sticking up on end like it always did.

“Wotcha, Sep,” croaked Beetle.

“Wotcha, Beetle,” laughed Septimus. “Wotcha!”

“Shh...” Sarah shushed. “Beetle’s family is here now, Septimus. They’d like a little time alone with him before...you know...oh, my goodness.”

“It works, Mum!” Septimus laughed. “My mixture *works*.”

“You mean...*you* did this?” asked Sarah, incredulous. Sarah, with all her knowledge of herbs and healing, had tried endless remedies for the Sickenesse, and nothing had had the slightest effect.

“Where am I?” asked Beetle, looking around him.

“You’re in the Infirmary,” Septimus told him. “You got the Sickenesse, remember?”

“Nope. Don’t remember anything. Well, not after Princess Jenna came to see me.... I remember *that*. Hey—she was looking for *you*.”

Septimus smiled. “Well, she came and found me, Beetle. You wouldn’t believe where she found me though.”

“Where, Sep?”

“Tell you later, Beetle. Get lots of **FizzFroot**, you’ll need it. Here’s your mum.”

There was still some of the Antidote left even after Septimus had dropped three drops into every mouth on the ward, so he left the bottle with Sarah for any new arrivals. To the accompaniment of an excited hubbub of chatter, and the celebration of relatives who had just arrived on the ferry for their evening visit, Septimus carefully wrote out a label—just as Marcellus had taught him—for Sarah to stick on the bottle:

Rx The Antidote

sig: iii drops p.o.

ut dict.

“Your writing’s gotten worse, Septimus,” Sarah commented as she proudly took the bottle from her son and placed it in a cupboard behind her table. “It looks just like a real Physician’s.”

Septimus smiled. At that moment, he *felt* just like a real Physician.

PALACE RATS



Hildegarde was on duty at the Palace door when Gringe arrived, breathless and frazzled.

“I’ve come on important business on be’alf of the ExtraOrdinary,” puffed Gringe. “I need to see Silas ’Eap.”

“I’m afraid no one knows where he is, Mr. Gringe,” said Hildegarde apologetically. “The Princess was looking for him earlier and could not find him.”

“E’ll be with the Counters, miss. Up in the attic.”

Hildegarde smiled at Gringe. “Well, you are welcome to go in, Mr. Gringe, and try your luck.”

“Thank you, miss.” Gringe, still a little overawed by the Palace, hurried past and disappeared into the shadows of the Long Walk. Minutes later he drew back a ragged curtain hanging in a dark alcove and took a long flight of dusty stairs up to the attic. At the top Gringe pushed open the creaky door and peered in; at the far end of the long, beamed loft space, he saw the flickering light of a candle. Silas Heap was exactly where Gringe had expected—in the

UnSealed room tending his Counter Colony.

The Counters were doing well, and at Gringe's approach Silas looked up, pleased to see his friend. "Look at this little fellow, Gringe. He's going to be a perfect Tunneler. I'm training him, getting him used to wriggling through things. Look at him go."

"Yeah, very nice, Silas, I'm sure. But I ain't come to watch your precious Counters."

Silas did not reply. He was down on his hands and knees, squinting into recesses under the floorboards. "Darn. He's gone. He's tunneled off."

"Yeah, well, that's the trouble with Tunnelers, Silas. Now look 'ere, I've had the ExtraOrdinary on at me and I've 'ad to leave the good-for-nothing Bridge Boy on the Gate—and Mrs. Gringe'll have my guts for garters when she finds that out, make no mistake—but we've got to put that painting back up 'ere an' *you* got to **Seal** the room again. Pronto."

"What are you going on about, Gringe? What painting? Here, boy, come on, boy, that's it...oh, he's gone again. Darn."

"The portrait of the crazy old bird in the crown. Pointy nose and scary look in 'er eyes."

"I'm not putting that thing back here, it'll unsettle the Counters. It can go somewhere else in the attic if they don't want it downstairs."

Gringe shook his head. "It's got to go back in 'ere, Silas—back to where it was before. And you've got to **Seal** it in like it was before an' all. Matter of Life or Death, your boy said."

Silas looked up. Gringe had his full attention now. "Which boy?" he asked, hardly daring to hope.

"Your Apprentice boy. Septimus."

"*Septimus?* When did he say that?"

"'Bout 'alf an hour ago. He was with the ExtraOrdinary. She's got scary eyes, an' all, 'asn't she?"

In a flurry of dust, Silas leaped to his feet. "He's back—*Septimus is back!*

Is he all right, Gringe?”

Gringe shrugged. “Looked all right to me. Bit scruffy, I suppose.”

“And Jenna, is she back too?”

“I dunno, Silas, do I? No one tells me anything—except to move pictures around or get shoved in the lock-up,” Gringe said grumpily.

“I must get to the Wizard Tower and see him,” said Silas, gathering his dusty Ordinary Wizard robes around him and, candle held high, setting off toward the little door at the far end of the attic.

“He ain’t there, Silas,” said Gringe, running after him. “He’s gone to the Infirmary. Got some cure for the Sickenesse or something. Silas, we gotta take care of that portrait or I’m in big trouble.”

Silas ignored Gringe. He rushed off, stumbling over the uneven floor, picking his way around the broken and rotten boards. Suddenly Gringe said something Silas had never heard him say before.

“You’ve got to take care of that picture, Silas—*please*.”

Silas stopped. “*What* did you say, Gringe?”

“You heard.”

“Well, it *must* be serious. All right, come on, Gringe. We’ll fix the picture.”

It was a struggle getting Etheldredda’s portrait off the wall. Silas got the impression that the picture had a mind of its own and did not want to be moved. Eventually a vicious tug from Gringe pulled the painting, along with a great lump of plaster and the picture nail, away from the wall and sent Gringe flying with it. Then, with a fair amount of what Sarah Heap called “*language*,” Silas and Gringe began the awkward task of manhandling the disapproving portrait up the attic stairs.

“You’d think this thing ’ad arms,” muttered Gringe after squeezing around a particularly tight corner. “Feels like it’s ’olding on to the banisters.”

“Ouch!” gasped Silas suddenly. “Stop kicking my shins, Gringe. That *hurt*.”

“Weren’t me, Silas. In fact—*ouch*—you can stop kicking my ankles.”

“Don’t be silly, Gringe. I’ve got better things to do than kick your stubby little ankles. Hey! That was my knee. You try that one more time, Gringe, and I’ll—”

“You’ll *what*, Silas ’Eap? Huh, *huh*?”

Both Silas and Gringe were battered and bruised and very near coming to blows by the time they reached the landing outside the attic door. They leaned the portrait against the wall and glared at each other, while the portrait glared at *them*.

“It’s ’er, isn’t it?” muttered Gringe after a while. “I dunno how she’s done it, but it’s been ’er that’s been kicking us.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” said Silas, accepting Gringe’s peace offering. “Come on, Gringe, let’s have a rest, we’ll do this later. Fancy a game of Counter-Feet?”

“Deluxe version?” asked Gringe.

“Deluxe version,” agreed Silas.

“And no mini-crocodiles?”

“No mini-crocodiles.”

On the floor below, Jenna and Sir Hereward were listening to the bumps and thumps above their heads. Jenna had returned to the Palace and, unable to find Silas or Sarah, had gone to see Sir Hereward. He was at his usual post, half hidden in the shadows, leaning against a long tapestry that hung down beside the doors.

“Good morning, fair Princess. The Palace rats do grow ever bolder, I declare,” said the knight, pointing his broken sword up to the ceiling, where, immediately above them, Silas had got his foot stuck between two rotten floorboards.

“Good morning, Sir Hereward,” said Jenna, who had become used to noises in the attic ever since Silas had started cultivating his Counter Colony. “They sound like two-legged rats with boots on to me.”

Sir Hereward looked at Jenna as if searching for an answer to something that was bothering him. “You are safely returned after your absence?” he asked. “For as I recall you were not here last night, nor the night before—two long nights indeed, for none knew where to find you. ’Tis good to see you, and with a little orange rug as a keepsake from your travels. How very charming.”

“It’s a cat, Sir Hereward,” said Jenna, holding Ullr up to show the knight.

Sir Hereward peered at the scrap of orange fur. Ullr stared vacantly at the ghost, seeing only a Time five hundred years ago. “’Tis a poor kind of cat,” observed the knight.

“I know,” said Jenna. “It’s like he’s not here anymore.”

“Perchance your cat has the Sickenesse,” said Sir Hereward.

Jenna shook her head. “I think he’s missing someone,” she said. “Just like I am.”

“Ah, you are strangely melancholy this morning, Princess, but here is something to raise your spirits. What is the difference between an elephant and a tangerine?”

“One’s big and gray and has a trunk, and the other is small and orange.”

“Oh.” Sir Hereward looked crestfallen.

“Just joking. I don’t know, what *is* the difference between an elephant and a tangerine?”

“Well, I won’t send you out to do *my* shopping then. Hur hur.”

“Ho, ho. Sir Hereward...you know where I went away to, don’t you?”

The knight seemed unwilling to answer. He poked his sword at his foot and fiddled with a loose plate of armor. “Only you can know that, Princess. Where, pray tell me?”

“I was *here*, Sir Hereward. And so were you.”

“Ah.”

“I was here *five hundred years ago*.”

Sir Hereward, who as an old ghost was on the transparent side already, nearly faded away. But he recovered himself enough to say, “And you are back. *Safe*. And only two days gone. It is a wonder, Princess Jenna, and it is a burden lifted from my old shoulders. Ever since you told me your name was Jenna, I have worried that one day you would disappear and never be seen again.”

“You never said.”

“I thought that it was not something you would wish to know, Princess. It is best not to know what the future holds for us.” Jenna thought of Marcellus Pye knowing that he had at least five hundred cold, dark years to spend alone in the Old Way, and she nodded.

“I have so many questions to ask you about what happened in the past, Sir Hereward.”

“One at a time, Princess. I’m an old ghost now, and my memory tires easily.”

“Just one today then: Did Hugo get home safely?”

Sir Hereward looked puzzled. “Hugo?” he asked.

“You remember Hugo,” said Jenna. “He was with us. Well, with Septimus really. Wore a Palace Servant’s uniform that was far too big for him.”

Sir Hereward smiled. “Ah yes, I remember Hugo. And very pleased his mother was to see him too.”

“I’m glad. Hugo was sweet.”

“Yes. He became a wonderful Physician later, due to young Septimus Heap, he always said. But I shall cause you to tarry no longer. You will be wanting to go to your Chamber and rest.”

Jenna shook her head, the memory of the little Princesses’ crying behind the wainscoting was still fresh. “No, not just yet, thank you, Sir Hereward. I am going to sit by the river.”

The autumn sun had warmed the old planks of the landing stage, and Jenna—comfortably upwind from Billy Pot’s piles of dragon dung—was sitting with

Ullr on her lap, dangling her feet into the surprisingly warm water of the sluggish river. Beside her was a blue and white saucer full of mashed corn, and nibbling at the corn was a small, naked duckling. As Jenna watched the corn steadily disappear into the duckling, her eyes grew heavy, and the blankets and cushion that she had brought down from Sarah Heap's living room seemed irresistible.

Which is why, when the Chief Customs Officer's launch drew up alongside the Palace landing stage, Alice Nettles and Alther Mella found a steadily breathing pile of crocheted blankets with an orange cat with a black-tipped tail and a small, stubbly duckling asleep on top of it.

"It's Jenna!" Alice gasped, recognizing Jenna's dark hair and the golden circlet. "How did she get *here*?"

"Are you sure?" asked the ghost, hardly daring to believe it. Alther and Alice had come to the Palace to break the terrible news of Jenna's and Nicko's disappearance to their parents. Alther had been ready to fly off alone, but Alice had insisted on going with him, and so Alther had followed the Customs Launch on its long journey upriver, all the while dreading what he was going to have to say.

"See for yourself." Alice smiled. "She's fast asleep."

Gently, Alther blew the covers back from Jenna's face and saw for himself. Jenna stirred at the ghost's warm touch but slept on, exhausted.

"Best to leave her sleeping," said Alice. "It's a warm afternoon, and she'll come to no harm."

"Funny ducklings they have around here," said Alther as he and Alice wandered across the sunlit lawns toward the Palace. "Must be a fancy new breed, I suppose."

48

THE SEND



The shadows over the lawns were lengthening, and still Jenna slept on, curled up under her blankets. From a distance Alther and Alice, who had searched the Palace for Silas and Sarah Heap and found neither, sat together on the lawn, watching the river from afar and chatting quietly.

On the other side of the Palace, walking briskly up the drive, were Marcia and Septimus, closely followed by Spit Fyre. Septimus was bringing Spit Fyre to see Jenna so that she could **UnDo** the **Seek**. Spit Fyre was dogging his every step and it was beginning to get extremely irritating.

“What I don’t understand, Septimus,” Marcia was saying, “is how a ghost of some kind of rat thingy—”

“It’s an Aie-Aie,” Septimus corrected. “Spit Fyre, *please* don’t breathe down my neck like that.”

“Aie-Aie, rat, elephant, whatever it is doesn’t matter—the point is that it is still a *ghost*. And ghosts don’t bite. Granted they can sometimes **Cause** a window to blow open or a door to slam shut, but they don’t bite. *Mind my*

cloak, you idiot dragon.”

“Ouch. That was my heel, Spit Fyre. I know, but this isn’t just a ghost, it’s a Substantial Spirit.”

“Those don’t exist, Septimus,” said Marcia. “You’ve been reading the Witches’ Apparition Almanac again, haven’t you?”

“No, I haven’t. I know it’s a Substantial Spirit because Marcellus said—”

“I am getting just a little tired of hearing what Marcellus said,” snapped Marcia.

“But you see, the Aie-Aie drank the same thing that Etheldredda drank. It was the Tincture that Marcellus made—” Marcia heaved a loud sigh at Marcellus’s name but said nothing.

Septimus continued. “He was going to drink it himself but it wasn’t ready and then Etheldredda snatched it and drank it. Marcellus was really upset. And then Etheldredda grabbed Jen and took her to the river but it was icy and she—Etheldredda—fell in and drowned, which served her right, so then Marcellus said he was going to **Entrance** her ghost into her official portrait and **Seal** it into a room, as he knew that she would become a Substantial Spirit and that soon it would be just the same as if she were alive anyway except that she would be able to live forever, which is what she wanted in the first place and—”

“Stop!” said Marcia. “I can feel another headache coming on.”

“So the Aie-Aie is a Substantial Spirit too and that’s why it’s biting people,” Septimus finished in a rush before Marcia could stop him.

By now they had reached the little wooden bridge that spanned the Palace Moat. Marcia stopped for a moment to collect her thoughts. She had, despite appearances to the contrary, listened to every word that Septimus had said. “So who knows what the Substantial Spirit of Etheldredda is capable of by now?” she muttered. “We’ve got to get her **Sealed** fast, Septimus.”

The wooden bridge over the Palace Moat sagged alarmingly under Spit Fyre’s weight as they approached the Palace doors. Hildegarde, the sub-Wizard on door duty, looked worried.

“Silas Heap, please, Hildegarde,” snapped Marcia. “At *once*.”

“I believe he is in the attic, Madam Marcia,” said Hildegarde, eyeing Spit Fyre warily. Hildegarde did not like reptiles very much and the Palace already had far too many for her liking, what with the snapping turtles in the Moat and Billy Pot’s multitude of Lawn Lizards.

“Good,” said Marcia. “Maybe he’s doing something right for once, though somehow I doubt it.” To Hildegarde’s relief she turned to Septimus and said, “Septimus, *do not* bring that dragon in here. Take it around to the back. I’m sure Mr. Pot would be grateful for some more contributions.” With that, Marcia rushed off into the shadows of the Long Walk, where there was a loud *crash* as she collided with the Palace cleaner and knocked over his bucket.

Leaving Marcia to tell the unfortunate cleaner where to put his bucket in the future, Septimus took the path around to the back of the Palace while Spit Fyre trotted after him, as if attached by a very short piece of invisible string.

After getting lost several times, Marcia finally made it up to the attic. She arrived to the sounds of an argument.

“Look, Gringe. I cannot be held responsible if you are unable to control your Counters. *My* Kicker would *never* have Kicked everything off the board.”

“*It was* your Kicker,” muttered Gringe. “Mine was just goin’ about ’is business and then he gets sent flyin’ across the room. Dunno *where* he’s gone.”

“Don’t know where *any* of them have gone,” said Silas grumpily, getting down on his hands and knees and peering between the floorboards. “Probably never see them again. *Huh.*”

“Silas Heap, what *are* you doing?” Marcia’s voice rang out as she strode down the long, empty attic toward the Counter-Feet players at the far end. Guiltily Silas jumped up and hit his head on a low rafter.

“*Ouch!*”

At the sight of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard approaching, cloak flying, eyes flashing and a look of fury on her face, Gringe went pale. “We were just about to put the painting back,” he said. “Honest.”

“Honest is not a word I automatically associate with *you*, Gringe,” snapped Marcia, a trifle unfairly.

“Keep your hair on, Marcia,” said Silas. “We’re *doing* it. I don’t see what the fuss is all about anyway.”

“That, Silas Heap, is why you are only an Ordinary Wizard. This room was **Sealed** for a reason: to keep the ghost of Queen Etheldredda **Sealed** inside—and her disgusting pet whatever-it-is, which has been running around the Castle biting people and spreading the Sickenesse.”

“Oh, come off it, Marcia,” Silas objected. “You can’t blame me for the Sickenesse too.”

“You let it out, Silas. No one else did. Ever since you stupidly **UnSealed** that portrait it is no coincidence that we have had the Sickenesse, and even worse, we’ve had Queen Etheldredda let loose.”

“She’s only a *ghost*, Marcia,” Silas protested. “There’s no need to get so worked up about it. There are loads of ghosts around here, and some of them are a real pain—much worse than her. I mean, there’s that one with the irritating whistle and then there’s—”

“Be quiet, Silas. Etheldredda is no ordinary ghost. She is dangerous, Silas. She was **Sealed** in by her son—her own *son*, no less—who knew what she was capable of.”

“What do you mean, capable of?” asked Silas, beginning to get a bad feeling about the whole business.

“Murdering her children. Princesses. Rightful heirs to the Castle. And now she is let loose here, in our Time, and she is intent on doing the same.”

“What?” asked Silas. “You don’t mean...Jenna?”

“I mean just that. And now Jenna has returned—”

“Jenna’s back!” gasped Silas. “Is she all right?”

“For the moment. She and Septimus are—”

“*Septimus*. So it’s true, they’re both safe?” Silas felt as though a weight had been lifted from him. Suddenly he felt far less like arguing with Marcia.

“Give us a hand then, Marcia,” he said. “We’ll get this picture **Sealed** up in no time, won’t we, Gringe?”

Gringe shrugged. As far as he was concerned, it was just another game of Counter-Foot brought to an untimely end by Silas Heap.

As the portrait moved slowly down the attic, Queen Etheldredda’s Royal Barge was **Passing Through** the anti-Sickness blockade below Raven’s Rock. The fishermen manning the boats on the blockade shivered as a chill breeze blew through the ships’ rigging and set the ropes eerily humming. Queen Etheldredda sat alone on her ghostly seat—the Aie-Aie was skulking outside the Manuscriptorium, waiting to bite a few soft-skinned scribes as they left work. As the Royal Barge progressed through the blockade and headed upriver to the Palace landing stage, the smile on Queen Etheldredda’s thin lips grew wider, for in her hands she cradled Jenna’s silver pistol.

And in the silver pistol she had placed Jenna’s Named bullet: I.P. for Infant Princess.

Up in the attic, Queen Etheldredda’s portrait was not going quietly. Silas was sure it had bit him, and Gringe’s arms felt like they were being pinched by a large crab as they struggled down the length of the attic toward the **UnSealed** room. About halfway there Gringe let out a loud yelp and dropped the painting. It landed on Silas’s toe, and Marcia finally lost the remaining shreds of her patience.

“Stand back!” she yelled. “I will **Send** it to the room.”

Silas was aghast. “You can’t do that,” he said. “You don’t know *where* it will end up.”

“Don’t go telling me my job, Silas Heap,” snapped Marcia. “It will **Go** where I **Send** it.”

“Don’t bank on it, Marcia,” muttered Silas.

Marcia did not reply. She was already summoning up the **Magyk** she needed for the **Send**—and she needed a lot of it. Silas watched the **Magykal** haze—a flickering, purplish mist—appear around Marcia until it was hard to see where Marcia ended and the attic began. Gringe just watched, open-

mouthed, as Marcia, staring intently at the portrait, began to chant slowly,

“Go You where I Send

Tarry not until the End

Stay You where I Tell

Mark You This and Mark it Well:

Go You to your Room!”

At once Marcia had the horrible feeling she had done something wrong. Alther’s wise words came back to her—*Be specific, Marcia. Say exactly what you mean*—but too late. The **Magyk**al haze enveloped the portrait, as it was meant to. Queen Etheldredda’s portrait rose, as it was meant to. Then it hurled itself through the window, as it was most definitively *not* meant to.

Marcia leaned out the window to see what had happened. She watched the portrait fly through the air and disappear into the wall of the turret—straight into the Queen’s Room.

Marcia waited for Silas’s scathing comment but it did not materialize. Silas had gone.

A ghostly barge makes no noise and so, as it drew up to the Palace landing stage, Jenna heard nothing. She slept peacefully on, but the duckling woke up. There was something in the air that reminded it of somewhere horrible—somewhere that smelled of oranges.

*In a distant Time, Snorri Snorrelssen, no longer alone, sat on Snake Slipway with Nicko Heap and watched the water flow by. As she gazed unfocussed into the Moat, once again Snorri **Saw** through Ullr’s eyes. She **Saw** the Royal Barge come to rest at the landing stage. She **Saw** Queen Etheldredda stand up, pistol in hand, and she **Saw** the winter sun glint off the polished silver of the weapon as Etheldredda raised the pistol and aimed it at the sleeping Jenna.*

Even though they were separated by five hundred years of Time, Ullr was still Snorri's cat, and he still did what his mistress asked. Which is why Ullr suddenly sprang to life and hurled himself at the ghost. But this time, Etheldredda, who was more Substantial, fought back and hit the small orange cat a swinging blow with the pistol. Ullr fell to the ground, but not before he had woken Jenna with his screech.

Jenna sat up with a jolt, still full of sleep. She could not make sense of what she saw—Ullr sprawled across the landing stage and a naked duckling running around in circles, cheeping like a tiny alarm clock.

On the lawn by the Palace, Alice had heard Ullr's screech and seen the flash of sun off the silver pistol. "That's odd," she said to Alther, who was dozing. "There's something going on down on the landing stage."

Alther opened his eyes and saw what Alice could not see. In a streak of panic, the ghost hurled himself across the lawn toward the river.

"Alther!" said Alice, following at top speed. "Alther, what *is* it?"

As Queen Etheldredda stepped daintily from the Royal Barge, Jenna felt a chill envelop her and, as though doused with a bucket of cold water, her head suddenly cleared. There was a *pistol* hovering in the air. *Her* pistol. The one the Hunter had used to hunt her. The one that Aunt Zelda was keeping safe for her. So what was it doing *pointing at her*?"

Queen Etheldredda raised the silver pistol and took aim at Jenna just as Alther arrived like a whirlwind. "Go!" he yelled to Jenna. He threw himself at Etheldredda, but she **Passed Through** Alther like a knife through butter. Alther collapsed, poleaxed by the **Substantial Spirit's** malice.

Jenna hesitated.

Etheldredda pulled the trigger.

There was a loud *crack* of the pistol shot, Alice Nettles threw herself at Jenna, and the silver bullet found its target.

The bullet went into Alice's heart—and there it stayed. A small silver ball with the letters I.P. scribed into the metal. Alice Nettles—named Iona at birth by her mother, Betty Pot—had been brought up by her aunt, Mary Nettles,

who had always liked the name Alice. But there is no fooling a silver bullet.

THE BONEFYRE

There was no hope for Alice. Pale and still, she lay on the landing stage with a peaceful smile on her lips. Around her knelt Silas and Marcia, who had come running at the sound of the shot, and Alther and Jenna, who held the unconscious Ullr in her arms.

Beside Alther lay the silver pistol, which Etheldredda had thrown down in disgust. As Alther gently stroked Alice's hair he began to realize that at last—at long last—he and Alice would be together. He could not help but wonder if Alice had been thinking of that when she had thrown herself in the path of the bullet—and if that was why she looked so peaceful now.

Marcia broke the shocked silence that surrounded Alice. “Jenna,” she said, “I want you to stay close to me from now on. You are not safe while Etheldredda remains **UnSealed**. Now where is that wretched dragon? I think for once we may have a use for him.”

Jenna nodded. Wishing that Snorri were there to help, she glanced around for any sight of Etheldredda. She saw nothing, but Jenna realized that nothing was exactly what Etheldredda wanted her to see. Warily she got up and laid Ullr on her blankets. The orange cat stirred, opened his eyes and gazed at Jenna with his faraway, unfocused look.

Jenna scooped up the little duckling, which was shivering, and settled it in between Ullr's paws for warmth. Then she and Marcia went to find Spit Fyre. The dragon was in the kitchen garden gulping down cooking apples with enthusiastic snorting noises. Septimus had heard the pistol shot, but he had assumed it to be some part of the dragon's digestive process. He was waiting impatiently while Spit Fyre sucked up the last of the windfalls and did not notice Marcia and Jenna's arrival. Neither did he see that right behind Jenna lurked Queen Etheldredda, though if he had looked closely Septimus might have seen a murkiness in the air, for Etheldredda was becoming increasingly **Substantial**.

*But through Ullr's eyes, Snorri **Saw** Etheldredda stalking Jenna as a tiger stalks its prey.*

Marcia marched up to Septimus. "Get that dragon organized, Septimus," she said. "We need **Fyre**—right now."

"He can't do **Fyre**," said Septimus.

"Yes he can," corrected Jenna.

"No he can't."

"He can. Look at his eyes. He's got the red ring of **Fyre**."

Septimus stood on tiptoe and stared into Spit Fyre's unblinking dragon eyes. Sure enough, the bright green iris was ringed with a thin red circle. "How did he get that?" Septimus asked suspiciously.

"I had to do the **Ignite**," Jenna explained.

"But he's *my* dragon," Septimus said, annoyed that he had not been there at such an important time.

“Enough of that,” said Marcia. “It doesn’t matter whose dragon he is. Follow me.” She strode out of the kitchen garden. Spit Fyre, at the sight of his **Seek** rapidly disappearing, gulped down the last cooking apple, emitted a cider-smelling belch and rushed off after Septimus. He very nearly trampled Queen Etheldredda into the ground, but to Snorri’s dismay, she sidestepped the dragon just in time and carried on stalking Jenna.

Etheldredda was not about to give up. She might have missed her chance with the pistol, but she would *not* be thwarted—from now on she would **Follow** Jenna wherever she went. She had all the time in the world and her chance would surely come. Jenna only had to step too near the edge of a parapet, stand too close to a running horse, warm her hands beside a blazing fire...and she, Etheldredda, rightful Queen, would be there—*ready*.

As Jenna followed Marcia across the Palace lawn, she shivered and rubbed the back of her neck—it felt strangely cold. She glanced behind her but saw nothing.

Marcia stopped in the middle of the lawn between the Palace and the river. “Here will do,” she said. “Septimus, I need **Fyre**—now.”

“I don’t know how,” said Septimus, a little sulkily.

“I’ll show you, Sep,” Jenna said, fishing her Navigator Tin from her tunic pocket. She prised it open and offered Septimus the **Ignite**. Septimus did not look impressed, but he took the piece of dragon skin and examined it carefully. “Is that all you have to say?” he asked. “Just **Ignite**?”

Jenna nodded.

“You sure there’s not something missing, Jen?”

Jenna sighed. “Of course I’m sure,” she said, suppressing another shiver. “I did *do* it, you know.”

Septimus did not look convinced, but he took a deep breath, looked Spit Fyre in his red-ringed eye, and said in a loud voice, “**Ignite!**”

With plenty of fuel—the dragon’s fire stomach was still uncomfortably crammed with the Sacred Herd of Sarn—Spit Fyre was only too happy to oblige. Deep in his fire stomach a rumble began; it grew and grew, shaking the ground and filling the air with low, unsettling reverberations as the gases built up until they reached an unbearable pressure—and the fire valve opened.

With a rush that shocked Spit Fyre as much as anyone else, the gases shot from the dragon's flared nostrils, hit the air and **Ignited** into a roaring jet of flame.

Everyone jumped back. Queen Etheldredda rubbed her hands together with glee; she had not expected an opportunity to present itself quite so soon. What could be better than a quick stumble into the path of a dragon's **Fyre**? No one would be able to save Jenna in time. Not with flames like that. Who would have thought that the interfering Marcia Overstrand would have so thoughtfully provided her with such an early opportunity? Etheldredda hovered, waiting impatiently for Jenna to get just a little closer—just enough for one tiny push....

*Far away, across Time, Snorri was frantic. She **Saw** Etheldredda, she **Saw** the **Fyre** and **Called** to Ullr, but the orange cat, still stunned, did nothing.*

“Keep the **Fyre** going, Septimus!” Marcia yelled above the roar of the gases and flames. “And *now* for the **BoneFyre**. Stand back, everyone.”

Once again the **Magykal** haze surrounded Marcia. When the ExtraOrdinary Wizard was sure that her **Magyk** was complete and she was fully protected, she went up to Spit Fyre, the **Fyre** still pouring from his nostrils. The dragon looked at her warily through his red-ringed eyes, but he did not move. Then, to the amazement of Septimus and Jenna, Marcia put her hand into the jet of flame and **Took** a handful of **Fyre**. She rolled it between her hands until it looked like a great ball of red-hot dough, threw it high into the air and chanted:

“Pure Fyre

Burn higher

Make a Pyre,

A True BoneFyre”

Marcia's handful of **Fyre** exploded into a great fireball. With intense concentration Marcia guided the roaring ball of fire down until it was a few feet off the ground. There it hovered, burning with a brilliant orange flame and a deep purple center, casting long, dancing shadows across the lawn. The **BoneFyre** was ready.

Spit Fyre, his fire stomach exhausted, **Ceased** his own **Fyre**. As the roaring from the **BoneFyre** settled down, Septimus and Jenna drew closer to the flames to watch as Marcia began the second part of her plan—the **Fetch**. **UnSeen** by anyone, even Alther—who was too taken with his Alice to notice—Etheldredda's pointy features lit up with excitement. Jenna was once again within stumbling distance of the fire. Etheldredda stepped behind Jenna, her vicious hand hovering no more than a finger's breadth above Jenna's back, waiting for the right moment for that one final push.

*Only Snorri **Saw** the danger. "Ullr will not **Hear** me," she told Nicko. "But maybe there is once last thing.... I do not know if I can do it, but I have to try." And then Snorri did something she had never dared to do before. She **Summoned** a Spirit across Time. In the Hole in the Wall Tavern, the bemused ghost of Olaf Snorrelssen found himself being picked up, dragged through the throng of ghosts and, breaking all the rules of ghosthood, hurtling toward the Palace. And Snorri **Saw** her father for the very first time.*

Now, Etheldredda decided, was the time to send Jenna into the flames. Now. Etheldredda extended her hands—and Olaf Snorrelssen grabbed her wrists. He did not know why, but he did it anyway.

"Unhand me, vile oaf!" screamed Etheldredda. Nothing would have pleased Olaf Snorrelssen more than to let go of the sharp and bony Spirit, but he couldn't. *Something* would not let him. Jenna felt a strange prickling at the back of her neck. Again she glanced around, but she saw nothing of the battle being fought over her by the two ghosts. Despite the heat from the flames, she shivered and turned back to watch Marcia.

Marcia was now well into the **Fetch**. Through the purple light of the flames and the **Magykal** haze, Jenna saw the portrait of Queen Etheldredda and the Aie-Aie emerge through the walls of the turret. Marcia reeled it in like a protesting fish—twisting, flapping, flailing—drawing it unrelentingly toward the **BoneFyre**.

Etheldredda saw it too and, knowing exactly what was in store, she redoubled her efforts to break free of Olaf Snorrelssen's grasp. If she was going into the **BoneFyre**, she was not going alone—she would take Jenna with her. But Olaf Snorrelssen, who had been strong and wiry in his Lifetime, hung on to Queen Etheldredda's arms and not once did the queen get her chance to give Jenna that great shove she so longed to.

Now the portrait was hovering above the flames, resisting to the last. The purple haze around Marcia deepened, and suddenly a resounding *crack* echoed around the Palace walls—Marcia had won. The portrait gave up its fight, and with a great *whoosh* it was sucked into the **BoneFyre**. It exploded with a searing black flame. With a terrible shriek, Etheldredda joined it and was consumed by the **Fyre**.

Etheldredda the Awful was no more.

*Snorri laughed with relief. Reluctantly—for she would have liked to have **Seen** her father longer—she let Olaf Snorrelssen **Return** to the safety of the Hole in the Wall Tavern, where he sat bemused for many hours, nursing his beer and wondering why he had such a strong image in his head of a young girl who looked so much like his own dear Alfrún.*

But the **Fetch** was not finished. A small speck appeared in the sky above the Palace and a terrible wail pierced the air: “Aie aie aie aie!” Twisting and resisting, snake tail flailing, its red saucer eyes popping with panic, Etheldredda's Aie-Aie hurtled toward the **BoneFyre** and, with a terrible scream, joined its mistress in the flames.

Deep within the **BoneFyre**, something was happening. An intense golden glow could be seen in the center of the purple flames. Entranced, Jenna and Septimus watched until it was so bright that neither could look at it further. As they turned away, something rolled out of the Fyre. It landed in the grass with a soft thud and, to their amazement, they saw Etheldredda's crown bounce along the scorched grass and roll down the slope toward the river. Jenna raced after it, grabbed at the crown, missed—and the crown fell into the river with a great hiss of steam. Throwing herself to the ground, Jenna plunged her arms into the freezing water and caught the crown as it slowly sank to the riverbed.

Triumphant and dripping, holding the True Crown in her hands for the

first time, Jenna went and sat beside Silas, Alther, and Alice—who lay pale and peaceful on the landing stage. Nursing the crown, which felt surprisingly heavy in her hands, Jenna murmured, “Thank you, Alice. Thank you for saving me. I will always think of you when I put on this crown.”

“Alice did a wonderful thing,” said Silas, still shaken by what had happened. “But, er, maybe best not to tell your mother everything just yet?”

“She’ll find out soon enough, Silas,” said Alther. “It will be all over the Castle by the morning.”

“That’s what worries me,” said Silas gloomily. Then he smiled at Jenna. “But you’re back safe, that’s all that matters.”

Jenna said nothing. Suddenly she knew how Silas felt. She couldn’t tell him now. Not about Nicko. Not yet.

Marcia **Ceased** the **BoneFyre**. The strange purple glow of the flames subsided and twilight began to take its place. Marcia, Septimus, and Spit Fyre joined the somber group on the landing stage. Marcia took off her heavy winter cloak with its indigo fur lining, folded it and placed it gently under Alice’s head.

“How are you, Alther?” she asked.

Alther shook his head and did not reply.

Jenna sat quietly and looked at her crown. Even though it had spent years sitting on top of the disapproving head of Queen Etheldredda, the True Crown felt good in her hands—and as Jenna held it, the last ray of light from the setting sun caught the pure gold and the crown glowed as it never had when perched on Queen Etheldredda’s angry head.

“It is yours now, Jenna,” said Marcia. “You have the True Crown—the one that Etheldredda stole from her descendants.”

Darkness fell and, unnoticed by anyone, the black from the tip of the DayUllr’s tail spread slowly across the orange and changed him to the night creature that he really was. The NightUllr sat like the Sphinx, his green eyes seeing only what Snorri asked him to see.

*Far away, in another Time, Snorri Snorrelssen **Saw** Jenna holding her crown and knew that all was well. She released Ullr. “Go, Ullr,” she whispered. “Go with Jenna until the day I will return.”*

The NightUllr got up, padded out of the shadows and took his place beside Jenna. “Hello, Ullr, welcome back.” Jenna smiled, stroking the panther and scratching his ears. “Come with me, there’s something I want to do.”

As the Palace clock struck Midnight and the lights from a hundred and one candles—Jenna had placed one in every window of the Palace—lit up the night, they all stood on the landing stage and waved farewell to Alice, who had been placed in her Leaving Boat and was drifting slowly away. Alther sat quietly beside the new ghost of Alice Nettles, as he would continue to do for the next year and a day at that very spot—for under the Rules of Ghosthood, ghosts must spend a year and a day in the very place where they entered their ghosthood, and Alther had no intention of leaving Alice to do that on her own.

“Well,” Marcia sighed, as Alice’s Leaving Boat disappeared into the night, beginning its long journey to the Beyond. “What a day.... I hope you don’t have anything quite so exciting planned for tomorrow, Septimus.”

Septimus shook his head. It was not strictly true; he did have something exciting planned—but he figured that just then Marcia would not appreciate being told the details of how he was going to save Marcellus Pye from his fate worse than death and get his **Flyte** Charm back.

He kept it simple. He smiled at Marcia. “I’m going fishing,” he said.

THINGS
YOU MIGHT LIKE TO
KNOW ABOUT...

QUEEN ETHELDREDDA
AND THE PORTRAIT IN THE ATTIC

After Queen Etheldredda fell in the river she did not bother to try to save herself—why should she? She was keen to embark on eternal life right away. She lay gazing up to the surface of the water, and soon she began to wonder why she felt so strange: kind of hollow and not quite there. Increasingly impatient, she watched the bottom of the Royal Barge as the bargee waited for hours, not daring to leave in case he missed her.

Slowly it began to dawn on Etheldredda that Marcellus’s potion had not worked—she was nothing more than a common ghost. Unaware that the potion had worked to some extent and that she was in fact a **Substantial Spirit**—for it is hard to tell the difference at first—Etheldredda lay under the water, watching the shifting surface, and working up a temper.

Etheldredda’s temper was at the boiling point when Marcellus Pye at last located his mother. And so it was that, thirteen days after she had slipped into the river and drowned, Queen Etheldredda was **Called Up** by her son at midnight. Like a cork out of a bottle, Etheldredda burst from the black waters of the river and, kicking and screaming, she flew through the freezing night air, giant snowflakes **Passing Through** her and turning her watery insides to ice. Still protesting, she was pulled into the small room hidden under the eaves at the far end of the Palace attic, where Marcellus Pye and Julius Pike, the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, were waiting for her. There, between the black and red robes of the Alchemist and the purple cloak of the Wizard, she saw the life-size portrait of herself and her Aie-Aie.

Etheldredda knew enough about **Magyk** to know what was about to happen, but there was nothing she could do. Despite her kicking and biting, punching and scratching, Julius Pike and Marcellus Pye dragged the **Substantial Spirit** of Etheldredda into her likeness, where she joined the Aie-Aie, which Marcellus had captured and killed the previous day.

They propped the portrait up against the wall and **Sealed** the room. And there she and the Aie-Aie stayed, until Silas Heap **UnSealed** the room five hundred years later.

PRINCESS ESMERALDA

After Marcellus had **Sealed** Etheldredda into the portrait and was sure that her Spirit could do Esmeralda no harm, he went through the Queen's Way and told Esmeralda the news. At first Esmeralda was pleased that she was no longer in danger from her mother, until it dawned on her that her mother was actually dead. After that Esmeralda spent a long time wandering the Marram Marshes, thinking about her mother and her lost sisters. She refused to come back to the Castle and spent her teenage years living with Broda. But, when the Time was Right, Esmeralda did return and take her rightful place as Queen.

Esmeralda did her best to rule well, although she never quite got rid of the nervousness brought about by having Queen Etheldredda as a mother. She married a handsome and very steady farmer from the apple farm just across the One-Way Bridge and had two daughters, Daisy and Boo, who both became Queens in their turn, for Daisy had five sons but no daughters.

After the Great Alchemie disaster—when for seven days and nights she helped Marcellus with the **Sealing** of the Ice Tunnels—Esmeralda developed a headache and spent most of her time in the small sitting room at the back of the Palace with the curtains closed, while the very capable Princess Daisy took over the Palace.

THE CROWNS

For as long as there had been Queens in the Castle, the True Crown had graced their heads. It was reputed to have been made from the finest and most **Magykal** gold ever known—the golden thread spun by the Spiders of Aurum. It certainly predated Hotep-Ra, who had founded the Wizard Tower. But, with the demise of Etheldredda, the True Crown was lost and Etheldredda's

prediction came true—Esmeralda never did wear the True Crown.

But Esmeralda didn't care about that. The True Crown was gone, and good riddance to it. Esmeralda wanted a brand-new sparkly crown all her own and in the fashion of the day, which was rather overwrought. Esmeralda was her mother's daughter, and what Esmeralda wanted, Esmeralda got. She was crowned in the throne room of the Palace on a rainy MidSummer's day, and then, resplendent in her new Crown, went to see the Dragon Boat. The dragon raised an eyebrow at the sight of so many diamonds and gems but said nothing. For some time Esmeralda would not be parted from her crown and wore it everywhere, until she got a stiff neck and reluctantly took it off when she went to sleep.

It was this crown that, many hundreds of years later, the Supreme Custodian ran off with, leaving Jenna with no crown of her own—until the True Crown rolled out of the **BoneFyre** and found its rightful owner once more.

THE AIE-AIE

Etheldredda found the Aie-Aie in the Palace gardens when she was a little girl. The creature had jumped ship after realizing that the ship's cook was planning to boil it for supper in revenge for a nasty nip on the ankle the Aie-Aie had given him that morning. Later that night the cook became delirious, and the ship's crew went without supper. Three weeks later the cook died—for the Aie-Aie carried the Sickness in its bite.

But Etheldredda soon realized this and found the Aie-Aie to be a most useful weapon. Her mother was terrified of her new pet but dared do nothing, for Etheldredda (or Ethel-Dreadful, as she was known) wanted the Aie-Aie, and even when she was only nine years old, what Etheldredda wanted, Etheldredda got.

The Aie-Aie was a long-lived creature despite many surreptitious attempts on its life by numerous Palace servants. It was said that Etheldredda cared more for the Aie-Aie than she did for her own daughters—which was, of course, true.

THE BUMPTIOUS BARRELLE OF LARDE

Although the Bumptious Barrelle of Larde was not called that as a child, his

own name was almost as bad: Aloysius Umbrella! Tyresius Dupont. His second name was a mistake on the part of the Registrar at the naming ceremony, in response to a barked instruction from the infant Aloysius's father to his wife to take the umbrella off his foot.

The young Aloysius Umbrella! was an only child who always knew best. When he was ten his mother, tired of being told how to darn his socks properly, secured a job at the Palace for him as an UnderMessenger to the Fourth Secretary of the Keeper of the Royal Doorstop. There was no stopping Aloysius Umbrella! after that—he worked his way up through the complicated Palace hierarchy until he was himself the Keeper of the Royal Doorstop at the tender age of fourteen.

At the age of twenty, Aloysius Umbrella! stepped in as deputy Steward to Queen Etheldredda after the actual Steward had been laid low by a mysterious bout of food poisoning—one of many he had suffered since Aloysius Umbrella! had begun to sit next to him at the weekly Servants' Supper. The Steward never fully recovered and Aloysius Umbrella! was offered the post full-time. Although Aloysius Umbrella! was by then known as Bumptious, he did not acquire his full nickname until he had spent a further three years overindulging in Palace food.

After he fled the Palace in terror, having slapped Queen Etheldredda, Aloysius Umbrella! took the night boat to the Port and left on the first ship he could find. He spent the rest of his days in a small town in a very hot Far Country, where he worked as a drain inspector during the day and spent his evenings carefully ironing the tattered remains of his Palace ribbons.

THE TRUE GLASS OF TIME

In Ancient Times there were many True Glasses of Time, but over the centuries they became lost, destroyed or—like Marcellus's Glass—they disintegrated under the opposing forces of Time. By the time Marcellus Pye was a promising young Alchemist, all were lost.

Marcellus read all he could find about the Glasses of Time. He discovered many things: that you needed a linked pair, and that whatever happens to one will happen to the other. He also discovered that when you walk through one you find yourself in a place that has no Time, and to go into another Time you *must* go through the other of the pair. But nowhere could he discover the secret formula of Time.

Marcellus became obsessed with discovering the formula, and after three years of searching he had a stroke of luck. One wet winter's afternoon, when he was meant to be visiting his mother, he stumbled across it in an ancient text buried under a dingy stack of books at the back of the Manuscriptorium. Marcellus memorized the formula and immediately burned it in the flame of his candle, for he wanted no one else to discover the secret. He soon regretted this, for the first two Glasses he made did not work properly. They merely transported him through a solid wall, which, though marvellous in itself, was not enough for Marcellus, whose ambition was to move freely through Time.

Marcellus decided that even so, these Glasses could be useful. He **Locked** each Glass so that only his **Key** could control it and put them in ornate gilded frames. He gave one to his mother as a peace offering after one of their frequent arguments. Etheldredda did not care for it; she put the Glass in her Robing Room and promptly forgot about it. It was this Glass that Septimus was dragged through.

Marcellus gave the other to the Chief Scribe of the Manuscriptorium, who was a vain man and was thrilled to have his own looking glass—an incredibly expensive item in those times. He did not realize that Marcellus was using it to secretly gain access to the Hermetic Chamber. This was the Glass through which Jenna, Ullr, and Septimus returned to their own Time.

After these two disappointments, Marcellus locked himself in his room and hypnotized himself until he remembered every last nuance of the formula for the True Glass of Time—or so he thought. In a daring innovation, Marcellus fused the pair of Glasses together, and they worked. The True Glass of Time was huge, immensely fragile—and dangerous. After Marcellus installed it in the Great Chamber of Physik he sent a number of scribes through but none returned. After his best friend disappeared through it, Marcellus decided not to risk using it himself and **Locked** the doors.

Now Marcellus was getting confident. He started to experiment. He wanted something light and transportable that he could use to gather secrets from the **Darke** Alchemists in the Lands of the Long Nights. After the passage of an auspicious number of days—one hundred and sixty-nine (thirteen times thirteen)—Marcellus successfully made a matched pair of Glasses. Keeping one at the Castle, he secretly sent the other through the Queen's Way to his wife, Broda Pye, with instructions for Broda to get it to the Port. Marcellus traveled to the port and supervised the Glass being loaded onto his ship—but while he slept, his first night on board, the Glass was promptly unloaded by the unscrupulous, debt-ridden captain and sold to

Drago Mills as a Luxury Novelty Glass. Unaware that he had been double crossed, Marcellus traveled all the way to the Lands of the Long Nights and did not discover the deception until the hold was emptied. Furious, he returned to the Port, intent on reclaiming his property, only to find that it was impounded in Warehouse Number Nine. Try as he might, Marcellus could not get it back. This was the Glass that Jenna, Nicko, Snorri, and Ullr went into—and Spit Fyre smashed.

The other Glass from the matched pair, which Marcellus had kept in the Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik, ready to take him to any Time in the Land of the Long Nights, was of no use to him. Marcellus put it away in a cupboard in disgust. Years later the cupboard found its way to the Palace, where it was used as the UnderCooks' coat cupboard. It was this Glass that Jenna, Nicko, Snorri, and Ullr came out of and stepped into Marcellus's Time.

After this Marcellus made no more Glasses. He decided he preferred gold—at least you knew where you were with gold.

HUGO TENDERFOOT

Hugo never forgot Septimus and the time Septimus had spent patiently teaching him all he had learned about **Physik**. After Sir Hereward had taken him home and his mother had been so relieved to see him, Hugo realized that his family did care for him after all, and he became much more confident. When Marcellus Pye found Hugo reading a **Physik** book when he was meant to be on door duty, instead of being angry he took Hugo on as his Apprentice. Hugo did indeed become a talented Physician—although he never managed to cure Esmeralda's headaches.

SNORRI'S MOTHER

Alfrún Snorrelssen came from a long line of Traders and so she was used to the yearly exodus of ships and Traders to the Small Wet Country Across the Sea. Every year after the first frost—and frost came early in those dark northern latitudes—the Trader's barges would set off laden with furs, spices, wool, tar, trinkets and trifles. They would not return until well after MidWinter Feast Day. Alfrún Snorrelssen always knew when her Olaf would return, and as the time drew near her friends would begin to ask, "Alfrún, Alfrún, can you **See** the ships yet?" And Alfrún always could. But the year that Olaf Snorrelssen went away for the last time, when Alfrún's friends asked, "Alfrún, Alfrún, can you **See** the ships yet?" Alfrún shook her head.

Even when the fleet of Trader's barges had appeared on the gray wintry horizon, still Alfrún shook her head, but this time in despair, for she knew that her Olaf was never coming back.

Alfrún gave her baby daughter the name that Olaf had chosen and named in his Letter of Charters. No matter that Olaf had been convinced that his child would be a boy; Alfrún honored his wishes and called the baby Snorri.

Snorri grew up surrounded by various aunts, uncles, grandmothers and cousins. She was a happy, bubbly child, and it was only when, at the age of thirteen, she found her father's Letters of Charter naming Snorri as his Successor to Trade that she became dissatisfied. Snorri had never given her father much thought before, but now she longed to sail in his path, tread in his footsteps through the Castle of the Small Wet Country Across the Sea and, most of all, drink Springo Special in the fabled Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House. And as a Spirit-Seer, she also longed to see his ghost.

When Snorri told her mother of her intention to Trade in the coming season, Alfrún Snorrelssen was aghast. She told her daughter of the dangers of the sea, she told her she was too young to Trade, that she was a girl and girls did not Trade, and besides, what did Snorri know about the price of fur and the quality of woolen cloth?

Snorri knew nothing, but she could learn. And when her mother found her stack of Traders' Manuals shoved under her bed and threw them into the tiled stove, Snorri took Ullr and stormed out of their little wooden house on the harbor and went to the *Alfrún*. Her mother guessed where she was and let her be, thinking that spending a cold night on an uncomfortable barge would bring Snorri to her senses and she would be back in the morning. But by morning Snorri was sailing out on the ebbing tide. She caught the southerly wind and was soon heading down the coast to pick up her very first cargo as a Trader. Alfrún Snorrelssen was distraught—she sent a fast pilot gig after Snorri, but there was a brisk wind that morning, and although the rowers of the gig had sight of the barge, they had no chance of catching up with it. Her daughter was gone, and Alfrún Snorrelssen blamed no one but herself.

SNORRI'S FATHER

When Olaf Snorrelssen knew that he and Alfrún were expecting their first child he was thrilled. He took his Letters of Charter to the League Office and insisted that they name his first child, Snorri, as his Successor. And then, promising Alfrún that this would be his last trip until the child was old

enough to go with him, with a heavy heart, Olaf Snorrelssen set off to Trade.

He arrived late at the Castle of the Small, Wet Country Across the Sea and did not get a good pitch at the Traders' Market. That night Olaf went to the Grateful Turbot (one of the Traders' favorite hostelries just outside the Castle) to drown his sorrows in the way that Northern Traders traditionally did, and as a consequence were banned from most Castle hostelries. Returning alone across the One-Way Bridge, Olaf Snorrelssen stumbled and hit his head on the parapet. He was found, dead and frozen, the next morning by a farmer on his way to market.

The ghost of Olaf Snorrelssen lingered at the bridge for a year and a day, as all ghosts must do at the scene of their entry into ghosthood. He chose not to **Appear** to anyone, but a nasty chill settled over the bridge, and many people claimed to feel quite depressed after crossing it. The Grateful Turbot Tavern nearly went out of business, as people became reluctant to cross the One-Way Bridge after dark. As soon as his year and a day was completed, Olaf Snorrelssen wafted away to the Hole in the Wall Tavern, and there he stayed.

THE ALFRÚN

The *Alfrún* languished at the Quarantine Dock all through the long winter months, where she acquired the forlorn air and the damp smell of neglected boats. When Jenna found out where the barge was she asked Jannit Maarten to bring her to the Castle boatyard. But before Jannit had got around to doing it, the *Alfrún* was gone.

WOLF BOY

When Wolf Boy left the *Alfrún*, he paddled across the river and found Sam Heap laughing at the sight of him frantically turning the paddles of the pink paddleboat. He got a warm welcome at Camp Heap, where the other Heap brothers lived, and despite the endless variety of jokes about his taste in boats, Wolf Boy was pleased to be back. However, he was disappointed that he could persuade none of the Heap brothers to help him find Septimus. Knowing that his own skills as a tracker were not going to help him find his old friend 412, for there had been no trail to pick up, Wolf Boy decided that Aunt Zelda would have the answer. He took his much-derided pink paddleboat down the river to the Port and then set off along the Causeway, which led to the Marram Marshes. Here Wolf Boy's tracking skills came in

useful. He followed the trail of the Boggart and arrived safely at Aunt Zelda's, where he discovered Jenna, who had just come through the Queen's Way to return the silver pistol to Aunt Zelda.

Wolf Boy stayed with Aunt Zelda. She stopped trying to teach him to read and began telling him about the things he really wanted to know—about the moon and stars, herbs and potions, and everything to do with White Witch lore. Wolf Boy was an eager and talented pupil, and it was not long before Aunt Zelda began to wonder if it would be possible to break with tradition and nominate Wolf Boy as her successor as Keeper.

LUCY GRINGE

Lucy Gringe arrived safely at the Port in Nicko's row boat. It was nearly midnight, and she tied the boat up to the harbor wall, curled up in Simon's cloak and tried to sleep.

The next morning, Lucy bought a pie from the Harbor and Dock Pie Shop. Maureen, who owned the shop, noticed how pale and cold Lucy looked and offered her a place by the fire in the kitchen to sit and eat her pie. Lucy was ravenous, and bought two more pies in quick succession plus three mugs of hot chocolate, downed everything, then fell asleep by the fire. Maureen left her to sleep, and later that day Lucy returned the favor by washing the pie dishes and serving in the shop. Maureen liked Lucy and was grateful for the help. She offered Lucy a bed in the corner of the kitchen and her keep in return for her efforts. Lucy accepted, glad of somewhere warm and friendly to stay with a steady supply of customers to ask if they had seen Simon.

To Lucy's disappointment, none of the customers had seen Simon, but late one night when she was sitting by the dying embers of the fire, Lucy saw a rat in the corner nibbling at the crumbs that her broom had missed. Lucy liked rats and did not chase it away as she knew Maureen would want her to. She watched the rat for a few minutes and then whispered, "Stanley?"

The rat looked shocked. "What?" it said.

"Stanley. You're Stanley, aren't you?" asked Lucy. "Remember, I fed you biscuits after Dad locked me up—you're a bit fatter than you were then."

"You're none too thin yourself, Lucy Gringe," Stanley retorted—and this was true, for Lucy did not hold herself back on the pies.

And this was how, at long last, Lucy Gringe found her way to Simon Heap. For Stanley, ex-Message Rat and member of the Secret Rat Service, knew where Simon was—although it took many talks at cross-purposes and many long hours of listening to Stanley’s reminiscences before Lucy discovered exactly what Stanley knew. The Big Freeze had already set in when Stanley at last agreed to take Lucy to the Badlands, and it was not until the spring of the following year that they actually set off. By late spring, Lucy and Simon were reunited at last.

About the Authors

ANGIE SAGE was born in London and grew up in the Thames Valley, London, and Kent. She lives in a fifteenth-century house in the west of England, which is a Magykal place full of history. She is also the author of the Araminta Spookie series. The first three books in the Septimus Heap series are international bestsellers.

MARK ZUG has loved fantasy novels since he was a teenager. He has illustrated many collectible card games, including *Magic: The Gathering* and *Dune*, as well as books and magazines. He lives in Pennsylvania.

Visit www.septimusheap.com or Magykal games and more!

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.

ALSO BY ANGIE SAGE

*Septimus Heap, Book One: **Magyk***

*Septimus Heap, Book Two: **Flyte***

*Septimus Heap, Book Four: **Queste***

*Araminta Spookie: **My Haunted House***

*Araminta Spookie: **The Sword in the Grotto***

*Araminta Spookie: **Frognapped***

*Araminta Spookie: **Vampire Brat***

Credits

Cover art © 2007 by Mark Zug

Copyright

SEPTIMUS HEAP BOOK THREE: PHYSIK. Text Copyright © 2007 by Angie Sage. Illustrations © 2007 by Mark Zug. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

ePub Edition 2008 ISBN 9780061757075

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
25 Ryde Road (PO Box 321)
Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com.au>

Canada

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900
Toronto, ON, M5R, 3L2, Canada
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.uk>

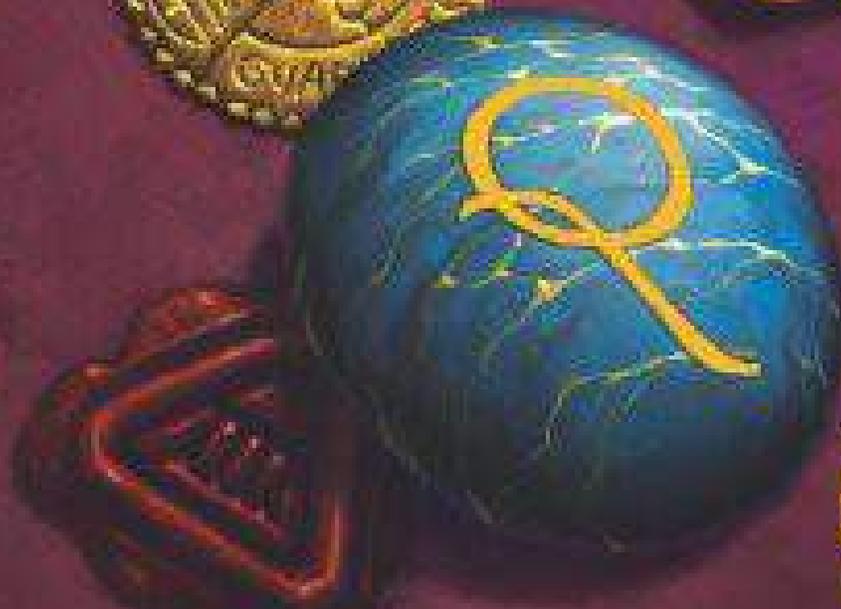
United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com>

SEPTIMUS HEAP

✦ BOOK FOUR ✦

Queste



VISIT
www.septimusheap.com
FOR MAGICAL
GAMES AND
MORE!

ANGIE SAGE

National Bestselling Author

 HarperCollins e-books

Septimus Heap

Book Four

Queste

Angie Sage

Illustrations by Mark Zug

For Katherine,

my editor—

thank you

Contents

Map

Prologue: Nicko and Snorri

1 Nicko's Release

2 Free!

3 The Darke Index

4 Out of the Badlands

5 The Grateful Turbot

6 Into the Castle

7 In Charge

8 The Vaults

- 9 A Room with a View
- 10 Dragon Management
- 11 Dragon-Watcher
- 12 Terry Tarsal
- 13 Wizard Sled
- 14 The House on Snake Slipway
- 15 In the Attic
- 16 Snorri's Map
- 17 Trouble
- 18 In Pieces
- 19 Mr. Ephaniah Grebe
- 20 ReUnite
- 21 Tertius Fume
- 22 Fired
- 23 The Projection
- 24 The Gathering
- 25 Siege
- 26 On the Run
- 27 Message Rats
- 28 The Questing Boat

- 29 Silas's Search
- 30 Promised
- 31 Camp Heap
- 32 Night Crossings
- 33 Breakfast
- 34 Forest Ways
- 35 Snow
- 36 The Hut
- 37 An Invitation
- 38 Tracked Down
- 39 Under the Snow
- 40 The Edge of the Abyss
- 41 The Toll-Man
- 42 ReUnited
- 43 The Bridge
- 44 The DoorKeeper
- 45 The House of Foryx
- 46 Ullr's Quest
- 47 Septimus's Queste
- 48 Door to Door

49 In Time

Endings and Beginnings...



About the Authors

Other Books by Angie Sage

Credits

Copyright

About the Publisher

Map

PROLOGUE:

NICKO AND SNORRI



It is the weekly market

on Wizard Way. A girl and a boy have stopped at a pickled herring stall. The boy has fair hair, twisted and braided in the style that sailors will be wearing sometime in the distant future. His green eyes have a serious, almost sad expression, and he is trying to persuade the girl to let him buy her some herring.

The girl, too, has fair hair, but hers is almost white. It is straight and long, held in place with a leather headband, the kind worn by Northern Traders. Her pale blue eyes look at the boy. “No,” she tells him. “I cannot eat it. It will remind me too much of home.”

“But you love herring,” he says.

The stallholder is an elderly woman with pale blue eyes like the girl. She has not sold a single herring all morning and she is determined not to let a chance of a sale go by. "If you love herring, you must try this," she tells the girl. "This is done the proper way. It's how herring should be pickled." She cuts a piece, sticks a small pointy wooden stick into it and hands it to the girl.

"Go on, Snorri," says the boy, almost pleading. "Try it. Please." Snorri smiles. "All right, Nicko. For you, I will try it."

"It is good?" asks the stallholder.

"It is good, Old Mother," says Snorri. "Very good."

Nicko is thinking. He is thinking that the stallholder speaks like Snorri. She has the same lilting accent and she does not have the Old Speak patterns that he and Snorri have become used to in the few months they have already spent in this Time. "Excuse me," he says. "Where are you from?"

A wistful look comes into the old woman's eyes. "You would not understand," she tells him.

Nicko persists. "But you are not from here," he says. "I can tell by the way you speak. You speak like Snorri here." He puts his arm around Snorri's shoulders and she blushes.

The old woman shrugs. "It is true I am not from here. I am from farther away than you could possibly imagine." Now Snorri is looking at the old woman too. She begins to speak in her own language, the language of her Time.



The old woman's eyes light up at hearing her own tongue spoken as she had spoken it as a child. "Yes," she says in reply to Snorri's tentative question. "I am Ells. Ells Larusdottir." Snorri speaks again and the old woman replies warily. "Yes, I do—or did—have a sister called Herdis. How do you know? Are you one of those thought-snatchers?"

Snorri shakes her head. "No," she says, still in her own language. "But I am a Spirit-Seer. As was my grandmother Herdis Larusdottir. And my mother, Alfrún, who was not yet born when my great-aunt Ells disappeared through the Glass."

Nicko wonders what Snorri could possibly be saying to make the old woman grip her flimsy stall table with such ferocity that her knuckles go white. Although Snorri has been teaching him her language, she spoke to the old woman much faster than he was used to and the only word he recognized was "mother." And this is how it happens that Great-aunt Ells takes Nicko and Snorri to her tall, thin house in the Castle walls, throws a log into her tiled stove and tells them her story. Many hours later Snorri and Nicko leave Great-aunt Ells's house full of pickled herring and hope. Most precious of all, they have a map showing the way to the House of Foryx, the Place Where All Times Do Meet. That evening Snorri makes two copies of

the map and gives one to Marcellus Pye, the Alchemist in whose house they are staying. For the next few weeks their days are full of plans as they prepare for their journey into the unknown.

It is a gray and rainy day when Marcellus Pye stands on the Castle Quay and waves their boat farewell. He wonders if he will ever see them again. He is still wondering.

1

NICKO'S RELEASE

J annit Maarten, boatbuilder, was on her way to the Palace.

Jannit, a lean, spare woman with a long stride and a sailor's pigtail, had never in her strangest dreams thought that she would one day be tying up her rowboat at Snake Slipway and heading for the Palace Gates. But, on a chilly gray spring day, here she was, doing just that—and feeling more than a little apprehensive.

Some minutes later Hildegarde, the sub-Wizard on door duty at the Palace, looked up from her night-school assignment titled “The Politics, Principles and Practice of Transformation.” She saw Jannit hesitantly walking over the wide plank bridge that spanned the ornamental moat and led to the Palace doors. Happy to have a break, Hildegarde jumped to her feet with a smile and said, “Good morning, Miss Maarten. How may I help you?”

“You know my name!” said Jannit, amazed.

Hildegarde did not tell Jannit that she made it her business to know everyone's name. Instead she said, “Of course I do, Miss Maarten. Your boatyard repaired my sister's boat last year. She was very pleased with the work.” Jannit had no idea who this sub-Wizard's sister could possibly be, but she could not help wondering what boat it was.

Jannit remembered boats. She smiled awkwardly and took off her battered sailor's boater, which she had worn especially for her visit to the Palace—it was Jannit's equivalent of a party frock and tiara.

“Ladies are welcome to keep their hats on,” said Hildegarde.

“Oh?” said Jannit, wondering what that had to do with her. Jannit did not think of herself as a lady.

“Is there someone you wish to see?” Hildegarde prompted, quite used to tongue-tied visitors.

Jannit twisted her boater around in her hands. “Sarah Heap,” she said. “Please.”

“I will send a messenger. May I tell her what it is you wish to see her about?” After a long pause Jannit replied. “Nicko Heap,” she said, staring at her hat.

“Ah. Please take a seat for a moment, Miss Maarten. I will find someone to take you to her right away.” Ten minutes later Sarah Heap, thinner than she had been but still in possession of the usual quota of Heap straw-colored curls, was at the small table in her sitting room. She gazed at Jannit with worried green eyes.

Jannit was perched on the edge of a large sofa. Although Jannit felt ill at ease, this was not the reason she was on the edge of her seat. It was because that was the only space left on the sofa—the rest was covered with the clutter that always seemed to follow Sarah Heap. With a couple of plant pots digging into her back and a teetering pile of towels settling cozily up against her, Jannit sat up very straight and then almost jumped off the sofa as a soft quacking came from a pile of clothes beside the fire. To Jannit’s amazement, a pink-skinned, stubble-covered duck wearing a multicolored crocheted waistcoat emerged from the pile, waddled over and sat beside her feet.

Sarah clicked her fingers. “Come here, Ethel,” she said to the duck. The duck got up and went to Sarah, who picked it up and sat it on her lap. “One of Jenna’s creatures,” Sarah said with a smile. “She never was one for pets and suddenly she has two. Strange. I don’t know where she got them from.”

Jannit smiled politely, unsure how to begin telling Sarah what she had to say. There was an awkward silence and at last she said, “Um. Well...it’s a big place you have here.”

“Oh, yes. Very big,” said Sarah.

“Wonderful for a large family,” said Jannit, immediately wishing she hadn’t.

“If they want to live with you,” said Sarah bitterly. “But not

if four of them have decided to live in the Forest with a coven of witches and they refuse to come home, even for a visit.

And then of course there’s Simon. I know he’s done wrong, but he’s still my first baby. I miss him so much; I would love to have him living here. It’s time he settled down. He could do a lot worse than Lucy Gringe, whatever his father says. There’s plenty of room for them all here—and children, too. And then there’s my little Septimus. We’ve been apart all these years and there he is, stuck at the top of that Wizard Tower with Marcia Fusspot Overstrand, who whenever she sees me has the nerve

to ask if I am enjoying seeing so much of Septimus. I suppose she thinks it’s some kind of joke, since I hardly ever see him now. In fact ever since Nicko...”

“Ah,” said Jannit, seizing her chance. “Nicko. That’s what—well, I expect you can guess why I’m here.”

“No,” said Sarah, who could but didn’t want to even think about it.

“Oh.” Jannit looked down at her boater and then, very purposefully, put it on top of a pile of something behind her.

Sarah’s heart sank. She knew what was coming.

Jannit cleared her throat and began. “As you know, Nicko has been gone for six months now and as far as I understand, no one knows where he is or

when—indeed, if—he is ever coming back. In fact—and I am very sorry to say this—I have heard that he will never return.”

Sarah caught her breath. No one had dared to say this to her face before.

“I am very sorry to have to come here like this, Madam Heap, but—”

“Oh, it’s Sarah. Please, just call me Sarah.”

“Sarah. Sarah, I am sorry, but we cannot struggle on without Nicko any longer. The summer season is looming, when even more foolhardy idiots will be putting to sea to try and catch a few herring. They’ll all be wanting their boats ready, plus the fact that the Port barge is in for repair again

after this month’s storms—well, we are facing our busiest time. I’m so sorry, but while Nicko is still apprenticed to me, according to the Boatbuilders Association training regulations—which are an absolute minefield, but I do have to abide by them—I cannot engage anyone else. I urgently need a new apprentice, especially as Rupert Gringe is nearing the end of his Articles soon.”

Sarah Heap clasped her hands together tightly, and Jannit noticed that her fingernails were bitten down to the quick.

Sarah was trembling and did not speak for some seconds. Then, just as Jannit thought she would have to break the silence, Sarah said, “He will

come back. I don’t believe they went back in Time—no one can do that. Jenna and Septimus just thought they did. It was some wicked, wicked spell. I keep asking Marcia to figure it out. She could Find Nicko, I know she could, but she’s done nothing. Nothing. It’s all a complete nightmare!” Sarah’s voice rose in despair.

“I’m so sorry,” Jannit murmured. “I really am.”

Sarah took a deep breath and tried to calm down. “It’s not your fault, Jannit. You were very good to Nicko. He loved working for you. But of course you must find another apprentice, although I would ask you one thing.”

“Of course,” replied Jannit.

“When Nicko returns, will you renew his apprenticeship?”

“I would be delighted to.” Jannit smiled, pleased that Sarah had asked for something she could readily agree to. “Even if I have a new apprentice, Nicko would step straight into Rupert’s shoes and become my senior apprentice—or journeyman as we call it down at the yard.”

Sarah smiled wistfully. “That would be wonderful,” she said.

“And now”—this was the part Jannit had been dreading—“I am afraid I must trouble you to sign the Release.” Jannit stood up to pull a roll of parchment from her coat pocket, and the pile of towels, suddenly losing their support, fell down and took her place.

Jannit cleared a space on the table and unrolled the long piece of parchment that formed Nicko’s apprentice Indentures.

She secured it top and bottom with whatever came to hand—a well-thumbed novel called *Love on the High Seas* and a large bag of biscuits.

“Oh.” Sarah caught her breath at the sight of Nicko’s spidery signature—along with her own and Jannit’s—at the foot of the parchment.

Hastily, Jannit placed the Release—a small slip of parchment—over the signatures and said, “Sarah, as one of the parties who signed the Indentures, I have to ask you to sign the Release. I have a pen if you...if you can’t find one.” Sarah couldn’t find one. She took the pen and ink bottle that Jannit had taken from her other coat pocket, dipped the pen in the ink and—feeling as though she was signing Nicko’s life away—she signed the parchment. A tear dripped onto the ink and smudged it; both Jannit and Sarah pretended not to notice.

Jannit signed her own signature next to Sarah’s; then she took a needle threaded with thick sail cotton from her bottomless coat pocket and sewed the Release over the original signatures.

Nicko Heap was no longer apprenticed to Jannit Maarten.

Jannit snatched up the hat balanced behind her and fled. It was only when she reached her boat that she realized she had taken Sarah's gardening hat, but she stuffed it on her head regardless and rowed slowly back to her boatyard.

Silas Heap and Maxie the wolfhound found Sarah in her herb garden. Sarah was, for some reason Silas did not understand, wearing a sailor's boater. She also had Jenna's duck with her. Silas was not keen on the duck—the stubble gave him goose bumps when he looked at it and he thought the crocheted waistcoat was a sign that Sarah was going a little crazy.

“Oh, there

you are,” he said, heading along the neatly tended grass path toward the bed of mint that Sarah was absentmindedly poking at. “I've been looking everywhere for you.”

Sarah gave Silas a wan half smile in reply, and as Silas and Maxie plowed through the defenseless patch of mint, she did not venture even a small protest. Silas, like Sarah, looked careworn. His straw-colored Heap curls had recently acquired a gray dusting of salt and pepper, his blue Ordinary Wizard robes hung loosely from him, and his silver Ordinary Wizard belt was pulled in a notch or two more than usual. Accompanied by the heady smell of crushed mint, Silas reached Sarah and launched straight into his prepared speech.

“You're not going to like this,” he said, “but my mind is made up. Maxie and I are going into the Forest and we're not coming out until we've found him.”

Sarah picked up the duck and hugged it tightly to her. It let out a strangled quack. “You are a pig-headed fool,” she said.

“How many times have I told you that if you would only get Marcia to do something about this horrible Darke Magyk that has trapped Nicko

somewhere, then he'd be back in a moment. But you won't. You go on and on about the stupid Forest—”

Silas sighed. “I told you, Marcia says it's not Darke Magyk. There's no point asking her over and over again.” Sarah glowered so Silas tried another tack. “Look, Sarah, I can't just do nothing, it's driving me crazy. It's been six months now since Jenna and Septimus came back without Nicko and I'm not waiting any longer. You had the same dream as I did. You know it means something.”

Sarah remembered the dream she had had a few months after Nicko disappeared. He was walking through a forest deep in snow; it was twilight and in front of him a yellow light shone through the trees. There was a girl beside him, a little taller and older than he was, Sarah thought. The girl had long, white-blond hair and was wrapped in a wolfskin pelt. She pointed to the light ahead. Nicko took the girl's hand and together they hurried toward the light. At that moment Silas had started snoring and Sarah had woken up with a jolt. The next morning Silas had excitedly described a dream he had had about Nicko. To Sarah's amazement it was identical to hers.

Since that moment Silas had become convinced that Nicko was in the Forest and he wanted to go search for him. But Sarah had disagreed. The forest in the dream was not, she had told Silas, the Castle Forest. It was different, she was sure of that. Silas, in turn, had also disagreed. He knew the Forest, he said—and he was sure it was the Castle Forest.

In their time together Sarah and Silas did not always agree, but they would quickly resolve their differences, often when Silas brought home a few wildflowers or herbs for Sarah as a peace offering. But this time there was no peace offering.

Silas and Sarah's arguments about forests became increasingly bitter and they soon lost sight of the real reason for their unhappiness: Nicko's disappearance.

But now Silas had just bumped into the departing Jannit Maarten, who was carrying Nicko's ex-Apprentice Indentures.

He had made his mind up. He was going into the Forest to find Nicko and no one was going to stop him—particularly Sarah.

2

FREE!



Feed the Magogs, do not touch

Sleuth, and don't go nosing around my room. Got that?" Simon Heap told his scowling assistant, Merrin Meredith.

"Yeah, yeah," sulked Merrin, who was sitting listlessly on the one comfortable chair in the Observatory. His dark, straggly hair hung limply over his face, masking a large pimple in the middle of his forehead that had sprung up overnight.

"You got that?" asked Simon crossly.

"I said

‘yeah,’ didn’t I?” mumbled Merrin, swinging his long, gangly legs so that his feet hit the chair with an irritating regularity.

“And you better keep the place tidy,” Lucy Gringe told him. “I don’t want to come back to a complete mess.” Merrin jumped up and made a mock bow to Lucy. “Yes, Your Ladyship. Can I do anything else for you, Your Ladyship?”

Lucy Gringe giggled.

Simon Heap frowned. “Come on, Lucy,” he said irritably. “If you want to get to the Port before nightfall, that is.”

“Wait a minute, I’ve just got to find my—”

“I’ve got your bag and your cloak. Come on, Luce.” Simon strode across the Observatory, his footsteps sounding hollow on the black slate, and disappeared through the granite arch that led to the stairs. “And, Merrin—don’t do anything stupid.” Simon’s voice echoed up the stairs.

Merrin kicked the chair angrily and a cloud of dust and disturbed moths flew out. He was not stupid. He was not, not, not

stupid. Merrin had spent the first ten years of his life being called stupid by his old master, DomDaniel, and he had had enough of it. Merrin had been mistakenly known as Septimus Heap for all those years, but however hard he had tried, he had been a poor substitute for the real Septimus.

DomDaniel never did realize the mistake—or the reason why his hapless Apprentice never managed to do anything right.

Scowling, Merrin threw himself back into the old armchair. He watched Lucy Gringe, plaits and ribbons flying, rush around, gathering up her last-minute bits and pieces.

At last Lucy was ready. She snatched up the multicolored scarf that she had knitted for Simon during the long winter evenings in the Harbor and Dock Pie Shop and ran after him. As she, too, disappeared under the gloomy

granite archway, she gave Merrin a little wave. Merrin lost his scowl and waved back. Lucy always managed to make him smile.

Happy to be away from what she considered to be the creepiest place on earth, Lucy did not give Merrin another thought as he listened to the hollow sound of her boots beginning the long descent to the cold, damp, Wurm-slimed burrow where Simon's horse, Thunder, was stabled.

As the sound of Lucy's boots faded away into the distance and a heavy silence replaced it, Merrin sprang into action. He seized a long pole and quickly began lowering the black blinds that covered the skylight at the top of the room—it poked up from the rough grass and rocky outcrops at the top of the tall slate cliffs, the only part of the Observatory visible aboveground. As Merrin pulled down blind after blind, the huge room slowly darkened until a dim twilight reigned.

Merrin went over to the Camera Obscura—a large, concave dish that filled the center of the circular room—and gazed at it with a rapt expression. What had been a blank white dish in the early-morning sun streaming through the skylight was now transformed to show a beautifully detailed, colorful scene. Entranced, he watched a line of sheep silently amble along the cliff top above the ravine, the pink clouds of the sunrise drifting slowly behind them.

Merrin reached up, took hold of a long pole hanging down from the center of the skylight, and began to turn it. A protesting squeak started up from a small bonnet at the apex of the skylight, which held the lens that focused the scene onto the dish below. As Merrin slowly turned the bonnet through a full circle, the picture before him changed, showing a silent panorama of the outside world. Merrin took a turn through the whole 360 degrees just for fun and then sought out the spot he wished to watch. He let go of the pole, the squeaking stopped and, pushing his straggly black hair out of his eyes, Merrin leaned forward and stared intently at the scene before him.

The dish showed a long, winding path that snaked down between rocky outcrops. A deep ravine could be seen to its right, and sheer slate cliffs to the left, broken only by an occasional rock fall or cascade of gravel. Patiently Merrin waited until at last he saw Thunder come into view. The

horse slowly picked his way along the path, carefully guided by Simon, his black cloak wrapped around him against the early-morning chill. He was muffled in Lucy's scarf, the end of which she had also wound around her own neck. Lucy sat behind Simon, swathed in her precious blue cloak, her arms clasped tightly around his waist.

Merrin grinned as he watched the horse travel silently across the dish. He was, he said to himself, seeing them off the premises. As he watched Thunder's slow progress, Merrin congratulated himself on having engineered the whole thing.

From the moment Lucy Gringe had arrived a couple of weeks ago—accompanied by an immensely irritating rat that Merrin had also seen off the premises with a well-aimed kick—Merrin had started planning. His opportunity arose sooner than he had expected. Lucy wanted a ring—and not any old ring either. A diamond ring.

Merrin had been surprised at how quickly Simon had agreed to Lucy's way of thinking about many things—even diamond rings. Seizing his chance, Merrin had suggested that he could look after the Observatory while Simon took Lucy to the Port to find a ring. Simon said yes, as he had in mind a visit to Drago Mills's warehouse clearance sale, which the rat had talked about at length. It had started the week previously due to the death of the owner of the warehouse, and was apparently full of the most amazing bargains. Lucy Gringe, however, had other ideas. She had already decided on the perfect ring and it was definitely not from Drago Mills's warehouse clearance sale.

At last Merrin's patience was rewarded by the sight of Thunder carrying his two riders off the edge of the dish. As the horse's tail disappeared Merrin let out a loud whoop. At last, at long last—after spending his whole life being told what to do by someone else—he was free!

3

THE DARKE INDEX



From its hiding place under his mattress, Merrin pulled out a slim, dog-eared, leather-covered book with the title *The Darke Index*

just visible in faded black letters. He grinned. At last he could read this without having to hide it from nosy-parker Simon Heap and the annoying Lucy. She was even worse than Simon and spent most of her time saying things like:

“What are you doing, Merrin?” and “What’s that you’re reading, Merrin? Show me. Oh, go on, don’t be so sulky, Merrin.”

Ever since Merrin had found the book at the back of a dusty cupboard that Simon had made him clean out, he had been fascinated by it. *The Darke Index*

spoke to Merrin in his own language. He understood the spells, the rules—and he particularly liked the section that told him how to break the rules. Here was a book written by someone Merrin could understand.

At night, in his small cell, curtained off from the Observatory (because Jenna had once turned the door into chocolate), he would take a tube of Glo Grubs and read for hours under his covers. Simon had noticed the light and teased him about being afraid of the dark, but for once Merrin did not rise to the provocation. It suited him that Simon asked no more questions about the light that glowed on into the early hours of the morning. If Simon wanted to think that, let him.

One day Simon Heap would find out that Merrin was most definitely not afraid of the dark—or, more to the point—the Darke.

Now, Merrin lit all the candles he could find—Simon was stingy with candles and only allowed one to be lit at a time—and he placed them all around the huge, circular chamber of the Observatory. The twilight he had caused by pulling down the blinds was replaced by the warm glow of candlelight. Merrin told himself that he was doing this because he needed the light to read, but Simon had also been a little bit right: Merrin did not like the dark—particularly when he was on his own.

Merrin decided to enjoy himself. He raided the tiny kitchen for the last of Lucy's pies—he found two steak and kidney, one chicken and mushroom and a squashed apple dumpling—then he poured himself a huge mug of Simon's cider. He put it all on the tiny table beside his narrow, lumpy bed and added a few musty chunks of the chocolate door that he had found in a dusty corner under the bed to his pile of food. Then he went and took the thick woolen blanket that Simon kept on his bed. Merrin hated being cold but he usually was, since the Observatory, being cut deep into the slate cliffs, always had a deep chill.

Looking forward to a whole day of doing exactly what he wanted, Merrin wrapped himself up in the blanket and, not even bothering to take his shoes off, he got into bed and started on his stash of food. By midmorning Merrin's book had fallen to the floor. He was fast asleep amid a sea of pastry crumbs, furry lumps of chocolate and discarded bits of kidney, because ever since Simon had told him what kidneys actually did, they had made Merrin feel sick.

One by one, the candles in the Observatory burned down but Merrin slept on until the dying splutters of the last candle jolted him awake. He woke in a panic. Night had fallen; it was pitch-dark and he couldn't remember where he was. He jumped out of bed and collided with the doorpost. As he reeled back, Merrin saw the white dish of the Camera Obscura illuminated by a thin shaft of moonlight that had found its way through a gap in the blinds. Panic subsiding, he took out his tinderbox and began lighting new candles. Soon the Observatory glowed with warm candlelight and felt almost cozy—but what Merrin had planned was about as far removed from cozy as it was possible to get.

Merrin picked *The Darke Index* off the floor and opened it to the last page, the title of which was: *Darkening the Destiny of AnOther*

or *The Ruination of Thine Enemy by Use of the*

Two-Faced Ring

A Tried and Tested Formula Used with Great

Success by the Author

Merrin knew that part by heart, but he had read no further because of the next line, which said: *Read no Further until thou art Ready to Do,*

Else shall be the worse for You

Merrin gulped. Now he was *Ready to Do*. His mouth felt dry and he licked his lips. They tasted of old pie—not nice.

Merrin fetched a glass of water, gulped it down and wondered whether it might be better to put the whole thing off until the next night. But the thought of another bleak day in the Observatory on his own, plus the possibility that Simon and Lucy might return at any time, was not good. He had to do this now. And so, with a scared feeling in the pit of his stomach, Merrin read on:

First You Summon your Servant Thing

Merrin's heart thumped; this was scary. Summoning a Thing was something that even Simon had not dared to do. But now that he had started, Merrin dared not stop. Warily, as if he were pulling a particularly vicious spider out of its lair, Merrin drew the Summoning Charm from its pocket at the bottom of the page. The Charm—a wafer-thin black diamond—felt as cold as ice. As instructed, Merrin held the diamond against his heart and, with the cold of the stone boring deep into his chest, he recited the Summons. Nothing happened. No gust of wind, no disturbance in the air, no fleeting shadows—nothing. The candles burned steadily on and the Observatory felt as empty as ever. Merrin tried again. Nothing.

A horrible feeling crept up on Merrin—it was true, he really was stupid. Once again he read the words, saying them slowly. Yet again nothing happened. Over and over Merrin repeated the words, convinced that he must be missing something obvious—something that anyone else with half a brain would have immediately noticed. But no Thing appeared, no Thing at all. Getting angry now, Merrin shouted the Summons—nothing. Then he whispered it, he pleaded, cajoled—and in desperation he yelled it out backward, all to no avail. Exhausted, Merrin sank to the floor in despair. He had tried everything he could think of, and he had failed—as usual.

What Merrin did not realize was that his Summons—every single one—had worked. The Observatory was now actually seething with Things. The problem was he could not see them.

Things were generally not possible to see, which was fortunate, as they were not a pleasant sight. Most Things were some kind of human figure, although not obviously male or female. They were usually tall, thin to the point of being skeletal and extremely decrepit, their clothes no more than a collection of dark rags. They wore miserable, sometimes desperate expressions mixed with underlying malevolence that left sensitive people who were unfortunate enough to meet their gaze feeling desperate for weeks afterward. Merrin—although he did not know it—had an aunt Edna who fit that description pretty exactly, but even he would have been able to tell the difference between his aunt Edna and a Thing—because a Thing looked dead.

It was then that Merrin read the second part of the instructions: Now
Address the Thing,

Demand to See.

Remove its Invisibility.

“Aaargh!” yelled Merrin, suddenly realizing to his horror what had happened. Angrily, he hurled the book at the wall.

How was he supposed to know the Things were invisible? Why hadn't the book said so before?

Half an hour later, Merrin had calmed down. Knowing that he had no choice but to continue, he picked up the book, found the crumpled page and began to follow the instructions. He recited the See, closed his eyes and counted to thirteen. Then, with a feeling of dread, he opened his eyes—and screamed.

Merrin was surrounded by Things. Twenty-six aggrieved, nose-out-of-joint, why-didn't-he-just-choose-me-aren't-I-good-enough-for-him Things were staring at him, their lips moving, mumbling and moaning but making no sound. They towered above him and stared at him so intently that even Merrin, who was not known for his sensitivity, felt a deep gloom rising inside him. It was, he thought, all going horribly wrong. Simon was right; everyone was right; he was stupid. But now he was stuck. He had to continue or else it would, as the book had said, be the worse for him. With a nasty feeling in the pit of his stomach, Merrin read the next instruction: Now Take with you your Servant Thing

To Find and Fetch the Two-Faced Ring

Merrin's heart sank when he read the words: the Two-Faced Ring. He still had nightmares about it.

A few months ago Simon had been grumpily cleaning up the Observatory, complaining loudly about Merrin's untidiness. Merrin, meanwhile, had hidden in the larder. He had been surreptitiously eating his way through a

secret stash of cold sausages when he had heard Simon scream. Merrin had very nearly choked—Simon usually did not scream. Gasping and coughing, he had staggered out to see a truly terrible sight: a foul collection of rubbery-looking bones glistening with black slime was slowly stalking Simon across the Observatory. Clutching his garbage sack to him as though it were some kind of shield Simon was backing away with a look of utter terror on his face.

Merrin knew at once to whom the bones belonged—his old master, DomDaniel. It was the ring that gave it away. The thick gold and jade Two-Faced Ring that DomDaniel had always worn on his thumb shone out against the black sheen of the bones. “This ring,” DomDaniel had once told Merrin, “is indestructible. He who wears it is indestructible. I wear it, therefore I am indestructible. Remember that, boy!” He had laughed and wagged his fat pink thumb in Merrin’s face.

Merrin had watched the bones corner the terrified Simon. He had listened while, from somewhere deep within the bones, came a Darke

hollow chant of destruction aimed directly at Simon. It had made Merrin want to curl up into a little ball, though he didn’t know why. Luckily for him, he did not remember the time in the Marram Marshes when DomDaniel had directed the very same chant at him.

As the chant had progressed relentlessly toward its end—when Simon would be Consumed—Merrin saw Simon Heap change. But not in the way DomDaniel had planned. The fear in Simon’s eyes was suddenly replaced by a wild anger.

Merrin had seen that look before and he knew it meant trouble.

It did.

In one swift action—like a butterfly hunter after a prize specimen—Simon had brought his garbage sack down over the bones, yelling a Darke

imprecation of his own. The bones had collapsed and some escaped across the floor, but the chant did not stop.

Panicking now, Simon had scrambled for the stray bones, throwing them into the sack just as he had been throwing the garbage a few minutes earlier. Muffled by the sack, still the Darke chant had continued.

Frantically, Simon had hurled the last bone into the sack. Then, as if his life depended on it—which it did—he had raced across the Observatory, pulled open the door to the Endless Cupboard, hurled the sack inside and slammed and Barred the door. Then, to Merrin’s amusement, Simon’s legs had given way beneath him and he had collapsed onto the floor like a wet rag. Merrin had taken advantage of the moment to finish off the sausages.

But now Merrin was going to have to see those awful bones once more. And, worse, take the ring from them. But even worse, he was going to have to go into the Endless Cupboard to find them, which really scared him. The Endless Cupboard had been built by DomDaniel himself. It was a place to dump Darke things that were no longer wanted and were impossible to DeActivate. The cupboard snaked deep into the rock and, although it wasn’t actually endless, it went on for miles.

Merrin swallowed hard. He knew he had to do it—there was no going back now. Trembling, he muttered the UnBar, grasped the innocent-looking brass cupboard doorknob and pulled. The door opened. Merrin reeled. Ice-cold air laced with the foulest smell—wet dog and rotting meat with a hint of burned rubber—hit him. He retched and spat in disgust.

With a feeling of doom, Merrin peered into the darkness. The cupboard appeared empty, but he knew it wasn’t. The Endless Cupboard shifted things about, taking the Darkest

deep into the rock. He dreaded to think how far it had taken the bones.

Lifting the candle above his head, Merrin stepped inside. The cupboard snaked deep into the rock like a tendril. As Merrin walked in, the air became cold. After about a dozen steps his candle flame began to gutter in the foul atmosphere, but he pressed on, deeper into the cupboard. Now the flame was growing smaller. It began to glow a dull red, and Merrin became alarmed. If there was not enough air for the flame then surely that meant that there was not enough air for him? Feeling light-headed now, with a

high-pitched buzzing in his ears, Merrin took a few more steps and suddenly the candle flame died, leaving for a brief moment the red glow at the end of the wick, and then complete darkness.

Merrin's chest felt tight. He opened his mouth wide to try to breathe more air, but nothing was there. He knew he had to get out of the cupboard—fast. Gasping, he turned back, only to run straight into an immovable Thing. In a blind panic, he pushed past the Thing, only to find another in his way, then another. Horrified, Merrin realized that he was trapped—that the long, thin cupboard was stuffed full of Things, and that they were probably still trying to get in, which indeed they were. Outside, an agitated crowd of Things

jostled, pushing, scratching and fighting to be the next one inside. A wave of fear engulfed Merrin; then the cupboard floor did something very strange. It rushed up to meet him and hit him on the head.

When Merrin came to he was back in the Observatory, lying on the cold slate floor.

Blearily he looked up, and twenty-six Things stared back. Usually the gaze of twenty-six Things would be enough to send someone into despair forever, but Merrin's eyes would not focus. All he saw was a wavy blur surrounding him, like a large, prickly hedge.

Slowly, Merrin became aware of something on the floor beside him. He turned his head—which hurt—and came face to face with a grubby canvas sack. A garbage sack. Inside, like a litter of kittens, something was moving.

Suddenly wide awake, Merrin leaped to his feet, grabbed the sack and upended it. A tangle of soft, slimy bones slid out across the floor, the small fat bone wearing the ring skittering across the floor with a metallic clink. Merrin stared at it blankly—what was he meant to do now? A bone by his foot twitched. Merrin screamed. Like blind worms, the bones were beginning to move, each one searching for its neighbor—they were ReAssembling.

A bony finger poked his ribs and Merrin screamed. DomDaniel was poking him. He was going to dieeeeeee! The Darke Index was thrust in front of his face and Merrin realized with relief that the bony finger belonged to a Thing. Obediently he read the passage that the Thing's finger was pointing to:

Take the Two-Faced Ring

From the Thumb

Of the One

Who wears It.

Remove the Ring the Other Way:

Your Possession now Holds Sway.

Merrin went over to the small slimy black stick that wore the Two-Faced Ring and looked down at it with revulsion. He steeled himself to pick it up. One, two, three—no, he couldn't do it. Yes, he could—he had to do it.

One...two...three—eurgh! He had it. The thumb bone was soft—like gristle. It was revolting. He was going to be sick.

Some seconds later, with a nasty taste in his mouth, Merrin grasped the Two-Faced Ring, knowing he had to pull it over the base of the bone—the Other

way. He pulled. It stuck on the wider part of the bone where the joint had been. Merrin fought off panic. It wouldn't come off. Soon DomDaniel would ReAssemble

and he'd be cat food. Desperation gave Merrin a kind of courage. He pulled out his pocket knife, put the thumb bone on the floor and sawed the end off the bone. Thick, black liquid oozed from the bone, and the Two-Faced Ring fell free.

Horribly fascinated, Merrin picked up the ring and stared at the broad, twisted band of gold with the opposite facing, evil-looking heads carved in jade. With shaking hands, he consulted *The Darke Index*: On your left hand

Upon the thumb

You place the band—

The Two-Faced One.

Trembling, Merrin slid the ring onto his own thumb, pushing away the thought that one day someone might try to take it off his thumb the Other

way. At first the ring sat loose on Merrin's thin, grubby thumb with its bitten nail and big knuckle, but not for long. He felt the gold become warmer and warmer until it was almost unpleasantly hot—and then the ring began to tighten. Soon it fit perfectly, but it did not stop there. Getting even hotter, the ring continued to tighten. His thumb began to throb.

Merrin panicked. He leaped up and down, shaking his thumb, yelling and stamping his feet with the pain. Tighter and tighter the ring swelled, turning the end of his thumb first red, then purple and finally a dark, deep blue. At that point, Merrin stopped shouting and stared at it in horror; he just knew that the end of his thumb was about to explode. Would it go pop, he wondered, or would it be a squelchy kind of splat? Merrin didn't want to know. He closed his eyes. And the moment he closed his eyes, the ring loosened its grip, the blood flowed back and Merrin's thumb deflated. The Two-Faced Ring now fit, although it felt tight—just tight enough to remind him of its presence. Merrin knew that it was his for life—or at least the life of his left thumb.

Merrin was beginning to realize that Darke Magyk

was not necessarily on the side of those who practiced it. But he could not stop now. He was trapped, and now he must embark upon the last part of the Enchantment—Darkening the Destiny of AnOther . And that must be done in the Castle, for that was where the Other lived, at the top of the

Wizard Tower, as he had once done. Using the same name that Merrin himself once had: Septimus Heap.

4

OUT OF THE BADLANDS



Just before dawn, Merrin roused

himself from his bed and staggered out, half asleep, into the gloomy Observatory, and headed for the Glo Grub tub.

Blearily, he scooped out a fresh tube of Glo Grubs ready for his journey and it was only when he was jamming the lid back onto the tub that Merrin opened his eyes properly—and screamed. He had forgotten about the Things. A good dozen of them were clustered around the Glo Grub tub watching his every move. The rest were wandering aimlessly about as though blown by an invisible breeze. Aware now that his every movement was being watched by the Things, Merrin padded into Simon's sparsely furnished room, unlocked a cupboard and took out a small black box on which was written: Sleuth.

Merrin elbowed his way back through his faithful cluster of Things and put Sleuth's box into a backpack along with a few other treasures. Then he shouldered the pack and took a deep breath. He knew it was time to go, but

right then even the cold, creepy, damp and lonely Observatory stuffed full of Things felt a whole lot more inviting than the journey he had in front of him. It would be a steep climb down hundreds of dark, slippery steps cut into the rock, creeping past the old Magogs' chamber and then out along a long, slimy Wurm Burrow. But Merrin knew he had no choice; he had to go.

Any hopes Merrin might have had that the Things

had finished their task and would stay behind in the Observatory were dashed when, after he had gone down the first few steps into the darkness, he turned and saw a line of Things. They shuffled forward, all elbows and knees, jabbing and kicking at one another, trying to get onto the steps behind him. Great, thought Merrin, just great.

Half an hour later, Merrin was at the entrance of the disused Wurm Burrow, but he was not alone. He knew that there were twenty-six Things

right behind him; he could feel them staring at him. They made the back of his neck feel prickly and icy cold. Nervously tapping his grubby fingers on the Wurm-slimed wall of the Burrow, Merrin shivered in the damp air. He stared intently at the dark skyline along the top of the cliffs on the far side of the ravine.

As much as Merrin longed to leave the Wurm Burrow, he was waiting for the first yellow streaks of dawn to show in the sky. Nighttime was a dangerous time to be out in the Slate Quarries of the Badlands. He had been told enough gory tales over the years to know that the most dangerous time of all was twilight. That was when the Land Wurms are on the move—in the evening breaking their day-long fast, or in the morning returning to their Burrows and looking out for one last tasty morsel to see them through the long day, which they would spend curled up deep inside the frosty slate cliffs.

Ten long, cold minutes later, Merrin was sure he could see the outline of the jagged rocks opposite him more clearly.

And as he watched, a slow slither of movement just below the skyline told him that dawn must be near—a Land Wurm was returning to its Burrow. Fascinated, Merrin watched the seemingly endless cylinder of the creature pour into the cliff face on the far side of the ravine. He wondered how many were doing just the same thing at that very moment on his

side of the ravine—maybe only a few feet away for all he knew, for Land Wurms were as silent as the night. The only sound heralding their arrival—if you were lucky—might be the clatter of a stone dislodging as they moved in for the kill. At that moment a shower of small stones fell from the cliffs above Merrin and, heart racing, he leaped back. Like a line of dominoes, twenty-six Things behind him did the same.

Merrin was spooked. As much as he was longing to escape the Things, he decided he would not set foot outside until he had seen the sun and knew

that he was safe. However, the sun did not oblige. The sky remained a dull gray and Merrin waited...and waited. Then, just as he had become convinced that, typically, it would be his luck to pick the one day in the whole history of the world when the sun was not going to rise, he saw a watery white disc inching its way into the sky above the somber cliffs. At last—it was time to go.

But first he had to get rid of the Things. Merrin was not going to make the trek to the Castle dogged by a long line of dismal Things. No way. He turned to the first Thing

in line. “I have left my cloak in the Observatory,” he said. “Get it for me.” The Thing looked puzzled. His Master was wearing his cloak.

“Get it!” shouted Merrin. “All of you—get my cloak!”

A servant Thing may not disobey its Master. With reproachful looks—for Merrin’s servant Things were not without intelligence—the creatures sloped off along the old Wurm Burrow. They were not surprised when a massive thud followed by a great rush of air told them that Merrin had slammed the huge iron Burrow plug closed. With a resigned air, the Things

continued their task and all, bar one, were still searching for the nonexistent cloak when Simon and Lucy returned a few days later.

But unknown to Merrin, one of the Things—the one that he had Summoned with his backward Summons—was not bound to obey his Master. Which is why, after Merrin had set off down the track, the great iron plug to the Wurm Burrow opened once more. The Thing slunk out and began to follow the one who had Summoned him. And over the Thing's shoulder was slung a grubby canvas sack of bones. The Thing had rapidly come to the conclusion that its new Master was going to need all the help he could get. And a sack of Darke bones might be just the help he was going to need.

Merrin took the path that hugged the walls of the slate cliffs leading into the Farmlands. He knew this part of the track well and was not fazed when, on rounding the first bend, a landslip blocked his way. With a feeling of excitement—and a little trepidation—Merrin clambered up the slippery rocks. He took care not to hurry too much, for fear of dislodging one of the rocks and sending himself plummeting hundreds of feet down into the torrent below. He reached the top safely and began to slide carefully down the other side. But halfway down, his feet slipped and sent a cluster of small rocks clattering into the ravine. Merrin stopped and held his breath, waiting for the avalanche to begin and take him with it, but his luck held and very gingerly he set off again. A few minutes later his feet touched the firm ground of the path.

Merrin let out a triumphant whoop and punched the air. He was free!

Accompanied by the roaring of the river flooding far below at the bottom of the ravine, Merrin traveled quickly down the ravine path. He did not look back even once. Even if he had, he probably would not have noticed the Thing, which blended into the shadows and took on the forms of the rocks in the way that Things do when they do not want to be noticed.

Before long Merrin was leaving the oppressive slate cliffs of the Badlands behind and heading into the scattered hill farms of the Upper Farmlands. This was unfamiliar territory now, but Merrin followed a wide track with a surface of dusty well-trodden earth. When he came to a fork in the road, he was rewarded by a sign-stone. The tall post of granite was carved with an

arrow pointing him to the right and one word: CASTLE. Merrin smiled. With a confident stride, he set off along the right-hand fork.

It was a cool spring day and the sun gave off little heat as it slowly rose above the low-lying cloud, but Merrin's brisk pace kept him warm enough. Soon a familiar empty feeling gathered in the pit of his stomach. Merrin was used to being hungry, but now that he was a free agent he had no intention of letting that state of affairs continue.

As he walked jauntily down the track that meandered through fields of newly planted vines and tiny fruit trees, Merrin saw a small stone farmhouse. It was not far away, half hidden in a dip. He broke into a jog. A few minutes later he was walking into an overgrown yard surrounded by ramshackle sheds, deserted except for a few bedraggled chickens pecking at the dirt. Before him was the long, low farmhouse, the front door half open. Merrin walked up to the door and the smell of baking bread hit him like a sledgehammer.

Merrin's stomach did something that felt like a double somersault—he had to have that bread. Taking care not to move the front door, which looked like it might have a nasty creak, he crept inside. He found himself in a long, dark room lit only by the glow of a fire from a stove at the far end. Merrin stopped and looked around. No one was there; he was sure of that. The baker of the bread obviously had other things to do, and while he or she was doing them Merrin would seize his chance.

Like a cat, Merrin padded silently across the earthen floor, past a large pile of hay and a stack of wooden boxes.

But—unlike a cat—he stepped on a chicken. With a great squawk the old blind hen rose into the air flapping her wings.

“Shh!” hissed Merrin desperately. “Shh, you stupid bird.” The old hen took no notice and careened off, crashing into a carefully stacked pile of poles ready for bean planting. The poles collapsed with the loudest clatter Merrin had ever heard, and footsteps came running.

A large, motherly looking woman appeared, silhouetted in a doorway across the room. Merrin ducked behind the stack of boxes. “Henny!” cried the woman, running a few feet away from Merrin. She tripped over the hen in the gloom and hurriedly scooped her up. “You silly chook. Come now, time for your breakfast, my sweetheart.” Time for my

breakfast, you mean, thought Merrin, annoyed that a moth-eaten old hen should get picked up, offered breakfast and called sweetheart, while he skulked hungrily in the shadows. He was pretty sure that if the woman had tripped over him instead of the chicken, the result would not have been the same. He held his breath as the woman walked right past him with the hen. His dark gray eyes followed her progress until she had disappeared out the front door and into the sunlight.

Then, like a streak of black lightning, Merrin shot over to the stove, yanked his sleeves down over his hands, wrenched open the oven door and pulled out a great round loaf of bread.

“A...aah...aaaah!” Merrin gasped under his breath, hopping from foot to foot as the damp heat from the piping-hot bread quickly found its way through his sleeves. Juggling the loaf like a great hot potato, Merrin shot out of the nearest door, ran around the back of the farmhouse and found himself in the yard. His way was barred by a mass of chickens, which were being fed by the woman whose bread Merrin was still juggling. At the sound of the clucking and fussing among her hens, the woman looked up.

“Hey!” she shouted.

Merrin stopped, unsure what to do. Should he turn and run back into the farm, risking an encounter with the woman’s husband or some burly farmhand? Or should he go straight ahead and get out onto the open road?

“That’s my bread,” said the woman, advancing toward him.

Merrin looked down at the loaf as if surprised to see it. Then he made a decision and ran—straight for the chickens.

With much clucking and squawking the chickens scattered. Feathers flew as Merrin plowed through the flock, delivering a few well-aimed kicks as he fled.

In seconds he was out on the road and running fast. He glanced back once and saw the woman standing in the middle of the road shaking her fist at him. He knew he was safe. She was not coming after him.

What Merrin did not see, partly because it was daylight and Things do not show up well in bright light—but mainly because he was not expecting to see it—was the Thing. It flowed along the hedgerows some distance behind him, like a stream of dirty water.

Another thing that Merrin did not see as he jogged along, hugging the now pleasantly hot bread, was a brown rat sitting in the grass by the side of the road. But the rat saw Merrin well enough. Stanley, ex-Message Rat, ex-Secret Service Rat, had no intention of getting anywhere near Merrin, particularly near his right boot. But Stanley's old Secret Service habits died hard and he was curious to know where Merrin was going. The boy was, in Stanley's opinion, trouble.

Stanley had just spent a couple of weeks with Humphrey, his old Message Rat Service boss, who had fled the Castle some six months ago after the RatStrangers had formed. Although Humphrey was enjoying his retirement in an apple loft on a small cider farm and had no intention of returning, he had tried to persuade Stanley to start up the Message Rat Service again. Stanley had promised to think about it.

Stanley watched Merrin stop at a crossroads. The boy stared at the signstones for a few seconds and then jauntily set off in the direction of the Castle. The rat watched Merrin stride down the road. With people like that heading for the Castle, he thought, a Message Rat Service might well be needed. He made a pact with himself: he would follow Merrin and if the boy did indeed go to the Castle, Stanley would take Humphrey's advice.

And so it was that two very different creatures followed Merrin as he made his way along the winding tracks that led through the Farmlands. Buoyed by his newfound freedom, Merrin made fast progress, and as night began to

fall he saw the Castle in the distance. Weary now, he trudged past the last farm before the river. He looked longingly at the lit candles in the farmhouse windows and at a family sitting down to supper, but he kept going, following the track through a small wood. One sharp bend later Merrin suddenly found himself out of the trees and on the riverbank. Amazed, he threw himself down on the grass and stared. He had never seen anything like it in his life.

On the other side of the wide, slow river, a great wall of lights reared up into the night sky, casting their sparkling reflections in the dark waters of the river. Behind the lights the shadowy bulk of the Castle could be seen. Merrin knew there were thousands of people inside, each one belonging to one of the lights, all living their lives and going about their business without a thought for a boy sitting on the opposite bank. Suddenly Merrin felt very small and alone.

Merrin stared at the lights, resisting the urge to count them—he was much given to counting things—and soon his eyes began to pick out more details and make sense of the shapes behind them. He saw the high walls of The Ramblings, which seemed to stretch along the river for miles. And, in the silence of the riverbank, he heard the sound of chatter and laughter drifting across the water. He saw the deserted pontoons of the old docks and the outlines of a few rotting ships.

And then as he looked, eyes wide as an owl's, Merrin picked out a ladder of lights that flickered purple and gold and reached impossibly high into the sky. At the top of the ladder was a golden pyramid, glowing with an eerie purple light and illuminating the underside of a bank of low-lying clouds.

A shiver ran through Merrin. He knew what that was—the Wizard Tower, a place where he had once spent an unhappy few months with his old master, DomDaniel. It was also, he thought with a sudden rush of anger, where that so-called Septimus Heap boy was right now, no doubt sitting by a warm fire, having supper and talking Wizard stuff and being listened to, as if what he said mattered. But not, thought Merrin, for very much longer. He ran his forefinger over the cold surface of the Two-Faced Ring that was wrapped—still a little too tightly—around his left thumb, and smiled.

Abruptly, Merrin jumped up from the damp grass and set off at top speed along the track. He knew that he would have to wait until dawn when the drawbridge was lowered to get into the Castle, and he needed somewhere to spend the night.

The track took him away from the riverbank and through some muddy fields bounded by high hedges. As he emerged from the last field Merrin saw the lights of the Grateful Turbot Tavern appear. In his pocket his hand closed around the bag of Simon's secret stash of money that he had taken. Time, he thought, to spend some of my hard-earned cash.

Stanley watched Merrin push open the door to the tavern and walk into the warm, welcoming glow. There was no doubt about it; Merrin was headed for the Castle. The Grateful Turbot had a well-deserved reputation for being haunted. No one would choose to stay there unless they were waiting for the Castle drawbridge to be lowered the next morning.

As the rat scuttled off, the Thing

loped up to the tavern door. But it did not venture inside. It sank into a dark corner of the front porch and huddled up on one of the benches that ran along the side with its sack of bones to keep it company through the night. The Thing did not exactly wear a look of contentment on its haggard face, but it was not displeased. If anyone had ever thought to ask a Thing

what its idea of a fun night out would be—which strangely enough no one ever had—sitting outside a haunted tavern with a bag of Necromancer's bones for company would probably have been at the top of the list.

5

THE GRATEFUL TURBOT



Merrin did not know how

old he was. He was in fact nearing his thirteenth birthday, but the guarded expression in his eyes made him look much older. Recently he had grown tall, and with the confidence of his new independence, plus the knowledge that he had enough money for many days to come, he strode into the Grateful Turbot Tavern. Making his voice as gruff as possible, he ordered supper and asked for a room for the night.

Some minutes later, Merrin was sitting by a crackling log fire with a tankard of the dark Turbot special on the table in front of him. He wished he had been brave enough to ask for lemonade. It was a quiet Sunday evening at the tavern and, apart from a couple of farmers haggling over the price of a cow, Merrin thought he had the place to himself. But what Merrin could not see, because he was not the kind of boy ghosts would normally choose to Appear to, was that the Grateful Turbot Tavern was stuffed full of ghosts. So much so that when Merrin had made his way from the bar to the fire he had inadvertently Passed Through

half a dozen ghosts before they had had the chance to get out of his way, causing much ghostly grumbling.

As Merrin took what he thought was an unoccupied seat by the fire he was in fact surrounded by ghosts—who liked to stand by a blazing fire on a dark night as much as any Living person.

Next to Merrin were three fishermen, one of whom was somewhat grumpy, having been in the seat Merrin had just taken. Some fifty years ago, the fishermen had drowned right outside the tavern after an argument over who had caught the biggest fish, and they were still arguing. Sitting across the table from Merrin was an ancient and very faded tinker-woman endlessly counting her pennies. The tinker had died of old age at that very table and still did not understand that she was dead. Clustered around the fire was a party of six knights killed in a long-forgotten battle for the One Way Bridge. They were chatting with a couple of dairymaids who, only a few years back, had gotten lost in a blizzard on their way home from the market and had frozen during the night. Perched on the edge of Merrin's table was a Princess who had run away to meet her sweetheart, sheltered under a tree in a sudden thunderstorm and been struck by lightning. She studied Merrin with a mournful gaze until he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He looked, thought the Princess, a little like her long-lost love—but only a little.

There was, not surprisingly, a bit of an atmosphere in the Grateful Turbot—which was why it was generally frequented only by those who were too late to get into the Castle and needed a bed for the night or by Northern Traders who were banned from most of the Castle taverns. And the first ghost that Merrin ever saw—although he never realized it—was the ghost of one of these Northern Traders.

Sitting in the shadows, some way back from the gathering by the fire, was the ghost of Olaf Snorrelssen, a Northern Trader who had once fallen asleep on the One Way Bridge and never woken again. Olaf sat in his shadowy corner and watched Merrin from across the room. There was something about the boy that caught his eye—here was a fellow traveler, a stranger in a foreign land as Olaf himself had so often been. In a sudden rush of fellow-feeling Olaf decided to make his first Appearance to a Living person.

As Olaf made his way toward Merrin, he glanced in one of the dark mirrors that lined the walls of the Grateful Turbot.

He saw himself for the first time in fifteen years—or rather, bits of himself. It was a shock. Olaf stopped in front of the mirror and stared. It was very strange: all his edges were in place, but there was a nasty gap in his middle that he could see straight through. And the top of his head wasn't quite there either. Olaf concentrated hard, and slowly the rest of his head, with its old leather headband and thinning blond hair Appeared. Goodness, was he really that thin on top? He put his hand up to feel the top of his head, but nothing was there. Olaf felt suddenly depressed; for a moment he had forgotten that he was a ghost. The advice other ghosts had given him about Appearing for the first time came back to him now. Take care, they had told him. Appearing

to the Living will stir old memories. The Living will seem too fast and too loud, and they will make you feel more of a ghost than you ever have before. Olaf took a deep breath and steadied himself. The rest of his stomach came into view.

He had the beginnings of a paunch. He didn't remember that, either, but then he never had taken much notice of his appearance when he was Living.

By the time Olaf had reached Merrin's table the ghost looked, in the dim light of the tavern, as solid as if he were Living. Merrin looked up at him and Olaf felt flustered—no Living person had seen him as a ghost before.

“Greetings,” said Olaf, uttering his first words to a Living being in fifteen years.

Merrin did not reply. Unsure what to do or say, Olaf sat down opposite the boy. He did not notice the faded ghost of the tinker-woman, who leaped squawking from her place, scattering her pennies all over the floor.

“Oh! I am sorry, Madam,” said Olaf, jumping up and scrabbling around on the floor to try to retrieve the pennies for the woman—which was impossible, as they were part of another ghost—and causing even more offense. The tinker pushed Olaf out of the way. She gathered up her pennies

and retreated, muttering, to a dark corner away from the fire, where she would spend the next one hundred years counting her pennies to make sure they were all there.

“Don’t call me Madam. I am not

a girl,” Merrin growled, scowling at Olaf. He wondered why this stranger had come over to talk to him and then suddenly dived onto the floor. Something was odd about him, but Merrin could not quite figure out what.

“Why no, indeed you are not a girl,” Olaf replied, confused. “You are a stranger here, I think?” he persevered, speaking softly in his singsong Northern accent.

“No,” said Merrin sullenly. “I’m not. I was born in the Castle. I...am coming home.”

“Ah, home,” said Olaf wistfully. “Then you are lucky. There are some of us who can never return home.” Merrin looked at the man opposite him. His weather-beaten face had a kindly look to it and his pale blue eyes were friendly. Merrin mellowed a little. It was the first time anyone had sought him out because they had been interested in talking to him, and the first time that anyone had ever spoken to him as if he were a grown-up, decent human being. It was a good feeling. Merrin risked a smile.

Encouraged by the smile, Olaf ventured, “You have family here?”

“No,” said Merrin, quickly deciding that a possible mother in the Port did not count. “I...don’t have any family.” Olaf, who had been one of a very large family, could not imagine what that must be like. “No family,” he said. “Not one little piece of family?”

Merrin shook his head. “Nope.”

“Then where will you stay? What will you do?”

Merrin shrugged. He’d been wondering that too but had put it to the back of his mind.

Olaf made a decision. Somewhere in the Lands of the Long Nights, he had a child who he had never seen and never would see. No matter that Olaf was sure for some reason he did not understand, his child was a girl. She would, he figured, be the same age as this boy. If he could not help his own, he would do another a good turn. “Tomorrow I shall take you into the Castle and I shall show you a good place where you can stay,” he offered. “Tonight you are staying here?”

Merrin nodded.

“And today you have traveled far, I think?” Olaf was getting into his stride now and beginning to enjoy himself.

“All the way from the Badlands. Never want to go back.”

“They were not your family there?” asked Olaf.

“No way. They treated me like a servant. Or worse. Took the first chance I could to get out of there.” Olaf nodded sympathetically. The boy, he thought, had had a hard life. It was time someone gave him a helping hand.

Encouraged by Olaf’s attention, Merrin began to tell his story. “I got away once before but I ended up stuck in the marshes with a crazy old witch who made me eat eel and cabbage sandwiches.”

“That is not good,” Olaf murmured.

“It was disgusting. But to escape from her I took a job with Simon Heap, and that was even worse. I ended up back in the same horrible place I’d grown up. I couldn’t believe it. Until a few weeks ago I thought I was stuck there forever with old Heap and that bag of bones.”

“Bag of bones?” asked Olaf, thinking he had not quite understood.

“Yeah. Simon’s old boss—and mine. DomDaniel. Lived in a sack till I tipped him out last night.”

“Tipped him...out?” Now Olaf was sure he did not understand.

“Yeah. I got his ring—want to see?”

Without waiting for an answer, Merrin waved his beringed thumb in the ghost’s face. “Mine now,” he said, “and I earned

it. It wasn’t nice going through all those bones. Some of them had stuff on them like gristle. And slime. And they were bendy. Yuck. But I got it off his thumb. Chopped the end off, ha ha. That showed him. You know, thumb bones are just like toe bones?”

Olaf nodded warily. This boy was not turning out to be quite what he had expected; he was beginning to regret his earlier offer. It was true what they said about the Living—there were some weird ones out there. Trust him to pick one of them the very first time he Appeared. Olaf was saved from hearing any more about bones by the barmaid bringing Merrin his supper: a huge plate of sausages stuck into a mound of mashed potatoes.

“I will leave you to eat your supper,” said Olaf, getting up quickly as the barmaid thumped the plate down in front of Merrin. Merrin nodded. He was pleased; he didn’t want to share any of his meal with the stranger. Merrin stabbed a large sausage with his fork. Olaf winced. He thought the sausages looked like thumb bones. He could just imagine them in a sack. Wearing rings.

“See you tomorrow, then,” said Merrin, his mouth full of sausage.

“Ah. Tomorrow. Yes, I will see you tomorrow,” said Olaf gloomily. He never broke a promise.

“Good,” said Merrin, looking up from spearing his second sausage. But the room was empty. The farmers had left, and so had the tall, blond stranger.

6

INTO THE CASTLE



While Merrin was trying to get

comfortable in a lumpy bed under the eaves of the Grateful Turbot, Stanley was burrowing into some straw in the rat hole underneath the resting place of the Castle drawbridge. The rat hole was a popular location for rats returning to the Castle, as it was a safe place to sleep while waiting for the dawn lowering of the drawbridge.

Stanley had been concerned that he might find the rat hole already full. This had happened to him a few times in the past and he had been forced to spend an uncomfortable night up a nearby tree, which was preferable to the haunted kitchens of the Grateful Turbot any day. Hoping he was not too late for a space, Stanley slipped down the bank and scooted into the well-hidden burrow. To his surprise, he realized that he was the only rat there. And then he remembered why—the RatStranglers.

Some six months ago Stanley and his wife, Dawnie, had narrowly escaped the RatStranglers. On reaching the relative safety of the Port, Dawnie had spread the increasingly dramatic story of their escape. There was nothing the rat community liked more than a bloodcurdling tale. Word had traveled fast, with the result that no rat in their right mind would now set foot in the

Castle. But not all rats, thought Stanley, were as up-to-date on current affairs as he was, and he knew that the RatStranglers were long gone. Good riddance too, he thought. He made his way deep into the warm and musty rat hole until he reached the very end and burrowed down into some old straw.

The rat hole was no fun without company. Stanley was a sociable rat who liked nothing more than a good gossip with other Message Rats. He found it rather depressing to be on his own in what had once been such a convivial place. He tried nibbling at half a moldy turnip that some rat had left behind, but the thought of Dawnie and the RatStranglers had taken his appetite away. And so with a small groan Stanley, tired and aching after his long trek, stretched out his little legs, yawned and fell fast asleep. Soon the sound of rat snores were drifting across the Moat, but no one—not even the members of the Gringe household, who lived in the gatehouse opposite—heard them.

As the first streaks of dawn appeared in the sky, the tremendous thud of the drawbridge slamming down onto its resting place shook Stanley out of his straw and sent him rolling down to the mouth of the rat hole. Bleary-eyed, he peered out into the dull twilight. It was not a welcoming kind of day. The wind skittered across the slate gray surface of the Moat and large spots of rain dotted the surface of the water with widening rings. But the empty rat hole was no fun to be in either. Stanley hopped out and sniffed the early morning air. The scent of dead leaves, rain and Moat water was mixed with an unpleasant whiff of stale stew that drifted across the water from the gatehouse opposite. The rat balanced briefly on the flat take-off stone used by rats for generations and then made a well-timed leap. He landed lightly on a narrow metal shelf on the underside of the drawbridge and, careful not to look down at the deep water below, he crossed the Moat by running along the rat-run hidden beneath the massive planks of the bridge.

Safely on the other side, Stanley scrambled up the muddy bank. Keeping his head down against the biting wind, which was sending swirls of dirt into his eyes, he scurried along the track that went through the North Gate. Suddenly Stanley—to his horror—found himself running over the feet of Mrs. Gringe, the wife of the gatekeeper. Stanley was used to avoiding

Gringe, who had large, heavy feet any rat could hear a mile away and a voice to match. But Mrs.

Gringe, a small worried-looking woman, was sitting quiet and still in the shelter of the gatehouse, with her little feet stuck out of the door, just asking to trip up an unsuspecting rat. Which they did. The feel of rat feet running over her own delicate toes was not something that Mrs. Gringe took lightly. In one swift second she managed to scream, grab a broom and land it with a thump on Stanley's disappearing tail.

Stanley shot off and headed down the nearest drain, which was not, after a night's heavy rain, the most comfortable place to be. It also turned out to be blocked.

"Rat, rat!" he heard Mrs. Gringe yell.

"Where?" growled a voice from the gatehouse.

"In the drain—get it, Gringe!"

Trapped, Stanley listened to the heavy footsteps of Gringe thudding above his head. He took a deep breath and sank below the water just in time.

Gringe knelt down and peered into the drain. "I can't see nothin'. You sure?"

"'Course I'm sure. Saw it with me own eyes."

"Ah. Well, I dunno." Gringe stared at the filthy water. "You know," he said slowly, "when you scream, I still think...I still think it's you an' Lucy having a shout. Happy days..."

"We weren't always shouting," said Mrs. Gringe with a sigh. "Well, only about that Heap boy." Stanley felt like his lungs were about to burst. A small bubble of air escaped from his mouth. "Ah," said Gringe. "I reckon the little blighter's hiding under the water."

"You want a shovel?"

“Yeah. Pass me that big one. I’ll dig ’im out and whack ’im on the ’ead. Good practice if that Heap boy ever shows his face in ’ere.”

Stanley could hold his breath no longer. A great shower of fetid water erupted from the drain—along with a sodden rat—and Gringe reeled back, spluttering. When he finally wiped the mess from his eyes, Stanley was gone—off into the warren of alleyways and sideslips that led from the North Gate deep into the Castle.

Just outside the Palace gates, Stanley took a quick and freezing cold bath in a horse trough. A bath was not the rat’s favorite way of spending time—he couldn’t remember when he last had one—but when a rat is off to the Palace, he has to make an effort.

Back at the Grateful Turbot Tavern, Merrin, however, was not making much of an effort at all. Olaf Snorrelssen had hung around for hours waiting for Merrin to wake up, spending the entire time being berated by the tinker-woman. The boy finally staggered downstairs just after ten, having been pulled out of bed by the landlady, who wanted her room back.

Mindful of his much-regretted promise, Olaf Appeared

from the shadows. “I shall take you into the Castle, yes?” the ghost asked, hoping the boy would refuse. Unfortunately he didn’t.

“Yeah. Let’s get out of this dump,” Merrin growled.

Olaf took Merrin over the One Way Bridge, the familiar feeling of gloom that the bridge gave him settling on him like a cloud. The cloud did not lift as, dutifully, Olaf showed the boy across the drawbridge. He mediated in the argument the boy picked with the gatekeeper—who was also in a foul temper and smelled pretty bad too. Then he headed for The Ramblings, a huge warren of a place that Olaf had a real affection for. As he guided Merrin through the narrow, sometimes crowded passageways, Olaf could not shake off a strange feeling that they were being followed. But every time he glanced back he could see nothing more than the occasional fleeting shadow, which was not unusual in the shadowy, twisting alleyways. Determined to keep his word, the ghost took Merrin deep into The

Ramblings. He led him to a small guesthouse where he himself had happy memories of staying many years ago.

That, Olaf mused later, was a mistake. Merrin had not liked the place. It was, he had said, a disgusting dump. When told the price of the rooms, the boy had called the owner, who was a gentle woman, a grasping old bat. Olaf decided to Appear

to the woman and apologize but that had been a mistake too. He had been flustered and got it wrong. At the sight of his sudden but incomplete Appearance the woman had screamed and slammed the door, which had Passed Through his foot and made him feel quite ill. By the time he recovered, Merrin had left. Relieved, Olaf had wandered off, unaware that he was half-Appearing

to everyone and causing havoc. By the end of the day, safely back in the ghostly haven of the Hole in the Wall Tavern, Olaf had decided that he would never Appear to anyone again. It was madness.

Stanley scuttled up one of the many back stairs of the Palace. Although he had never actually been upstairs in the Palace before, as an ex-Message Rat, Stanley knew the layout backward—he had had to learn it as part of his higher exams.

Avoiding the old ghost of a knight who was on guard—and who aimed a one-armed swipe at him with his sword—Stanley scuttled up the tapestry at the side of some big double doors. He pushed his way through the cobwebby rat-gap at the top of the wainscoting and looked down. It was a long drop on the other side. Stanley waited for a moment, gathering his courage for the jump. Far below, sitting by the fire, was Jenna Heap, Princess and heir to the Castle. Beside her lay a much-thumbed note.

Stanley could not read it from that distance, but Jenna already knew it by heart. The note read: Delivered by hand from the Wizard Tower by B. Catchpole

Received at Palace: 7:30 A.M.

From: Septimus Heap, Apprentice to Marcia Overstrand,

ExtraOrdinary Wizard

Dear Jen,

Can you meet me at Marcellus's place at midday today? Have just had a note from him! It is really good. I think he has remembered some things at last. He has some stuff of Nicko's to show us and he says that there may be a way for him to come back!!!! See you there.

Love,

Septimus xxxx

Jenna was so excited that she could hardly keep still, let alone wait for midday. After yet another depressing breakfast with Sarah Heap, she had escaped to her room and was trying to do something useful to pass the hours. Unaware that she was being watched by a teetering rat, she was determinedly reading a large book.

Far above Jenna, Stanley took a deep breath and launched himself into space. He landed on Jenna's bed, bounced high into the air, thumped down onto her hearthrug and turned his ankle. "Oof!" he grunted, rolling forward and banging his head on the coal-scuttle.

Jenna leaped to her feet. "Stanley?" she gasped.

Stanley jumped up, winced and saluted. "At your service, Your Majesty."

"Not 'Your Majesty' yet," said Jenna. "Not until I am crowned with that." She made a face and pointed to a very beautiful but simple crown sitting on a red velvet cushion on the mantelpiece.

"Ooh," said Stanley, a little overawed. "It looks very heavy. Wouldn't like to wear that all day."

"Neither would I," said Jenna. "And I don't intend to just yet either. You know, Stanley, you always turn up when I least expect it. How are you—"

and Dawnie?”

“I am fine,” the rat replied. “I am sure that Dawnie is fine too. She makes a point of it, after all.”

“Ah,” said Jenna. “Things between you not good then?”

“No, Your Maj. But it was an amicable separation. Well, when I left I thought she looked kind of amicable. Possibly.

Although she was eating a pie at the time, which always puts her in a good mood.”

“Oh, I’m really sorry, Stanley.”

“I’m not,” replied the rat tersely.

“So, er...what are you doing with your life now?” asked Jenna.

“Keeping busy. Can’t complain. Visiting old friends, catching up, networking, you know how it is. Just done a bit of freelance actually—a mission to the Badlands.”

Jenna shuddered. “Horrible place,” she said.

“I’m with you there, Your Maj. And I wouldn’t like to bump into those that live there on a dark night. Actually, I’d rather not bump into them at all. But I’m making my base here now; no place like home, as they say. And I have a little proposition of my own to put to you, if you wouldn’t mind hearing me out. If you’re not too busy, that is. But if you are I can come back later. No doubt the trials and tribulations of young Queenshipdom and royaltyness bear heavy on your youthful shoulders and I—”

“I’m only reading, Stanley. I’m meeting someone later—it’s really important and I want to find out as much as I can before I go.”

“Very wise. Always go prepared. Big book you’ve got there. Not a great one for reading myself.”

“It is rather big.” Jenna sighed. “And complicated, too. It’s about Time.”

“Yes, that’s what I was thinking. It’s about time I came back and—”

“No, that’s what I am reading about. Time.”

“Quite. Been away far too long. But like I said, I have a proposition to put to you that may indeed be to your advantage.

Shall I go on?”

Jenna smiled. “Well, you generally do,” she said, closing her book and putting it down on the rug. “Sit down. Perch on my book here.”

“Ah. Thank you, Your Maj, but I think better on my feet,” he said. “Now, my proposition is that if you would be so good as to let me reopen the East Gate Lookout Tower and reinstitute the much missed Official Castle Message Rat Service, I would be honored to offer you the first year’s subscription at premium discount rates—”

“The Palace always got it free before,” said Jenna.

“Really? Well free for the first year, then. I would also throw in your own personal bodyguard rat and priority service at all times.”

“Fine,” said Jenna. “Go ahead.”

Stanley sat down on the book. “You sure?” he asked.

“Yes. We could use the Message Rat Service; it’s really missed. But where you’ll find the rats I don’t know. They’ve all disappeared. You’re the first one I’ve seen in a long time.”

Stanley jumped to his feet and saluted again—a habit he had recently picked up from an old ship’s rat in the Port. “No problem,” he said. “It takes a rat to find a rat. I’ll keep you informed, Your Maj. Your bodyguard will be dispatched ASAP ohcrumbsyou’vegotacat.” From underneath Jenna’s bed a small, scraggy orange cat had emerged. Although the cat was not much bigger than Stanley, there was a steely glint in its blue eyes that the rat did

not like the look of. Not one bit. Stanley, who never forgot a cat, was sure he had seen it somewhere before.

“Oh, well, yes. I’m taking care of him for someone. Calm, Ullr,” said Jenna, noticing the cat was getting ready to pounce.

“I’ll have to rescind the bodyguard offer,” said Stanley, backing away. “Not with a cat in residence. Can’t put my staff at risk.”

Jenna picked up Ullr and held him tight. “Don’t worry,” she said. “Ullr’s the best bodyguard I could wish for.”



Stanley eyed the cat. “Bit on the small side for a bodyguard, isn’t it?” he asked. Ullr unsheathed his claws and tried to wriggle out of Jenna’s grasp. Stanley backed away hurriedly. “I’ll be off, then, Your Maj. And thank you. Good-bye.” Jenna jumped up and let Stanley out of the door. “It’s okay, Sir

Hereward,” she told the ghost who was about to aim another swipe at the rat. “He’s a friend.”

Stanley scampered along the corridor, leaped nimbly down the sweeping Palace stairs and, head held high, walked out of the main Palace door with Jenna’s words ringing in his ears. He was a friend. A friend of Royalty.

If Dawnie could see him now.

7

IN CHARGE

Beetle, Front Office and Inspection Clerk at Number Thirteen Wizard Way, home of the Magykal Manuscriptorium and Spell Checkers Incorporated, was not having a good day. It was a blustery, rainy Monday morning and Jillie Djinn, the Chief Hermetic Scribe, had left him in charge. At first Beetle had been thrilled. It was a real honor, since Miss Jillie Djinn chose her deputies carefully, even if it was only for an hour, and she usually gave the job to the most senior scribe.

But that morning she had fixed Beetle with her disconcerting stare—which always made him wonder what he had done wrong—and said, “Beetle, you’re in charge. Anyone comes about the job, fill out the form and I’ll see them this afternoon. Back in an hour. No earlier. No later.” Then, with a rustle of her dark blue silk robes Miss Djinn had bustled out of the door and was gone.

Beetle had closed the door against the wind and whistled a long low note. Resisting the urge to run amok yelling, “It’s mine, all mine!” he had contented himself with peering into the Manuscriptorium itself and checking that all seemed well. It did. Twenty scribes—one short of the usual number—sat perched at their high desks under twenty dim pools of light, their pens scratching away, copying out various spells, formulas, charms, enchantments, indentures, diatribes, licences, permits, proxies and anything else that was needed by the Wizards—or indeed anyone in the Castle who had a few silver pennies to spare.

Beetle celebrated his temporary promotion by sitting on his swivel chair and spinning around and around in circles—which was not allowed—while practicing his I’m-in-charge look. For five heady minutes everything had been wonderful—and then it all went wrong.

Beetle was amazed at how much trouble could cram itself into such a short space of time. It began when a tall, thin boy dressed in a shabby black tunic and travel-stained cloak came into the front office, made Jillie Djinn’s new—and extremely irritating—Daily Customer Counter click over to number three and demanded to see the Chief Hermetic Scribe.

“She’s out,” said Beetle snappily, deciding he did not like the look of the boy at all. “I’m in charge.” The boy looked Beetle up and down and sniggered. “Oh, yeah,” he said. “I don’t think.”

“Obviously not,” replied Beetle, surprised to hear himself sounding remarkably like Marcia Overstrand for a moment.

Remembering, a little late, that a member of the Manuscriptorium must be civil at all times, Beetle hurriedly asked,

“Well, um, can I help you?”

“I doubt it.” The boy shrugged.

Beetle took a deep breath and counted to ten. Then he said, “I’m sure I can do something if you tell me what you want.”

“I want that scribe’s job,” the boy replied.

Beetle was shocked. “The scribe’s job?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said the boy. He grinned, pleased at the effect he had had. “Like I said, the scribe’s job.”

“But—but do you have any qualifications?” Beetle stammered.

In reply, the boy leaned forward and clicked his finger and thumb in Beetle’s face. A flicker of black flame appeared from the tip of his thumb.

“That’s my qualification,” the boy said.

Beetle sat down in his chair with a bump. He’d heard about Darke tricks, although he’d never actually seen one before.

It had not escaped his notice that the boy was wearing what he assumed to be a cheap copy of the fabled Two-Faced Darke

Ring. The boy was obviously one of those weird kids who thought that if they dressed in black and bought pretend Darke trinkets from Gothyk Grotto in The Ramblings, they were the next Apprentice to old DomDaniel.

Beetle blamed Jillie Djinn. She had, much to his disapproval, put a notice up on the door to the Manuscriptorium a few weeks ago, seeking a new scribe. Beetle had objected, saying it would be an invitation to all kinds of weird people to apply. But Miss Djinn had insisted.

To Beetle’s relief, up until that moment no one had applied for the job. He had been busy trying to persuade the notoriously stingy Miss Djinn to pay for an advertisement in The Scribes and Scriveners Journal. That morning he had, in fact, left a copy of their special-offer reduced rates on her desk. But now it looked as if his worst fears had come true.

With a sigh, Beetle got out the standard Manuscriptorium job application form, licked the end of his pencil and asked,

“Name?”

“Septimus Heap,” said the boy.

“Don’t be stupid,” said Beetle.

“No one calls me stupid!” the boy shouted. “No one. Got that?”

“Okay, okay,” said Beetle. “But you are not Septimus Heap.”

“How do you know?” the boy said with a sneer.

“Because I know Septimus Heap. And he’s not you. No way.”

The boy's dark eyes flashed angrily. "Well, that's where you're wrong. I know who I am. You don't. So where it says

'name' on your little form you can write down 'Septimus Heap.'"

"No."

Beetle and the boy stared each other down. The boy looked away first. "Yeah, well," he said. "I was called that. Once." Beetle decided to humor the boy in case he suddenly lost it—not that Beetle was concerned about coming off worse in a fight. Although the boy was a little taller than him, he was thin and had a weak look about him, whereas Beetle was sturdy and powerfully built. But Beetle did not want the front office trashed, particularly while he was in charge. "So what are you called now?" he asked quietly.

The boy did not answer right away. His black eyes, which Beetle noticed were flecked with green, flickered around like a lizard's. It seemed to Beetle as if the boy was making up a name on the spot.

Beetle was right. Merrin needed a name fast and he wanted something special. He didn't like being Merrin Meredith; it didn't feel like him. Besides, it was a stupid name. Meredith was a girl's name and he thought that Merrin was plain silly. He needed something scary. Quickly, Merrin chose the two scariest people he had known in his life—DomDaniel and the Hunter.

Beetle was getting impatient. "So what's your name?" he asked.

"Dom—er, I mean, Daniel."

"DomDaniel?" Beetle shook his head.

"Don't be stupid. I said Daniel. Daniel. Got that?"

Beetle concentrated on keeping calm and said, "Daniel what?"

"Daniel Hunter."

“Okay. I’ll put down ‘Daniel Hunter,’ all right?” asked Beetle with exaggerated patience.

“Yeah.”

“You sure? Don’t want to change your mind again, do you?”

“Look, it’s my name, right? So put it down,” the boy said with a snarl.

Deciding that the best thing to do was to get rid of the boy as soon as he could, Beetle hurriedly filled out the rest of the form. He made no comment when the boy told him he had had at least ten years experience as an Apprentice to two Wizards and a working knowledge of White Witchcraft. Beetle did not believe a word of what the boy said and would have written down that he had flown to the Moon and back if it would have sped up his departure.

At last the form was filled in. With some relish, Beetle viciously impaled it on the spike of paperwork awaiting Jillie Djinn’s return.

The boy showed no sign of leaving.

“That’s it,” said Beetle. “You can go now.”

“So when do I come for my interview?”

Bother, thought Beetle. Merrin watched him closely as he looked through the Daily Diary, a hefty ledger that lived on Beetle’s desk and was his job to keep up to date. “Two thirty-three precisely,” he said. “Not a minute early, not a minute late.”

“See ya then,” said the boy with a smirk.

“Look forward to it,” replied Beetle coolly. “Allow me to show you out.” Beetle got up, held the door open and stared at Merrin until he was gone. Then he slammed the door with a bang that shook the office. At that the Rogue Spell Alarm sounded.

The Rogue Spell Alarm was designed to be particularly annoying—a series of loud screeches to the accompaniment of shrill, unremitting bell. Unsure whether it was another Darke trick or if there really was a rogue spell on the loose, Beetle sent four reluctant scribes down to the basement to check it out. But despite some serious thumping sounds echoing up from the basement, the alarm did not stop. Beetle was faced with a rebellion from the remaining scribes, who



were trying to get on with the day’s work. Exasperated, he sent two of the more beefy scribes down as reinforcements and suggested that the others find some earplugs. This was not received well.

At that point, a great crash shook the front office. Fearsome growls and thuds could be heard through the reinforced door that led from the office to the Wild Book Store. Beetle took a deep breath and peered through the inspection flap in the door. A big fight had broken out. The air was thick with fur and feathers. Beetle knew he had to get in there fast, before the whole bookstore got trashed. As he tentatively opened the door, a large—and very hairy—Spider Almanac tried to force its way out.

Unfortunately Beetle asked Foxy, one of the more highly strung scribes, to help him hold the door. It was not a good choice. Foxy screamed and fainted, knocking over two huge bottles of indelible ink, which spilled their entire contents over two weeks’ worth of Jillie Djinn’s calculations that Beetle was supposed to be copying for her.

Beetle put his head around the door to the Manuscriptorium and yelled, “Erase Spell! Quick!” Then, taking a deep breath, he plunged into the Wild

Book Store.

Ten minutes later a disheveled, sore, but successful Beetle emerged from the store. Foxy was still flat out on the floor, being stepped over by the scribes as they hunted desperately for an Erase Spell before Jillie Djinn returned. The Rogue Spell Alarm was still ringing. And Beetle, who had taken his own advice and had two cork earplugs with twirly handles sticking out of his ears, was nursing some nasty scratches from an ambush by a Foryx Field Guide. It could not, thought Beetle, get any worse.

It could.

There was a sudden ping

and the door counter clicked over to four. In strode Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard; her purple cloak flying in the wind, her dark curly hair wet and windswept from the cold spring rain. Marcia frowned at the shrieking of the Alarm, which drilled into her ears and seemed to meet somewhere in the soft and delicate middle of her head.

“Beetle!” she yelled. “What on earth is going on?”

8

THE VAULTS

There was something about Marcia

Overstrand that always seemed to fill the space she was in—and then some. Beetle instinctively stepped back to give the ExtraOrdinary Wizard more room.

“What on earth is this awful din?” Marcia shouted.

“She’s not here,” replied Beetle, who thought Marcia had asked, “Where on earth is the awful Djinn?”

“What?”

Beetle glanced desperately at the clock—had Jillie Djinn only been gone for such a short time? “Back in thirty minutes!” he yelled.

Marcia was beginning to get the feeling that she had stepped into the middle of one of the new-style plays that Septimus had taken her to see in the small Theater in The Ramblings. “And what have you got growing out of your ears?” she asked.

Beetle suddenly remembered his earplugs and pulled them out with a faint pop. “Sorry,” he said, raising his voice above the Alarm, which chose that very moment to stop.

“No need to shout,” said Marcia.

“No. Er, sorry,” Beetle stammered. “Can I help you, Madam Marcia? I’m, um, in charge until Miss Djinn gets back.”

“Oh, good.” Marcia smiled as if relieved, which surprised Beetle.

“Been a bit of a morning,” he said. He tried unsuccessfully to smooth down his thick black hair, which always stuck out at odd angles when he got flustered.

“So I see,” said Marcia. “Well, it happens to us all.”

“Does it?” said Beetle, surprised.

“All the time.” Marcia sighed. “Now, Beetle, unfortunately I need to go down to the Vaults.” Feeling tremendously relieved that Marcia was taking things so well, Beetle led the ExtraOrdinary Wizard into the Manuscriptorium. As they stepped through the door there was a flash of green light. A huddle of scribes leaped back with a shout and then craned forward to see the results of their Erase Spell. A loud shriek came from the middle of the huddle. “Argh, my feet! Look at my feet!”

A collection of gasps rose from the group.

“I told you that spell was moldy but you wouldn’t listen.”

“Hey, those are big toadstools!”

“Yeah, massive.”

“Now your feet look like they smell, Partridge.”

A loud laugh came from the group; then one of the scribes noticed Marcia standing behind them. He nudged the scribe next to him and seconds later an embarrassed silence fell.

“Good morning, Scribes,” said Marcia.

“Good morning, Madam Overstrand,” the scribes chorused like good schoolchildren.

“Having trouble?” asked Marcia with a smile.

The scribes nodded sheepishly.

Beetle was amazed at Marcia’s good temper. He did not realize that Marcia was particularly fond of him ever since he had helped her with a difficult episode in her life not long before, which had involved an aggressive bunch of bones.

Beetle watched admiringly as Marcia, with a flick of her fingers and a flash of Magykal purple light, wiped out the impressive crop of toadstools that had sprung up from Partridge’s feet and burst through his boots in a spectacular array of red, orange and lurid yellow. Leaving Partridge gazing at his boots, which now had a random selection of holes dotted over them, Marcia Erased the spilled ink, ReFilled the ink bottles and Restored Jillie Djinn’s calculations.

Amid the chorus of grateful “thank-yous” from the scribes—particularly from Partridge—Marcia stepped over the recumbent form of Foxy. Beetle showed her through a concealed door in the bookshelves that lined the Manuscriptorium, then he followed Marcia into a candle-lit, winding passage. The passage was long and sloped steeply downward until it came

to a flight of stone steps. At the foot of these was a huge studded iron door—and the belligerent Ghost of the Vaults.

The Ghost of the Vaults was one of the Ancients—ghosts over five hundred years old—who inhabited the older parts of the Castle. But unlike all the other Ancients, he was not particularly faded and his voice was still strong. He had a hectoring manner and was one of the most unpleasant ghosts in the Castle. The Ghost of the Vaults refused to tell anyone his name, although his old-fashioned Chief Hermetic Scribe robes were somewhat of a giveaway. Marcia was well aware who he was and Beetle had figured it out too—the ghost was the very first Chief Scribe ever to hold office, Tertius Fume. But although Beetle had searched for information about Tertius Fume, he had found nothing—except a snippet hidden in a damp old tome that he had rescued from propping up the rotten end of a bookshelf in a Manuscriptorium storeroom. The book, which Beetle guessed was part of an old series for children, was called: One Hundred and One Questions

You Have Always Wanted to Ask About: HOTEPA-RA!

(Our Castle's very first ExtraOrdinary Wizard)

Deluxe edition with answers

Although the last few pages of answers were eaten away by mold, Beetle had found out a lot of things he hadn't known.

One of the questions was: Did Hotep-Ra have a best friend?

The answer intrigued Beetle: Yes, he did!! (The book was much given to exclamation marks.) But, boys and girls, he was not a good friend. He was an old friend who came to visit from far away, and his name was Tertius Fume. At first Hotep-Ra was pleased to see him. They had lots of fun! Hotep-Ra gave his best friend a house to live in on Wizard Way.

Tertius Fume was very clever and soon his house became the Manuscriptorium! But although Hotep-Ra's best friend was clever, he was not nice! (Remember, boys and girls, that it is much better to be nice than

clever.) Soon Tertius Fume was doing bad things that Hotep-Ra did not know about and so he came to a Bad End!

That was the only place Beetle had seen Tertius Fume's name actually written down—apart from heading the list of all the Chief Hermetic Scribes inscribed on the honor board in the front office. It was as if everything about him had been expunged.

Tertius Fume glared at Marcia and Beetle as they came down the steps. He was not a pleasant-looking ghost. His deep black eyes were narrow slits in his pale face, which sported a long gray goatee. The ghost's thin white lips were drawn back into a mocking snarl and moved, Beetle realized, even when he was not talking. It looked as if he were chewing the cud.

“Password...” said Tertius Fume. His deep, hollow-sounding voice echoed off the damp stone walls and made the hairs on the back of Beetle's neck stand up. The ghost gave him the creeps.

Marcia sighed as if expecting trouble. “Tentacle,” she said.

“No.”

“Stop messing around,” said Marcia. “Of course it is.”

“Why?” Tertius Fume leaned back against the door, folded his arms and regarded Marcia with a superior air. Beetle, who was not a violent boy, felt like giving him a good kick.

“I have not the faintest idea why,” said Marcia irritably, “but that is not the point. One doesn't have to know why; a password just is. Now let us through. Tentacle. Tent-a-cle.”

“No. I've changed it.”

“You can't change a password without clearing it first with the Password Committee, of which I am Chairwoman. And you haven't. Tentacle it was and Tentacle it remains.”

But the great iron door to the Vaults stayed firmly closed. Tertius Fume looked at Marcia with an amused expression and started examining his ghostly fingernails as if Marcia was no longer of any consequence at all. Beetle began to think that there was some truth in the old story that Tertius Fume had been assassinated by a group of disaffected scribes.

“Very well,” said Marcia. “You leave me no choice but to OverRide the password. Stand back, Beetle.”

“Ah. Just testing,” said Tertius Fume a little hurriedly. “You’ve passed. In you go now, and don’t mess anything up.”

“Idiot,” said Marcia under her breath.

Beetle took a couple of lamps from the rack outside the door and lit them. Marcia gave the door a bad-tempered shove.

It creaked open and the smell of damp earth and musty paper wafted into the stairwell. Inside the Vaults, Marcia locked the door and did an Alarm on it. If Tertius Fume was going to sidle up and eavesdrop she wanted some warning.

Marcia was still seething about the ghost. “He doesn’t like women, that’s his trouble,” she told Beetle. “He never did that with Alther, but ever since I took over he’s done that every time. Every time. It drives me crazy.”

“We just call him Old Goat-Face,” said Beetle.

“Do you?” Marcia laughed. “Well, I don’t suppose he would like that. Now, Beetle, I would like The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath, please.”

“Oh, right.” Beetle sounded surprised. “Um, let me get you a seat.” Beetle placed the lamps on a great lump of a table that looked as though it was carved out of stone, and rubbed the dust off the seat of the old chair beside it with the end of his sleeve. Marcia sneezed. She sat down and wrapped her purple cloak tightly around her against the damp air of the Vaults. “Oh, and Beetle—could you bring the most recent ExtraOrdinary Apprentice Urn?”

“No problem. I’ll be back in a sec.”

Marcia watched the flame from his lamp guttering in the drafts that blew through the ancient ventilation system, as Beetle disappeared into the farthest reaches of the Vaults. Beetle knew his way around the Vaults with his eyes closed—something that he had actually done for his Intermediate Manuscriptorium Management Exam—and he was back quickly with his arms clasped around a huge lapis lazuli blue and gold urn. The lamp hung from a spare finger and on top of the urn a long cylinder wrapped in cloth was balanced precariously.

Extremely carefully, Beetle set the urn and the cylinder down on the table, and he placed his lamp beside it. In the light of the flame the lapis lazuli gleamed a beautiful deep dark blue and the streaks of gold that ran through it shone with a warm glow.

“Would you like to take these up to the Hermetic Chamber?” Beetle asked Marcia.

“No, thank you, Beetle,” Marcia replied. “I have no wish to go to the Chamber. In fact I am glad that Miss Djinn is not here. I would like to speak to you in confidence.”

“Me?” gasped Beetle.

“Indeed. In your capacity as Inspection Clerk. And because I trust you.”

“Oh. Thank you.” Beetle flushed.

“Of course I trust your Chief Hermetic Scribe implicitly,” Marcia said. “But she does have a tendency to complicate matters, if you know what I mean?”

Beetle nodded. He knew exactly what Marcia meant.

“Would you take out the Plan, please?”

Beetle unwound the discolored cloth from the long silver tube. The end of the tube was sealed with purple wax, which was stamped with the imprint of the Akhu Amulet. The amulet, which hung around Marcia’s neck, had

been the symbol and source of the power of the ExtraOrdinary Wizards since Hotep-Ra himself.

From her ExtraOrdinary Wizard gold and platinum belt, Marcia unclipped what appeared to be a long silver lozenge.

She muttered something under her breath and, like the claws of a cat unsheathing, a shiny, slightly curved silver blade silently shot out. Beetle watched, fascinated, as Marcia ran the razor-sharp blade around the wax on the end of the tube so that it parted like butter. She drew out a thick roll of paper and unrolled it. From a shelf under the table Beetle took four ornate gold paperweights with silver handles and placed one on each corner.

Marcia took out the tiny spectacles that she used for close work. She perused the complex diagram, running her finger along the path of the Ice Tunnels, muttering to herself. Beetle had politely stepped away but Marcia beckoned him over.

“You know the two tunnel ghosts—the brothers who were trapped in the Emergency Freeze and have been looking for a way out ever since?”

“Eldred and Alfred Stone?”

“That’s them. Well, apparently they have

found a way out. Alther—you know the ghost of Alther Mella? You’re too young to remember but he was our last ExtraOrdinary Wizard.” Beetle nodded. He had met Alther many times recently while Septimus had been learning to use the Flyte Charm. “Well, Alther saw them a couple of nights ago.”

“Actually,” said Beetle, “now I think about it, I haven’t seen them in the tunnels for some time.”

“Really? This is not good news, Beetle. Not good news at all...aha. Now come and have a look. There is something going on here.” Marcia stabbed a long finger at a fuzzy area on what appeared to be a tangle of worms, snaking and folding in and out of one another.

Beetle had never seen a Live Plan before. As he looked he was sure he saw something on the edge of the Plan move.

“Did you see that?” gasped Marcia. “It moved.”

“It’s doing it again,” said Beetle. “I think it’s the hatch under old Weasal’s place.”

“I thought

you’d know what you were looking at,” said Marcia. “Beetle, I need you to go and check this out. Urgently. That hatch and this fuzzy bit here... wherever that is.”

Beetle whistled between his teeth. “That’s under the old Alchemie Chamber.” Marcia frowned. “I think,” she said, “that it might be a good idea if you take Septimus with you. There’s safety in numbers. I’ll send him over. You do understand that this is highly confidential, don’t you?” Beetle nodded.

“I particularly do not want the Ghost of the Vaults to know. He is not to be trusted. You know who he is, I suppose?”

“Tertius Fume?”

“Quite. I thought you would have figured it out. Septimus did too.” Marcia smiled fondly. “Very well, you can put the Plan away now. It’s not good to have it out in the light for too long.” Beetle began rolling up the Plan. “Do you still want the Apprentice Urn?” he asked.

Marcia snapped out of her thoughts. “Oh! I’d quite forgotten. Yes, please, Beetle.” Marcia unsealed the urn and plunged her arm deep inside. She drew out a roll of vellum tied with purple and green ribbons and sealed with purple sealing wax, which also bore the imprint of the Akhu Amulet. Marcia checked the signature written along the length of the roll. Septimus’s young, wobbly writing was unmistakable, but Marcia was amazed how it had changed in such a short time. Now, Septimus’s signature was sprawling and confident—if a little overcomplicated. Satisfied that she

had the right urn, Marcia replaced the roll of indentures. She took out from her ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt a beautiful tiny gold and silver arrow. For a moment she held it in her palm and both she and Beetle gazed at it.

“Sep’s Flyte Charm,” breathed Beetle.

“Half right, Beetle,” corrected Marcia. “It is the Flyte Charm but it does not belong to Septimus. The Flyte Charm is one of the Ancient Charms; it belongs to no one.” With that she dropped the Charm into the depths of the urn.

“Oh!” said Beetle. “Um...did you mean to do that?”

“I most certainly did,” said Marcia. “Septimus needs to settle down and get on with his work. Recently he has been rushing around all over the place—which is, I understand, one of the effects of having the Flyte Charm. People become



unsettled, always wanting to be off. Of course, he says

he’s been seeing his mother, but Sarah tells me she hasn’t seen him for ages and I believe her. The Flyte Charm can stay here until he is old enough to

handle it. It is not a toy. You may reseal now, Beetle.” One of the skills Beetle had learned in the Manuscriptorium was when to say nothing. He could tell that right then was just such a moment. He took the candle from his lamp and set it under a small tripod with a tiny brass saucepan perched upon it. From a drawer in the table he took out a knife and a great chunk of purple sealing wax, then he began to shave off some wax, allowing the shavings to drop into the pan. Marcia and Beetle watched the wax slowly melt into a dark purple puddle. Very carefully, Beetle poured half the wax over the end of the Plan and the other half so that it covered the ridge between the top of the urn and its gold stopper. When the wax was nearly set Marcia took off the Akhu Amulet and pressed it deep into the wax, leaving the unmistakable dragon imprint on the seals.

Marcia watched Beetle disappear into the depths of the Vaults. Somewhere surprisingly distant, she heard the faint scrape of lapis lazuli against stone as Beetle pushed the urn back into its place on a dark shelf far away from prying eyes, then the click of the lock as Beetle laid The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath back in its ebony chest.

“A successful visit?” said Tertius Fume grumpily as they left the Vaults. “I do hope you found nothing too Alarming?”

“I knew

he’d try to listen,” Marcia spluttered indignantly as she followed Beetle back along the zigzag passage. “Serves him right. I put a Sting in the Alarm.”

Beetle chuckled. You don’t mess with Marcia, he thought.

9

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

A bored Thing slowly chewed the tops of its fingers, pulling at long bits of skin with its blackened teeth. It glared at its Master—a waste of space in the opinion of the Thing—and cursed its ill fortune at having been Engendered

for such a fool. Its Master, blissfully unaware of the waves of loathing coming his way, was also busy chewing.

Merrin was leaning nonchalantly against the old clock tower opposite the Palace, eating a licorice snake, enjoying his first ever taste of a sweet. After his contretemps with Beetle in the Manuscriptorium, Merrin had wandered back through The Ramblings and had discovered Ma Custard's All-Day-All-Night Sweet Shop, tucked away on the far side of the Castle down Sugar Cone Cut beside the Old Dock. While the Thing and its sack of bones had loitered outside, creating an oppressive haze that put off other customers, Merrin had spent ages gazing at all the sweets. Ma Custard, who was used to people dithering for hours between lemon lumps and ferocious fizzes, had let him linger. Eventually Merrin had chosen the licorice snake because it reminded him of the black snake that Simon Heap kept, and Merrin had always wondered what snake tasted like.

Merrin savored his last sticky mouthful of licorice. He stared up at the windows that ran the length of the Palace—a long, low, mellow old building—and began to count them. It was then that the idea came to him. Why waste his money on renting a room? Just think how many licorice snakes he could buy with a whole week's rent. Anyway, he belonged in the Castle—it was his right to live anywhere he wanted. So there. And where better than the Palace? Merrin swallowed the snake's tail with a decisive gulp. Problem solved.

Merrin was good at finding ways into places—especially places he should not go. So it was easy for him to sneak unnoticed along the narrow high-walled alleyway that led around the outside of the Palace grounds to the small door in the wall of the Palace kitchen garden. The door was open as usual. Sarah Heap liked to leave it open so her friend Sally Mullin could drop by and have a midmorning chat before she got back to the lunchtime rush in her café.

Although Merrin planned to one day have the entire Palace at his disposal—just as DomDaniel's deputy, the Supreme Custodian, once had—for now things were, regrettably, a little different. Closely followed by the Thing, he slipped in through the open door and found himself in the kitchen garden.

Merrin liked the kitchen garden; it appealed to his sense of order. It was the one place where Sarah Heap was tidy. The garden was bounded on all sides by a high redbrick wall. It was neatly laid out with close-mown grass paths running between well-tended beds where Sarah was in the process of planting early lettuce, peas, beans and all kinds of vegetables that Merrin did not even recognize, let alone dream of eating. The paths all led to a large well in the center of the garden, where Sarah drew the water for her plants. At the far end of the garden was a low brick arch, which Merrin could see led into a covered way.

Keeping close to the wall, Merrin carefully walked the grass paths, resisting the urge to count the newly sewn lettuce seedlings. As he got near the arch, he could not believe his luck. At the end of the covered way was a half open door that led straight into the Palace. His new home beckoned.

It was then that Merrin felt something

breathing down his neck. He had had the feeling of being followed for a while. He had felt it outside the Grateful Turbot, again when he had come out of the Manuscriptorium and particularly outside Ma Custard's—something had been Waiting

for him, but every time he had turned around he had seen nothing. But now Merrin was sure. He spun around and caught the Thing unawares.

“Got you!” he yelled and then clapped his hand over his mouth in horror. Someone would hear. Merrin and the Thing froze, staring at each other, listening for footsteps. None came.

“You stupid Thing, I told you to look for my cloak,” hissed Merrin. “What are you doing here?”

“I am come to help you, Master,” the Thing replied in a low, mournful whisper.

“Just you?” asked Merrin suspiciously.

“Just me, Master,” replied the Thing dolefully.

Merrin felt relieved. “Well, you can wait outside. I’m not having you tiptoeing behind me in the Palace—ohcrumbswhydidyoubringthose?” Merrin had caught sight of the sack of bones.

“For yooooooooou, Master,” said the Thing in its low, insinuating voice.

Merrin stared at the Thing. He hated the way he could not quite see the Thing’s expression; it made him think it was mocking him. But Merrin knew that, whatever the Thing

might think, it had to obey him. “I don’t want those disgusting bones,” he told the Thing. “You can...” Merrin cast around for somewhere to put them. His eyes lighted on the well. “You can chuck them down the well.” The Thing looked horrified but all Merrin saw was a faint flash of red from the lizard eyes. Leaving the Thing staring at its precious sack of bones in disbelief, Merrin slipped through the arch and crept along the covered way. He flitted from pillar to pillar until he had reached the half open door. The door looked as if it could have a nasty squeak, so he squeezed through the gap into the cool, musty shade of the old building. And there he was—inside the Palace.

Not long after, Sarah Heap came into the garden through a small gate near the old kitchens. She still wore Jannit’s battered sailor’s boater. Sarah rather liked it, as it made her feel quite jaunty and carefree, which was something she had not felt for some time. But as she walked past the well on her way to her greenhouse to collect the seedlings for that day’s planting, a horrible feeling of gloom came over her. She stopped in her tracks—something Darke was by the well.

Sarah Heap had not been interested in Magyk for many years. She had trained as a healer and thought she had left Magyk far behind her. But she still had the telltale Magykal green eyes and knew quite enough to do a See. So when, to her horror, Sarah saw the Thing perched on the edge of her

well—her beautiful clean, clear, pure well—with a sack of something Darke, all Sarah’s Magyk came flooding back to her. She looked the Thing

in the eye—as much as that was possible with its flickering, evasive eyes—and chanted very slowly:

“Pure and clean this well shall stay

Shielded from Darke for a year and a day.”

The Thing

glared angrily at Sarah, but there was nothing it could do. It heaved the sack of bones over its shoulder and sloped off.

Sarah waited until the Thing

had left the kitchen garden, then the awfulness of what she had seen suddenly overcame her and she ran, trembling, back inside to sit with Ethel.

The Thing

waited until Sarah had disappeared into the Palace, then returned to the kitchen garden. Unable now to put the bones where it had been instructed it chose instead the garden shed, where it carefully placed the sack among the piles of flowerpots and general garden clutter. Then the Thing

loped up to the half-open door that led into the Palace and folded itself deep into a leafy bush to wait for its Master’s eventual exit.

The Palace was not what Merrin had expected. It smelled funny—damp and old with musty cooking smells lurking in the corners. And as Merrin’s eyes got used to the dimness, he could see it didn’t look that great either. The plaster on the walls was cracked and crumbling and where he had brushed against it there was white dust all over his black cloak.

Ahead of him was a seemingly endless stone-flagged corridor, known as the Long Walk. It was as wide as a small road, with a threadbare red carpet running along the middle. Warily, Merrin set off. Every few yards a door opened off the corridor and at first he stopped at each one, half expecting someone to come out. But now the Palace was occupied only by Sarah, Silas and Jenna Heap—and Maxie, the wolfhound. Employing staff did not

come naturally to Sarah; she preferred to do things herself. That morning the few Palace servants Sarah had taken on were elsewhere—the Cook was in the kitchens chatting to the Cleaner, the WashingUp Boy was dozing in the pantry and the HouseKeeper had a bad cold and had stayed home.

Soon Merrin realized that the place was deserted and he became braver. He wandered along, poking at the strange array of objects displayed along the Long Walk. There were statues of all shapes and sizes—of animals, people and the kind of weird creatures that Merrin often had bad dreams about. There were tall vases, stuffed tigers, an ancient chariot, petrified trees, shrunken heads, ships' figureheads and all kinds of clutter. Hanging on the walls were ancient portraits of long-dead Queens and Princesses and as Merrin glanced up at them he was sure their eyes followed him. He half expected one of them to reach out, tap him on the shoulder and ask him what he was doing.

But they didn't. No one did.

After a while Merrin came across a tattered and faded red velvet curtain that was looped back, beyond which he could see a steep and narrow flight of stairs twisting up into darkness. This was more like it. He wanted a room right at the top of the Palace—somewhere where he could hide away, make his plans and look down on all the comings and goings.

Quickly Merrin slipped past the curtain. Soon he was tiptoeing up the creaky stairs, past damp and peeling wallpaper, pushing through long, looping cobwebs and once—to his horror—having his foot disappear through a patch of rotten wood into the empty space below.

At the top of the stairs Merrin negotiated a landing piled high with old empty chests, then up two more flights of stairs, until at last he reached the tangle of tiny attic rooms that ran the length of the Palace. This was where, back when the Palace had been full of servants and courtiers, the more important servants had lived, but now the rooms lay empty and forlorn, inhabited by only a few of the less sociable ghosts of governesses, ladies' maids and footmen. Most Palace ghosts preferred the lower floors, where there was a chance to meet old friends, talk about how things were so much

better in the old days and maybe catch a glimpse of the Living Princess if they were lucky.

Merrin chose one of the governess's rooms at the front. It was small, but there was a bed, a table, a small closet and a fireplace that still bore the dusty remains of the last fire in the grate. The room had a mournful atmosphere, helped along by the faded rose-covered wallpaper, but it suited Merrin, who noticed neither.

Merrin, however, did not

suit the occupant of the room. The governess, who was wearing the long gray dress with a red stripe around the hem that all governesses to the Princesses used to wear, leaped to her feet. With a look of horror she watched Merrin walking around her precious, private space as if he owned the place. Twice he nearly Passed Through her foot—which was not surprising as she wore the long, pointy shoes fashionable in her Time. By the time Merrin had sat down on her bed, testing the springs by bouncing like a naughty three-year-old, the governess was in great distress. With a rush of freezing air, she fled from the room, leaving him wondering why the door had suddenly slammed shut.

Merrin took off his backpack and one by one he laid his precious possessions on the small table underneath the little dormer window in descending order of size. He then changed his mind and laid them out alphabetically and—finally—in order of importance. It took a while but eventually from left to right there was: 1 dog-eared book titled: The Darke Index by T.F.F. (Deceased)

1 small, square ebony box inscribed Sleuth

1 Magog claw

1 bottle of flies (mostly dead)

Small tub of Wurm Slime

1 pair of pajamas

1 toothbrush

1 bar of soap

Everything in order, Merrin rubbed the grime from the inside of the little window in his attic room and peered out through the smeared circle. It was a great view—all the way down the old Ceremonial Way. The Ceremonial Way was deserted, as usual, but to the left he could see the Wizard Way, the wind sending the cloaks and hats flapping and flying of those who were scurrying along trying to stay in the shelter of the low, yellow stone buildings. And almost at the end of the Way, on the left, Merrin could just make out the purple door of the Manuscriptorium. And outside the door was that Septimus Heap boy—the bright green Apprentice tunic gave him away.

Merrin could hardly believe that a chance to continue the Darkening had happened so soon—and so easily. Quickly he opened The Darke Index, found the page and began the next stage of Darkening the Destiny of AnOther. He fixed Septimus in his gaze and positioned his thumb so that the left-hand face of the ring was looking out the window. Then he began to chant a long, slow incantation under his breath. Merrin saw Septimus stop, look back and then glance down at his shoe as if he had stepped in something. Merrin chuckled to himself. That Septimus Heap boy had no idea what was going on—no idea at all. Merrin was getting good at this Darke stuff. And he was going to get a lot better.

An amazing feeling of power suddenly swept over Merrin and he laughed out loud. He was the Possessor of the Two-Faced Ring—he was indestructible. For the first time in his life he felt important. But what, right then, felt best of all was the fact that he had his own place, and no one

knew where to find him. No one could come and drag him from his bed and demand that he learn his lessons or eat up his cabbage sandwich. He could stay in bed all day if he wanted to. In fact, he might just lie down for a bit now. He had not slept well at the Grateful Turbot; the bed had been lumpy and he had heard the sound of someone else breathing in the room. And the night before that he had hardly slept at all. Merrin yawned. There was a letter he was planning to write, but he'd do it later. He lay down on the governess's equally lumpy bed and fell fast asleep.

Merrin woke groggy and in a panic, unsure of the time. He looked out of the window. There was a large clock on the



tower above the clock repair shop at the end of Wizard Way, and he breathed a sigh of relief. It was all right. He had half an hour until his interview. Quickly, he stuffed The Darke Index into his pocket, strode across the little room and pulled at the door. It was jammed. Merrin pulled again, harder. It was stuck fast.

Twenty-five minutes later and in a total panic, Merrin desperately gave one last, enormous heave on the door. It flew open and sent him hurtling back across the room. Bruised, he picked himself up and rushed out.

Not caring who heard or saw him, Merrin flew down the stairs. He was determined not to mess up this chance. He would get there on time, whatever it took. And whoever got in his way had better look out.

DRAGON MANAGEMENT

Septimus Heap stepped off

the rotating silver spiral stairs that had taken him down through the Wizard Tower from the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's rooms at the top to the entrance Hall. As he hurried across the Hall, he was not surprised to see a message saying GOOD

MORNING, APPRENTICE, YOUR DRAGON IS AWAKE

appear in the multicolored floor, for the floor always greeted him and seemed to know what was going on before he did.

The next greeting was less welcome. "Good morning, Apprentice," came a voice from the Old Spells cupboard next to the pair of massive silver doors guarding the entrance to the Wizard Tower. Septimus jumped—as he always did. The voice belonged to Boris Catchpole, demoted from failed Wizard to night porter after a Final Warning from Marcia. Boris Catchpole's voice always startled Septimus. It gave him flashbacks to his days in the Young Army when Catchpole had been, for a while, the dreaded Deputy Hunter.

"Oh! Good morning, Catchpole," Septimus replied. "Did you deliver my message to the Palace?"

"Indeed I did, Apprentice. Always at your service, ha-ha. And how may I help you this morning?" asked Catchpole, who was on a self-imposed efficiency drive, determined to get back his sub-Wizard status. Catchpole was a beanpole of a man who still wore his treasured blue Ordinary Wizard robes with his old sub-Wizard flashes on the sleeves. It had been just Catchpole's luck not only to be given a set of robes too short for him, but also to get them shrunk in the wash, which meant that two thin white legs stuck out from the hem of the robes before they finally reached the safety of Catchpole's boots.

Like an insecure giant heron, Catchpole skipped in front of Septimus saying, “Allow me to open the doors, Apprentice.”

“I have the password, thank you,” Septimus replied.

Catchpole hopped back. “Oh, yes, of course you do. Silly me. Well, if there’s anything else I can do, anything...” He suddenly stopped, remembering that there was something he definitely did not want to do. He did not want to help with Spit Fyre’s breakfast.

But Septimus—to Catchpole’s relief—did not take him up on his offer. He just murmured the password and let the giant silver doors silently swing open to reveal a gray, blustery spring day splattered with stray drops of rain. Septimus wrapped his green woolen Apprentice cloak around himself and set off at a brisk pace down the big marble steps that led from the Wizard Tower into the Courtyard. He skirted the base of the Tower and headed for a newly built wooden shed, which was neatly tucked in against one of the huge buttresses. Then, very quietly, in the hope that Spit Fyre would not hear and get overexcited, he opened the door and slipped inside.

Septimus clicked his fingers. Two candles sprang into flame, brightening the gray morning light inside the shed and illuminating the interior, which consisted of three big tubs of oats, a barrel of skimmed milk delivered that morning, one tub of windfall apples and, crammed into an old sack, an assortment of pies and sausages, the leftovers from the Meat Pie and Sausage Cart—also delivered early that morning.

With the practiced air of someone who did this every day—weekdays, weekends, holidays and feast days, come rain or shine—Septimus got to work. From outside the shed he wheeled in a large empty wooden tub on the side of which was written in multicolored letters:

SPIT FYRE

DO NOT REMOVE

If found please return to the Wizard Tower Courtyard

Septimus started to fill the tub. He took hold of a long-handled shovel and began to scoop out great quantities of oats and throw them into his wheeled tub. When it was about one third of the way full he emptied the sack of meat pies and sausages into the oats and mixed them in well; then he added two big shovelfuls of the apples. Finally he heaved up the barrel of skimmed milk, unscrewed the top and upended it over the mixture. The milk tumbled out with a loud glugging noise. When it had all disappeared into the oat and sausage mix, Septimus plunged in the shovel and, with some difficulty, stirred the glutinous mix. By the time he had finished, the oats had soaked up the milk and had expanded to nearly fill the tub. Septimus took out the shovel, shook off a few clinging pieces of steak and apple and regarded the mixture with an air of satisfaction. It was now a grubby brown color flecked with bits of broken piecrust, smashed sausages and bruised apples. Perfect.

Septimus wheeled the tub out into the Courtyard and took off, the wheels clattering and jumping on the cobbles. As he expected, as soon as the tub hit the cobbles, a loud thudding echoed around the Courtyard walls and the ground under his feet shook as though a stampede of elephants were on its way. Spit Fyre, Septimus's almost full-grown dragon, was hungry.

A stampede of elephants might well have been easier to manage than Septimus's next task, which was to let Spit Fyre out of the Dragon Kennel—a long stone building with a line of small windows set in just under the eaves. Septimus had recently had the Wizard Workshop make up a new set of doors with a huge iron bar inside each one. The trick was to open them without getting himself, or any passing Wizard, trampled into the ground. Septimus had noticed that it had been quite some time since any Wizard had actually dared to pass by during Spit Fyre's breakfast time, particularly since the notorious episode of Catchpole being mistaken for a large meat pie (or was it a sausage?) and hurled into the breakfast tub by a well-aimed swipe of the dragon's tail.

Septimus left the breakfast tub at the foot of a wide ramp that led up to the barn doors of the Dragon Kennel. He tiptoed up the ramp in the vain hope that Spit Fyre would not notice him coming, which of course the dragon did. And as the doors reverberated to great thuds of Spit Fyre banging them

with his nose, Septimus calmly placed his hand on the doors and said, “UnBar!” Deep inside the thick doors he felt the whirr and rumble of the bar retracting. He immediately leaped to one side. No sooner had Septimus safely cleared the ramp than the doors sprang open under the force of a dragon, who now weighed the equivalent of 1,264 seagulls.

His claws sending up showers of sparks as they scraped along the stones, Spit Fyre skidded to a halt in front of his breakfast tub and began siphoning up the contents. The noise reminded Septimus of the sound his bathwater made when he took the plug out, only a hundred times louder. Catchpole, who claimed to have seen the elusive bottomless whirlpool in Bleak Creek, said that when he closed his eyes, he was hard pressed to tell the difference between Bleak Creek and Spit Fyre eating his breakfast, although he thought that Spit Fyre was probably louder.

The dragon did not take long to finish his breakfast. He scraped the barrel clean with his long, green, rasping tongue; then he licked his lips appreciatively and sucked up the last few shreds of sausage that had stuck to his scales.

“Hello, Spit Fyre,” said Septimus, careful to approach the dragon from the front as he had had a few narrow misses with Spit Fyre’s powerful tail. The dragon snuffled a greeting and put his head down so that his great green dragon eye, the iris rimmed with the red of Fyre, looked into Septimus’s brilliant green eyes. Septimus stroked the dragon’s velvety nose and said, “I’ll be back later, Spit Fyre. Be good.”

The dragon settled down outside the Dragon Kennel and closed his eyes. Now the usual late-morning chorus began—the crash of slamming windows as Wizard after Wizard tried to escape the low rumble of Spit Fyre’s snores echoing around the yard.

Septimus jumped over Spit Fyre’s tail, taking care not to trip over the barb at the end. Then he walked across the Courtyard and into the blue shadows of the beautiful lapis lazuli Great Arch. There, as he always did now, he stopped and looked down Wizard Way. Septimus still loved the feeling of being in the Wizard Way of his own Time, where he belonged. He breathed in the rain-misted air and as he gazed down the wide avenue something

purple caught his eye at the far end. Septimus knew it was Marcia Overstrand; a gust of wind had blown the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's cloak out like a great purple sail behind her as she strode through the Palace gates.

Wondering what had sent Marcia to the Palace, Septimus checked in his pocket for a piece of paper and set off along Wizard Way to the Manuscriptorium. He paused for a moment outside the door, freshly painted in Jillie Djinn's new corporate color—a pinkish purple. He Felt someone Ill-Watching

him. Slowly, Septimus turned and, to avoid the Watcher realizing he had been Felt, he lifted his foot as if he was looking at something he had stepped in. At the same time he tried, as best he could, to put up a Shield against the Ill-Watcher.

While he energetically scraped the sole of his shoe against the curb he turned his eyes in the direction of the Ill-Watching. To his surprise his eyes were drawn to the Palace. Puzzled, Septimus stopped scraping. He must be wrong.

There was no one in the Palace who would do that. He was getting jumpy. What he needed was half an hour of Beetle's company and a mug of FizzFroot.

Septimus pushed open the door to the Manuscriptorium. Ping. Jillie Djinn's counter clicked over to number seven.

“Wotcha, Sep,” said Beetle, jumping up from his chair.

“Wotcha, Beetle,” Septimus replied.

“That was quick. I wasn't expecting you so soon.”

“I didn't know you were expecting me at all,” said Septimus, puzzled. He took the piece of paper from his pocket. It was covered with his very best capital letters carefully drawn in various colors. “I need a space in your window.” Beetle looked at the Manuscriptorium front window—what he could see of it, at least, which amounted to no more than a few square

inches. The rest was piled high with stacks of books, pamphlets, papers, manuscripts, parchments, bills, receipts and remedies that were randomly—and rather stickily—interspersed with old pies, socks, poems, peashooters, marshmallows (Beetle was a great fan of marshmallows), umbrellas and sausage sandwiches from the meat pie cart, most of which had been put down by absentminded scribes only to be instantly lost in the muddle and never seen again—although they were sometimes smelled.

“Can’t I get you something else a bit easier, Sep?” asked Beetle. “Like an All My Dreams Come True Spell or something?”

Septimus looked at the piece of paper. “It’s not very big,” he said. “Couldn’t you fit it in somewhere? It’s really important. Marcia’s threatening to send Spit Fyre away because she says I’m spending too much time looking after him and I’m not getting any work done. So I thought if I did this…”

Septimus handed the paper to Beetle. ““Dragon-sitter wanted,” Beetle read out. ““Irregular hours but interesting work.

Sense of humor an advantage. Apply to Septimus Heap, Wizard Tower.” Beetle snorted with laughter. “They’ll need a bit more than a sense of humor, won’t they, Sep? How about cast-iron feet, no sense of smell and being able to run a hundred yards in two seconds flat—and that’s just for starters.” Septimus looked downcast. “I know,” he said, “but I didn’t want to put people off. I’ve had people interested but as soon as I show them how to clean out the Dragon Kennel something weird happens. They suddenly remember that, oops, they completely forgot that they had agreed to look after their great-aunt or, oh bother, it escaped their mind that they had to take a long sea voyage the very next day. Then they look all embarrassed and say how really upset they are as they would have loved to have taken the job. I believed the first two but after that it got a bit predictable. Oh, go on, Beetle, please put my notice up. You get all sorts of unusual people looking in here; one of them might do the job.”

“You’re right, we get all sorts of unusual people in here,” grumbled Beetle. “Too unusual for my liking. Tell you what, Sep. Since it’s you, I’ll make a space on the door. This advertisement for a new scribe can go. It’s attracting

the wrong kind of people, just like I told Miss Djinn it would. I'll stick yours there instead."

"Oh, thanks, Beetle."

With some enthusiasm, Beetle ripped down Jillie Djinn's notice, crumpled it into a little ball and hurled it into the wastepaper bin. Then he got a pot of glue, slathered it all over Septimus's paper, and stuck it on the grubby window.

Septimus tried not to notice that the colored letters had run.

"I'm due a break now," said Beetle, licking the glue off his fingers. "Like some FizzFroot?"

"You bet," said Septimus. He followed Beetle out through the Manuscriptorium and into Beetle's den in the backyard.

Beetle set out two mugs, dropped a Fizz Bom cube into each one and lit a small burner. As the kettle began to boil, it let out the loud squeal that—ever since Beetle had once let it boil dry—it always made when the water got too hot for it.

Beetle took the kettle off the burner and poured the water into the mugs, which immediately frothed up and began to overflow with chilled pink foam. He handed one to Septimus.

"Oof, that's a good one!" Septimus spluttered as the FizzFroot went straight up his nose.

"Funny thing happened this morning," said Beetle after a few restorative gulps of FizzFroot. "Someone said they were you."

Septimus took another gulp of FizzFroot and sneezed. "Atchoo! Me?"

"Yeah. Weird kid. Wanted the scribe job."

"So what did you say?"

“Well, I told him he wasn’t

you, and he didn’t take it too well. But I had to tell him that he could come back later. Not my job to say who can apply to be a scribe. Hope Miss Djinn can see he’s as nutty as a fruitcake. I shall tell her he knows a few Darke tricks, too.

Don’t want any of that stuff in here.”

“Darke tricks?” asked Septimus.

“Yeah. You know, the flame coming out of the thumb one. Used to be considered highly insulting in the old days. Not nice even now.”

“No. I wonder who he was.”

“Hmm. Well, I’ll let you know if he comes back.”

Septimus and Beetle sat for a while, drinking their FizzFroot, until Beetle remembered that before everything had gone crazy that morning he had been hoping Septimus would drop by. “Hey, Sep,” he said, suddenly jumping to his feet with a smile back on his face, “we can kill two birds with one stone. I’ve got something to show you.”



“What?”

“You won’t know unless you come and look, will you?” Beetle grinned.

11

DRAGON-WATCHER

Mr. Pot!” yelled Marcia, striding across the Palace lawns, her quarry in sight. “Mr. Pot!” Billy Pot did not reply; he was pushing a large wheelbarrow of dragon dung and was not in a good mood. Billy had completely forgotten how pleased he had been when Septimus had allowed him to start collecting Spit Fyre’s dragon dung. But that had been in what Billy now considered to be the Good Old Days, when he had a regular job mowing the Palace lawns with his Contraption. Billy’s Contraption worked on organic principles, which meant that it contained about twenty hungry lawn lizards in a box that Billy wheeled—extremely slowly—across the grass, while the lawn lizards ate the grass—or not.

Billy kept hundreds of lawn lizards in lizard lodges down by the river, and as the lizard population grew he began to have trouble keeping them under control. The dragon dung had worked miracles—at first. Fearing that a monster lizard had moved into their territory, the lawn lizards instantly became manageable. However, after some time passed and the monster lizard had not materialized, the lawn lizards, which were not stupid, realized something was up. And now they were just as uncontrollable as they ever had been and—having seen off a massive rival—they were arrogant too, and had taken to snapping at Billy’s ankles. Billy was done with lawn lizards.

The last straw for Billy had come when, after a long day’s mowing and several changes of lizards, the Contraption—never the same since it had been trampled by Simon Heap’s horse—had finally fallen to pieces. Sarah Heap had seized her chance. Disgusted with the great piles of dragon dung littering the Palace lawns, Sarah had dispatched Silas to the Port with strict instructions to return with a state-of-the-art lawn mower. Silas was unusually efficient and came back on the return Port barge with an impressive machine.

Billy hated it. It had horrible sharp blades instead of lizards and had to be pulled by horse. Billy was a reptile person; he didn’t like horses.

But the dragon dung had kept right on coming.

Sarah Heap, who was finally getting used to telling people what to do, provided Billy with a large field beside the Palace lawns and told him to shift the dragon dung into the field now

and get to planting vegetables. Billy didn’t like that. He didn’t like vegetables, either.

Billy Pot now made a point of not talking to anyone who looked like they might be trouble—and the ExtraOrdinary Wizard yelling at him ticked all Billy’s trouble boxes. But Marcia was not easily put off. She chased after Billy, who saw her coming and did his best to pick up speed, but was not entirely successful, hampered as he was by his heavy wheelbarrow.

“Mr. Pot!” Marcia jumped in front of the barrow, caught the heel of her pointy purple python shoe in an old rabbit hole and promptly fell over. Billy peered over the pile of dragon dung only to find that the ExtraOrdinary Wizard had disappeared, which was all right by him.

It was only when Marcia staggered to her feet, clutching the snapped heel from one of the pythons, hair awry and with an extremely irritable glint in her green eyes, that Billy thought it wise to set the barrow down.

He peered over the top. “What?”

“Mr. Pot...ouch...I have a job for you,” said Marcia.

“Look, Your ExtraOrdinariness, I already collected the last lot and I ain’t got room for no more until the end of the week. Got that?”

“Oh.” Marcia was a little taken aback. After twelve years as an ExtraOrdinary Wizard she was used to a little more respect.

“I gotta get on now,” Billy growled. He picked up the barrow handles and set off toward the vegetable garden at a slow trudge.

Putting on a fast hobble, Marcia waylaid the wheelbarrow again. “Mr. Pot,” she said very insistently.

Billy sighed and let go of the barrow handles. “What?” he asked.

“As I said, I have a job for you. It’s a new vacancy—Dragon-Watcher. I think you would be eminently well qualified.”

“What d’you mean exactly, Dragon-Watcher?” asked Billy suspiciously.

“I’ve written out a job description,” said Marcia, handing Billy a crisp piece of paper. He took it dubiously and stared at it. Billy didn’t like paper very much either, especially fancy pieces of thick paper with writing on them. Actually it was the writing that Billy really did not like—he had no idea where to start with writing.

“Other way up,” said Marcia.

“Oh.” Flustered, as once again a piece of paper got the better of him, Billy turned the paper around. “You read it.

Haven’t got my specs,” he mumbled. He handed the paper back to Marcia, who took it cautiously between finger and thumb, trying to avoid the thick, grimy fingerprints that now covered the edges.

““Dragon-Watcher job description,”” Marcia began. ““Number one: Dragon to live out, i.e., at Dragon-Watcher’s residence and or workplace.””

“What?” Billy frowned, puzzled.

“Spit Fyre will live here,” said Marcia.

“Here?”

“Yes, here. The vegetable field will be ideal.”

“What about the veg?” asked Billy, suddenly discovering a new concern for vegetables.

“He’s not fussy; he’ll eat anything.”

“That’s what bothers me,” muttered Billy.



““Number two: Dragon-Watcher to have total responsibility for dragon when in his care. Number three: Apprentice may visit dragon on alternate evenings and weekends only, and is allowed one half-hour flight only at those times. Number four: rates of pay by negotiation—but I suggest double what you are currently getting from the Palace.””

“Double?” Billy gasped, shocked.

“Very well, triple, then. But that’s my final offer. Will you take the job or not?”

“Yes! Er, yes, ExtraOrdinary. I would be honored.”

“My Apprentice will bring the dragon over later today. The builders will be arriving this morning.”

“Builders?”

“To construct the dragon house. Good day to you, Mr. Pot. I’ll send a contract down for you to sign later.”

“Oh. Right. Um, good day, Your ExtraOrdinariness.”

As Marcia limped off, Billy Pot sat down on the riverbank and scratched his head in amazement. He immediately wished he hadn’t. Dragon droppings were really hard to get out of your hair.

12

TERRY TARSAL

Terry Tarsal, shoemaker and reluctant

keeper of a purple python, liked a quiet life. Most of the time he got it—and the times he didn’t usually had something to do with purple python shoes.

Terry was a small, wiry man with large capable hands worn rough and callused after years of working with leather. He had a long, narrow shop down Footpad Passage just off Wizard Way, which smelled of dust, leather, waxed thread and, on that particular day, linseed oil. Terry enjoyed his work. What he did not enjoy was keeping a purple python in the backyard of the shop. But Marcia Overstrand was one of his best customers and over the ten years that Marcia had been ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Terry had steeled himself to look after the snake and collect its sloughed skins for when Marcia ordered her next pair of shoes.

That morning Terry had just fed the python, which always upset him. He was recovering with a cup of hot cider when through the frosted glass of his shop window he saw the purple blur of Marcia Overstrand's robes. The next moment the shop door—which was terrified of Marcia—sprang open.

Terry Tarsal was made of sterner stuff. "Good morning, Miss Overstrand," he said, not bothering to get up. He took another sip of cider. "Your new ones are not ready yet. I'm still waiting for the wretched python to slough."

"I haven't come for those," said Marcia, hobbling in. "It's an emergency." She bent down, pulled off her shoe and dropped it on the counter along with the broken heel. "Snapped, just like that. No warning. I could have broken my leg." Terry picked up the offending shoe and held it at arm's length. "You've stepped in something," he said accusingly.

"Really? I was under the impression that was what shoes were for," said Marcia, "stepping on things."

"On, yes. But not in. Well, I suppose it will brush off. Do you want to wait or come back later?"

"I don't plan on hopping all the way back to the Wizard Tower, thank you, Mr. Tarsal. I'll wait."

"Please yourself. I am quite happy to lend you a pair of one-size-fits-all galoshes."

"I do not

wear galoshes," said Marcia stonily. "And I most particularly do not wear one-size-fits-all galoshes, thank you very much."

Terry Tarsal picked up the shoes and disappeared into the back of the shop. Marcia sat down on the uncomfortable wooden bench beside the counter—Terry did not like his customers to linger—and gazed around the little shop.

Marcia enjoyed her visits to Terry Tarsal. She liked to sit in the quiet old shop in the dark alley where no one could find her. And if someone did

stumble across her sitting there, she enjoyed the look of shock on their face at seeing the ExtraOrdinary Wizard sitting on the rickety bench in the shoemaker's shop, waiting for her shoes just like any other Castle inhabitant.

And so, while Terry Tarsal scraped off the dragon dung and set about making a new heel and finding a scrap of python skin to cover it with, Marcia contentedly sat and gazed at the shoes awaiting pick-up. They were a motley bunch. Most were run-of-the-mill boots of brown or black leather with thick laces and heavy leather soles. There was a collection of red and green workmen's clogs, the kind that many of those who worked in the craft rooms and small factories in The Ramblings wore to protect their feet. There was a troupe of small pink dance shoes festooned with ribbons, two pairs of fisherman's boots made from oiled leather—which Marcia realized were the source of the pungent smell of linseed oil that filled the shop—and a pair of the most bizarre shoes, with the longest, pointiest toes that Marcia had ever seen.

Intrigued, Marcia got up and went over for a closer look at the strange shoes. She could not resist picking them up. The shoes were beautiful, made from soft red leather, embellished with deep tooled swirls of gold leaf. Although the shoes were made for a normal foot size, the long, tapering toes stretched to at least two feet in length, and at the far end of each toe two long black ribbons were sewn onto the shoe. Marcia held them in her hands, marveling at how light they were, and at what good quality leather Terry Tarsal had used. She ran her finger along the lines of the gold tooling. The more she looked, the more she became convinced that the elegant swirls on each toe formed the letter M.

Still holding the soft red shoes, Marcia retreated to the bench with a feeling of excitement that she had not felt since she was a little girl on the eve of her birthday. It was, in fact, Marcia's birthday the following week and a suspicion had begun to form in her mind that maybe Septimus had actually put some thought into her present—rather than his usual hurried bunch of flowers picked from the Palace gardens. She remembered Septimus describing the shoes that they had worn in the Time that he had been kidnapped into by that ghastly Alchemist, Marcellus Pye. She had

commented that the shoes sounded like they were about the only decent thing there. It would, thought Marcia, be just the kind of unusual present that Septimus would come up with if he put his mind to it.

Feeling a little guilty at seeing her present before her birthday, Marcia was hastily putting the shoes back on the shelf when Terry Tarsal reappeared. “Strangest shoes I’ve ever made,” he commented.

Marcia spun around as though she had been caught doing something she shouldn’t. Unable to resist, she asked, “Who ordered them?”

“Your Apprentice, if I remember rightly,” said Terry Tarsal.

“I thought as much,” said Marcia, smiling. How sweet it was of Septimus, she thought. He could be so considerate at times; she must try to be less grumpy with him. She decided that if Septimus settled down and worked hard with his Projection, she would take notice of what Alther had told her—that Septimus was getting to the age where he needed more freedom—and she would try not to make a fuss about him going out and not telling her exactly where he was going.

Terry Tarsal’s voice interrupted Marcia’s good resolutions. “Are you paying for them?” he asked.

“Certainly not! And I don’t want him to know I have seen them either. Is that clear?” Terry Tarsal shrugged. “Don’t know what it is about these shoes,” he said. “That’s exactly what your Apprentice said to me—don’t let Marcia see them. He was very definite about that.”

“I expect he was,” said Marcia approvingly.

“Anyway, I’ve got to deliver them tomorrow. Though why he can’t come and get them himself, I don’t know. It’s not as though Snake Slipway is miles away, is it?”

“Snake Slipway? What’s Snake Slipway got to do with it?” asked Marcia.

“That’s where he lives,” said Terry patiently as though Marcia was being deliberately slow. “Now, about this heel—”

“That’s where who lives?”

“The odd fellow who came in with your Apprentice—the one who the shoes are for. Look, the glue on the heel needs at least an hour to dry and —”

“The one who the shoes are for?”

“So are you sure you want to—”

“Mr. Tarsal, answer me. Exactly who are these shoes for?”

“I really can’t answer that. It’s confidential information.”

“Balderdash!” exploded Marcia. “They’re only a pair of shoes, for heaven’s sake. It’s hardly top secret, is it?” Terry Tarsal would not give in. “Customer confidentiality,” he replied.

“Mr. Tarsal. If you don’t tell me who these shoes are for I will be forced to...to...” Marcia racked her brain for something Terry would find particularly galling. “I shall be forced to make all the shoes awaiting pick-up half a size smaller.”

“You wouldn’t...”

“I would. Now who are these shoes for?”

“Marcellus Pye.”

“Marcellus Pye?”

Marcia yelled so loud the door rattled in terror and a jar of tiny green buttons leaped from the counter and scattered across the floor.

“Now look what you’ve done,” said Terry, getting on his hands and knees and hunting down the buttons. “I’ll never find them all. They’ve gone

everywhere.”

Marcia stared at Terry scrabbling after the buttons as though he were from another planet. She could not make sense of anything; there were just three words going around in her head and they seemed to be taking up all the thinking space.

The words were: “Septimus,” “Marcellus” and “Pye.”

“You could give us a hand instead of staring into space like a constipated camel,” Terry Tarsal broke rudely into Marcia’s spinning thoughts.

It was not every day that someone called Marcia a constipated camel but it did the trick. Marcia came to and joined Terry Tarsal in the button hunt, but still the thoughts whirled around her head. “You did say Marcellus Pye, didn’t you?” she asked.

“Yes,”

said Terry irritably. He levered a small green object out from between the floorboards with his fingernail only to discover it was a green sherbet pip. “Marcellus Pye. Remember writing it as ‘Pie’ as in apple and your Apprentice telling me it was ‘P-Y-E.’”

“You are absolutely sure?” asked Marcia. All kinds of impossible explanations were going through her head. None made sense. And all involved Septimus.

Terry Tarsal straightened up with a groan and rubbed his back. “Yes, I said. Look, do stop going on, Madam Overstrand.

I gotta concentrate here. These buttons are my best jade.”

“Best jade?” asked Marcia.

“Yes. Never find their like again. Just my luck...”

Marcia stood up and brushed down her robes, which were covered in dust—Terry preferred shoemaking to housekeeping. She clicked her fingers and

muttered a Retrieve. From hidden cracks and crevices in Terry Tarsal's floorboards the buttons gathered together, and as Terry watched open-mouthed, a fine green stream of buttons flew back into their jar.

Terry got to his feet, an expression of relief and amazement on his face. He had never actually seen any Magyk before and to have Marcia actually use it for something as mundane as finding his precious buttons touched Terry. "Thank you," he muttered. "That's...well, that's very kind of you."

"Least I could do," said Marcia. "Now, can I see the order book?"

"Order book?"

"Yes, please, Mr. Tarsal."

Bemused, Terry shook his head and went to fetch the order book. He returned with a heavy leather-bound ledger and thumped it down on the counter.

"I would like to see the order for those shoes," said Marcia. "Please." Terry licked his finger and began leafing through to find the right day. "Here we are," he said, pointing to an entry from three weeks ago.

Marcia took out her spectacles and peered at Terry Tarsal's crabbed handwriting. The name Marcellus Pye jumped out and hit her. "I don't believe it," she muttered.

"Yeah. That's him."

"Was he very old?" asked Marcia, trying to make sense of things.

"No, he was young—about thirty. Quite good-looking if it weren't for the funny haircut. I remember now, I had to measure his feet as he didn't know what size he was. He kept giving me the old size—we stopped using those at least a hundred years ago. Even my old dad wouldn't have remembered that. He had an odd accent, too—not that he said much.

Your Apprentice did most of the talking, if I remember."

“Did he really?” asked Marcia, suddenly sitting down on the bench. “Well, I don’t know...”

“You all right, Miss Overstrand?” asked Terry. “You look a bit pale. I’ll get you a glass of water.” Marcia was not all right. She felt strangely disconnected, as though the world was suddenly not quite what she had thought it was. Terry brought her a glass of water.

“Thank you, Terry.” Sitting with her purple-stockinged feet resting on the dusty floor, Marcia sipped her glass of water.

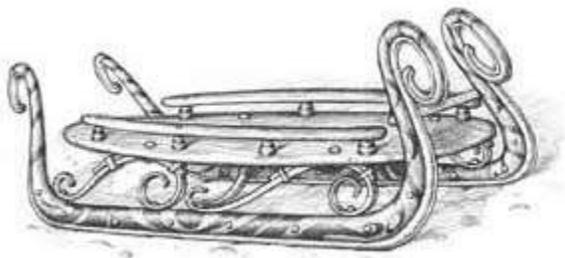
She knew that the real reason for her shock was not so much the presence of a young Marcellus Pye in her Time, which was weird enough, but the realization that Septimus—her trusted Septimus—had deceived her.

Watched by a concerned Terry Tarsal, Marcia drank the rest of the water and began to feel a little more like herself.

“Terry,” she said.

“Yes, ExtraOrdinary?”

“While you’re waiting for the heel to dry, put those jade buttons on my shoes, will you?” **13**



WIZARD SLED

While Marcia waited for the

glue to dry, Septimus was doing something much more interesting—squeezing through a small trapdoor in the floor of Beetle’s hut.

“I didn’t know you could get to the Ice Tunnels through here,” Septimus said, as his feet found the rungs of the ladder fixed to the wall of ice below him.

“Tradesman’s entrance.” Beetle grinned up at Septimus. His breath was misting on the freezing air and his face was an unearthly color in the light of the flickering blue lamp he had just lit. “Miss Djinn makes me use it. Close the hatch, will you, Sep?”

“Yep,” said Septimus. He pulled down the heavy Sealed hatch—typical of all the Sealed entrances to the Ice Tunnels—that was hidden under the trapdoor, and heard the soft hiss as it settled onto its Seal. From beneath his Apprentice robes he took the Alchemie Key

that he wore around his neck and pressed it into a circular depression in the middle of the hatch. Then he climbed down the icy metal ladder into the depths below Beetle’s hut and joined him on the slippery surface of the Ice Tunnel.

Septimus’s dragon ring, which he wore on his right index finger, gave off a dim yellow glow. But it was Beetle’s blue lamp that caught the beautiful white-blue sparkle of the ice covering the inside of the tunnel like cake icing and threw their distorted shadows across the icy vault of the high-arched roof.

“I’ll just nip up and Seal the hatch,” said Beetle. “Then we’ll be off.”

“It’s all Sealed,” said Septimus.

“No, Sep. I gotta use the Seal—see?” Beetle held up a wax disc—an exact copy of Septimus’s solid gold Keye. In reply Septimus drew out his Keye and waved it at Beetle with a grin. Beetle shook his head in amazement. “Sheesh...I am not even going to ask how you got that, Sep.”

“Marcellus gave it to me,” said Septimus. “It’s how Jenna and I got out.”

“Ah,” said Beetle, tactful enough not to mention Nicko, who had not gotten out and was still trapped in another Time.

Mentioning Nicko upset Septimus, which Beetle did not like to see. Beetle took a simple wooden sled from a hook nailed into the icy wall. “Want to hop on?” he asked.

Beetle held the rope of the sled while Septimus climbed on; then he took his place at the front and fixed his lamp so that it became a headlight. Remembering what Beetle’s sled driving was like, Septimus held on tight—and not a moment too soon. Before he had time to draw a breath the sled had shot off and was taking the first bend—a sharp right-hander—on one runner.

“Wheerrr...aaargh!” yelled Septimus. His shout was carried away on the icy air, traveling for miles joining with the many ghostly laments that lingered on the cold tunnel winds.

After almost two years as an Inspection clerk, Beetle was an expert sled driver—but unused to passengers. He took bends halfway up the icy walls, rounded corners using skid turns and if he had to stop he’d do what he called a double spin reverse whiz and end up facing the way he had come. After a few minutes Septimus was looking decidedly green.

He had a brief respite as the sled trundled slowly up a long incline, but as it teetered at the top Septimus realized the worst was yet to come.

In front of him, in the light of Beetle’s blue headlight, he could see a long brilliant white tunnel dropping into pitch-darkness, while above them the roof of the tunnel seemed to arch upward into a cavernous dome.

“This is my favorite part!” yelled Beetle over his shoulder. “Hold on tight!” Septimus was already holding on so tight that he felt like his fingers had become welded to the sled. He took a deep breath and braced himself. The sled teetered as if it, too, were taking a deep breath. Then suddenly it went hurtling down the ice at breakneck speed, until Septimus felt a strange sensation, as though the ground was no longer there. He glanced down and realized to his horror that indeed the ground no longer was there. It was about twenty feet below them. They were airborne.

“Beeeeeee...tuuuuuuuul stop!” yelled Septimus, his voice whisked away by the wind.

Beetle was oblivious. This was the very best part of his week. It was something that, ever since he had perfected the sled jump, he had wanted to share with Septimus. It never crossed his mind that Septimus might not feel the same way.

They landed surprisingly smoothly, whizzing across a wide, flat expanse of ice and shooting straight into a tunnel so narrow that Septimus was forced to stop holding on to the sled for fear of his knuckles scraping the walls of ice. The tunnel twisted and turned. Beetle slowed down to avoid the sled getting stuck, but as they bumped slowly along between two great walls of ice Septimus began to get a horrible closed-in feeling. At last the tunnel widened out into a circular chamber with a high roof. Beetle drew to an unexpectedly sedate halt.

“We’re here,” he said in a low voice.

“Where?” asked Septimus, looking around at the huge Chamber. It felt familiar but he could not quite think why.

“You know,” Beetle said in a loud whisper. “The place that Marcia told us to check out.”

“Marcia?” Septimus was puzzled.

“Didn’t she tell you?” asked Beetle.

“Marcia doesn’t tell me anything,” Septimus replied gloomily.

Beetle got off the sled. “Well, anyway, we gotta check out something, Sep. Stuff’s been happening down here. Come on.”

Septimus gingerly stood up on the ice and followed Beetle as he set off, shining his brilliant blue light around the smooth ice walls of the Chamber. Suddenly Septimus knew where they were. “It’s the Chamber of Alchemie!” He gasped. “I...I used to come here every day.” Septimus

sounded wistful. “Marcellus showed me tons of stuff. And he didn’t nag me all the time.”

“Yeah, well, I bet it was a bit warmer then too,” Beetle said. “Ah, here we are. Look, it’s melted and refrozen.” Beetle’s blue light had picked out the slab of ice that covered the old doorway to the Chamber. Unlike the rest of the hoarfrosted ice, this was clear, with hundreds of tiny bubbles trapped within it. It reminded Septimus of one of Beetle’s FizzFroots—the lemon-flavored one that he did not like so much.

“That’s new ice,” Septimus whispered.

Beetle shrugged. “I know. But at least it’s refrozen. I’ll just check the Seal.” Beetle pressed his wax Keye into the metal disc at the side of the ice. “Weird and weirder,” he said. “It’s been ReSealed. Come on, Sep, we’ve got one more to check—but first I’ve got something to show you.”

Five minutes later, Beetle threw his sled into a double spin reverse whiz and stopped in a spray of frost. Septimus fell off and lay on the ice, staring up at the blue-white roof of a tunnel.

“Come on, Sep,” said Beetle. He grabbed hold of Septimus’s hands and pulled him to his feet. “I found it last week. I figured out a shortcut down one of the Narrows and I saw that.” He pointed to a small piece of purple rope sticking out of the ice.

Septimus got down on his hands and knees to have a closer look.

“There’s no color down here,” explained Beetle. “So it stood out a mile. I tried to dig it out but it’s no good; the ice has taken it in. It does that. I dropped my lucky scarf once and I found it the next week, trapped under two inches of ice. For a while I’d see it when I went by, but it got drawn down deeper and deeper until one day I couldn’t see it anymore. So it’s funny that you can still see the rope.” Beetle scraped at the ice with his penknife and freed up a little more of the rope so that a few inches stuck clear. “Well—go on,” he said.

“Go on, what?” asked Septimus, puzzled.

“Grab hold of the rope and pull. It won’t come out for me, but I reckon it will for you.”

“Why me?”

“Well, it belongs to you.”

“What belongs to me?”

Beetle smiled a mysterious smile. “You’ll have to give a tug and find out, won’t you?” he said.

Septimus shook his head with a puzzled smile and then, humoring Beetle, he took up the frayed rope end and pulled. He couldn’t get much of a hold, but to his surprise a long length of thick purple rope freed itself from the ice as easily as if he had been pulling it from newly fallen snow.

“It’s coming!” Beetle yelled, excited. “I knew it would. Keep pulling, Sep!” Septimus needed no encouragement. He pulled steadily until the ice began to crumble and two golden runners broke the surface. Amazed, Septimus gave a hefty tug and from the depths of the ice emerged the most beautiful sled he had ever seen. “The Wizard Tower sled,” he breathed. “Beetle, you found the Wizard Tower sled.”

“Yeah,” said Beetle with the biggest grin Septimus had seen in a long time. “Good, isn’t it?”

“Good? It’s incredible.” Septimus brushed the dusting of ice crystals off the sled and set it down on its golden runners. It stood waiting patiently on the ice—sleek, high and delicate like a racehorse compared to the donkey of a sled that Beetle had. The intricately carved wood, inlaid with strips of lapis lazuli, felt almost warm to Septimus’s touch, and its purple, blue and gold paint sparkled in the light of Beetle’s lamp. Hanging from the gold bar that ran between the front of the two curved runners was a silver whistle, tied on with a green ribbon.

“No wonder they lost it,” said Beetle. “They left the whistle on the sled. That’s a dumb thing to do. You should always keep it with you, Sep. Here.”

Beetle untied the whistle and handed it to Septimus. “It will come whenever you whistle,” he said, “and you might find you need to. These highly strung sleds were notorious for wandering off. I bet that poor Apprentice spent a long time looking for it. Must have been a nightmare.” Septimus put the whistle in his tunic pocket. “Thanks, Beetle,” he said. “You know so much stuff. Stuff that even Marcia doesn’t know.”

“I dunno about that, Sep. Marcia knows more than you think. She just doesn’t want to tell, that’s all,” said Beetle.

“She certainly doesn’t tell me,” said Septimus.

“So,” said Beetle, quickly changing the subject—aware that Marcia had told him rather a lot that morning—“are you going to get on? I can teach you how to do a double spin reverse whiz and even a triple spin if you like.”

“Um. Well, maybe later, when I’m used to it.” Septimus gingerly sat down on his sled, half expecting it to shoot off the way Beetle’s sled did. But it just sat patiently beneath him as if waiting for instructions. “How do you work these things?” he asked, realizing he never inquired how Beetle got his sled to go up and down the ice slopes and do exactly as he wished.

“You just think about what you want it to do and it does it—but only if you’re the right person to ride it. If you tried to ride mine it would just ignore you.”

“Okay, then, I’ll give it a try,” said Septimus, and in his head he thought, slowly—go slowly. And so, very, very slowly, the Wizard Tower sled set off to the sound of Beetle’s laughter.



“What did you tell it, Sep?” he shouted after him. “Make like a snail?”

“I’m just testing,” said Septimus a little defensively.

“So test how fast it’ll go,” suggested Beetle. “I bet it’s amazing. Much faster than this old thing.” He kicked his own sled affectionately.

“Well, maybe later,” Septimus replied.

“Okay, Sep,” said Beetle, getting on his sled. “But there’s one last thing Marcia asked us to check out.” Septimus smiled—what did Marcia matter when he had a beautiful sled like this? “Okay, Beetle,” he said. “I can help you with your Inspection now. Like they did in the old days.”

Beetle grinned. “Great,” he said.

14

THE HOUSE ON SNAKE SLIPWAY

Beetle shone his light onto

a hatch in the roof of an ice tunnel. It was no more than a few feet above their heads, almost near enough to touch if they jumped up high. The hatch formed an oval depression with the usual metal Seal beside it. All around it was a thin line of clear ice.

“See,” said Beetle, “it’s the same here. The ice has melted and refrozen. And, let’s see...yes, it’s been ReSealed too.

Weird.”

“Hmm...” said Septimus, not totally surprised. He knew whose hatch this was.

Beetle peered up at the hatch. “Of course this one could just be a faulty Seal on the other side. Sometimes the domestic ones do that. It would be good to get in there and check, but some really weird guy moved in not long ago. Bit of a recluse, apparently. Won’t even answer the door.”

“I know,” said Septimus. “I wish he would. But he’s not really used to things yet.”

“Do you know him, Sep?” asked Beetle, surprised.

Septimus made a decision—he would confide in Beetle. He was tired of keeping his visits to Marcellus a secret. “Well, yes, I do. But...er, Marcia doesn’t know I come to see him. I keep meaning to tell her but she’s so

grumpy at the moment and—” Suddenly Septimus remembered something. “Oh, gosh—Beetle, have you got your timepiece with you?”

“Of course.” Beetle grinned proudly. He had a state-of-the-art timepiece that had been found in pieces at the back of a Manuscriptorium cupboard and thrown out. He had rescued it and over several months, with the help of the Conservation Scribe, had painstakingly put it back together. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, completely silent due to a complicated flywheel mechanism and—most important of all—it kept very good time.

Proudly, Beetle took the timepiece from his pocket. It was made of a mix of gold and silver and was attached to a thick leather cord. On the top was a large handle with a winder in the middle. It sat covering Beetle’s hand like a small, fat tortoise.

Septimus was impressed. “How did they make them so small?” he asked.

“Dunno,” said Beetle. “You just don’t get them like that anymore.” The hands on the timepiece were drawing close to midday. “Oh, rats,” said Septimus. “I’m going to be late. Jenna will be really mad.”

“Jenna?” Beetle seemed to have developed a squeak.

“Yeah. I’m meeting her here and I—”

“What—here, Sep?”

“No, not down here. I mean up there.” Septimus pointed up to the hatch. “In the house.”

“Are you?”

Septimus had an idea. “Would you like to come too? I could ask Marcellus if we could check the hatch from the inside.”

“Marcellus—is that the weird guy who lives there?”

“He’s not really weird,” said Septimus. “Just a bit...unused to things.”

“The name sounds familiar,” said Beetle. “Hey, isn’t he the one who kidnapped you through that Glass—the crazy old Alchemist?”

“Um, yes,” admitted Septimus. “But he’s not crazy. And he doesn’t even look old anymore.”

“Still an Alchemist though,” said Beetle. “No wonder that hatch is a problem. Sheesh, I’m surprised we haven’t had a total meltdown.”

Septimus wondered if telling Beetle had been such a good idea, but it was too late now. “I’ll open the hatch, then, okay?” he said. “It won’t hurt for a few minutes. I can ReSeal it from inside.” Beetle looked shocked. “Open a Sealed hatch?”

“Well, yes. Then we can get in that way and meet Jenna—”

“Are you really meeting Princess Jenna up there?” Beetle asked.

Septimus nodded, jumping up and down to keep warm. His feet were beginning to feel like blocks of ice.

The temptation of seeing Jenna was too much for Beetle. “Okay, then,” he said. “But I really shouldn’t. Miss Djinn would throw a fit if she knew.” From underneath his sled he took what Septimus realized was a telescopic ladder, opened it up and propped it against the wall. “I’ll hold the ladder, Sep, and you can UnSeal the hatch. Probably better that way.”

Ten minutes later Beetle and Septimus were making their way along the long, musty passageway that led from the hatch all the way to the house on Snake Slipway. Septimus knew the way well. He had first been there when it had belonged to Professor Weasal Van Klampff, whose ghastly housekeeper, Una Brakket, had taken him along the passage to Weasal’s Laboratory. The passage had been dark and dusty then, but now it was well kept, with old-fashioned rush-lights placed in holders at regular intervals along the walls. It was just as it had been when Septimus had lived there for six strange months in another Time as Marcellus Pye’s Alchemie Apprentice. Now Beetle followed Septimus as he set a brisk pace along the

passage, passing the turning that led to the old Laboratory and following the long zigzag path underneath the houses that backed onto the Moat.

It was not long before Septimus and Beetle arrived at the end of the passageway and emerged into the large vaulted cellars below the house. Septimus strode through them and, worried that he was already late for Jenna, ran up the cellar steps and pushed open the cellar door under the stairs. “Marcellus?” he called out. “Marcellus?” There was no reply.

Septimus padded into the house, closely followed by a wary Beetle. The place smelled odd to Beetle. The waxy scent of candles was combined with a bittersweet aroma of oranges, cloves and something he could not identify. Beetle could not get rid of the feeling that he had somehow gone back in time. It had the same effect on Septimus. He was used to it now, but when he had first visited Marcellus just after the old Alchemist had moved in, Septimus had suddenly become convinced that he was still trapped in Marcellus’s Time and his return to his own Time had been nothing more than a dream. In a terrible panic he had run out of the house, and to his joy he had seen Jillie Djinn bustling past. Jillie never did figure out quite why Marcia’s Apprentice had thrown his arms around her and said how thrilled he was to see her, but she had gone back to the Manuscriptorium that morning with a spring in her step. People did not often throw their arms around Jillie Djinn.

The silence of the house fell upon Septimus and Beetle like a blanket. They walked along the narrow hallway, which was lit with more candles than Beetle had ever seen in his life. When they reached the foot of a steep flight of dark oak stairs, Beetle was amazed to see a lit candle had been placed on each step.

“All these candles, they’re weird,” whispered Beetle, feeling somewhat spooked.

“He doesn’t like the dark,” whispered Septimus. “Shhh, I can hear footsteps upstairs. Marcellus? Marcell...us,” he called out.

“Apprentice?” came a wary voice from the floor above. “’Tis you?”

“Yes, it’s me,” Septimus replied.

Heavy footsteps sounded above and then Beetle saw a sight so strange he remembered it for the rest of his life. Coming slowly down the stairs, lit from below by each candle that he passed, was a dark-haired young man sporting an old-fashioned haircut. He was wearing what Beetle knew—from old engravings—were the black and gold robes of an Alchemist. The sleeves of the young man’s tunic were what Beetle considered to be ridiculously long and they trailed down the stairs behind him. They were matched by the strangest shoes that Beetle had ever seen in his life—the points of the shoes must have been about two feet long and were tied up onto garters that the young man wore just below his knees. Beetle suddenly became aware that his mouth had fallen open and he rapidly closed it.

The young man reached the foot of the stairs and Septimus said, “Marcellus, this is my friend Beetle. He works at the Manuscriptorium. Beetle, this is Marcellus Pye.”

A feeling of unreality stole over Beetle. Marcellus Pye was five hundred years old. He was the Last Alchemist. His writings were banned—even from the Manuscriptorium—and he, Beetle, was being introduced to him. It was not possible.

Marcellus Pye extended his hand and said in a somewhat strange accent, “Welcome. It is wonderful work you young scribes do. Wonderful.”

Like a lost sheep, Beetle gazed in bewilderment and made a small baa.

A quick nudge from Septimus sorted the sheep out. “Oh...thank you,” Beetle said, shaking the offered hand, which was, to his relief, warm—not ice-cold as he had expected. “But I’m not a scribe. I’m the Inspection clerk. I check the Seals in the ice tunnels.”

“Ah,” said Marcellus. “A necessary evil that I hope one day soon will be removed.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about that,” said Beetle, back in professional mode. “But I do know that the hatch for this house has been UnSealed

recently.”

“Possibly. But not for long. I have ReSealed it. You have no need to worry.”

“But—” Beetle was cut short by the tinkling of a bell far above his head.

Marcellus started at the noise. He looked panic-stricken. “’Tis the doorbell,” he said, staring at the door.

“Shall I answer it?” Septimus offered.

“Must you?” asked Marcellus.

“You should try to be more sociable, Marcellus,” Septimus scolded him. “It’s not good for you to hide away like this.”

“But the sun is so bright and the noise so loud, Apprentice.”

There was another, more insistent, ring of the doorbell.

“I think it’s probably Jenna,” said Septimus, itching to open the door. “You said I could bring her here, remember? You said you were ready to tell us what happened. To Nicko.”

Marcellus looked puzzled. “Nicko?” he asked.

Septimus’s heart sank. For six months now he had been trying to get Marcellus to tell him what he knew about Nicko, and a few days earlier Marcellus had finally agreed. Now it seemed as though he had forgotten—again. Septimus found it hard to get used to the fact that although Marcellus Pye looked like a young man once more, he often behaved like an old man. Marcellus had centuries-old habits that were hard to discard—he would lapse into a shuffling old-man gait and adopt a querulous manner. But it was Marcellus’s bad memory that annoyed Septimus the most. He had grumpily told Marcellus that this was just laziness, but Marcellus had countered by saying that he had five hundred years of memories in his head and where exactly did Septimus think he was going to find space for all the new ones?

Septimus sighed. He left Marcellus dithering in the hallway and went to answer the door.

“Sep!” said Jenna, sounding relieved. She stood on the doorstep, looking windswept and cold. Her dark hair was wet, hanging in tendrils around her face, and she had her thick red winter cloak wrapped tightly around her. “You took your time,” she said, stamping her feet with the cold. “It’s horrible out here. Aren’t you going to let me in?”

“Password please,” said Septimus, suddenly serious.

Jenna frowned. “What password?”

“Don’t you know?”

“No. Oh, bother. Can’t you let me in anyway?”

“Hmm...I don’t know about that, Jen.”

“Sep, I’m freezing out here. Please.”

“Oh, all right, then. Since it’s you.”

Septimus stepped back. Jenna rushed in out of the rain and stood shaking the drips off her cloak. Suddenly she stopped and looked at Septimus suspiciously. “There isn’t a password, is there?” she said.

“Nope.” Septimus grinned.

“Horrible boy!” Jenna laughed and gave Septimus a push. “Oh, hello, Beetle. Nice to see you.” Beetle blushed and found that, once again, he had forgotten how to speak—but Jenna did not seem to notice. She was occupied taking out a small orange cat from beneath her cloak and tucking it under her arm, which surprised Beetle—he hadn’t thought of Jenna as someone who would have a cat. Then for some reason Beetle did not understand, Marcellus said, “Welcome, Esmeralda.”

“Thank you, Marcellus,” said Jenna. She smiled; she had almost forgotten how she had once been regularly mistaken for Princess Esmeralda in

Marcellus Pye's Time.



Then, with an old-fashioned half bow, Marcellus said, “Pray, Princess, Apprentice and Scribe, follow me.” A moment later Beetle was following Jenna, Septimus and Marcellus upstairs, weaving his way around dripping candles, wondering what he had gotten himself into. And

how he was going to explain it all to Miss Djinn when she found out—which she always did.

15

IN THE ATTIC

They followed

Marcellus up to a small room right at the top of the house—a dark space, tucked in under sloping eaves and lined with wooden paneling. The room was sparsely furnished with an old trestle table with two benches, and a few chairs lined up along the walls—all left by the previous owner, Weasal Van

Klampff. In the center of the table was a cluster of candles, lit earlier that morning by the housekeeper and already half burned down.

As Marcellus showed them in, a pang of recognition shot through Septimus—this had been his room not so long ago.

Yet he knew it was so

long ago that it seemed impossible. This was the room where, for the first few nights he had been in Marcellus's Time, an Alchemie Scribe had slept across the doorway to stop him from trying to escape. This was the room where he had desperately thought up all kinds of crazy plans to return to his own Time; the room where he had sat for hours looking out of the window longing to see a familiar face pass by in the street far below. It was not, all things considered, his most favorite place in the world—but now here he was, back again with Beetle and Jenna. That was something he had never dared to imagine. Suddenly Septimus felt very peculiar. He sat down with a bump on one of the benches at the trestle table.

Beetle and Jenna sat beside him, and soon three expectant faces were looking up at Marcellus Pye. Marcellus returned their gaze with a puzzled expression. "Now...why did we come up here?" he asked.

"It's to do with Nicko. You remember," said Septimus hopefully, although he had no idea why Marcellus had taken them all the way up to this particular room.

"Nicko?" asked Marcellus blankly.

"Nicko. My brother. He was trapped in your Time. You must remember," said Septimus, a trace of desperation surfacing in his voice. It had taken months for him to arrange this meeting and now, as Marcellus's memory did its familiar disappearing act, he felt it all slipping away again.

"Ah, I remember," said Marcellus. Septimus's spirits lifted. "It was my spectacles. I still need them; it is most annoying.

Now, where are they?"

“They are on the top of your head,” said Septimus wearily.

“Indeed, so they are.” Marcellus reached for his spectacles and settled them on his nose. “Good,” he said. “I shall need them for Nicko’s papers.”

Septimus felt excited—now

they were getting somewhere. He smiled at Jenna, whose eyes looked suspiciously bright, as they always did when Nicko’s name was mentioned.

Lapsing into his old man’s shuffling gait—which Beetle blamed on the weird shoes—Marcellus went over to the chimney and pressed on a small panel high up on the side. The panel swung open with an apologetic creak. Everyone watched as he took out a ragged collection of brittle, yellowing papers. Carefully, he brought them over to the table and gently laid them down.

Jenna gasped—they were covered in Nicko’s distinctive scrawl.

“Nicko and Snorri left these behind,” Marcellus said. “I put them in the chimney for safekeeping as I was afraid that someone might throw them away, for they appear to be but notes and jottings in an untutored hand. But, as the years went by—and there were many, many years—I forgot about the hiding place. Indeed, Apprentice, I did not remember again until some months after you asked me about your brother.”

“When you said you didn’t remember,” said Septimus.

“’Tis true, I did not. But then things about my old life began to come back to me. And one day when I came up to this room I did remember. Briefly. After that I spent many weeks coming all the way up here only to wonder what it was I wanted. But when you last spoke to me about Nicko, I wrote it down. I carried the note everywhere and then, when I came up here again, I remembered. I even remembered the hiding place—which, to my amazement, I found undisturbed.

Which is why I sent you the message to come here today.”

“Thank you, Marcellus,” said Septimus.

“I owe it to you, Apprentice. I confess I cannot read much of what is in Nicko’s hand, but perhaps you can understand your brother’s writing better than I. It may be that the notes will tell their own story. But I will fill in the gaps as much as I can.”

Jenna cautiously looked at the papers. The ink was faded to a pale sepia color, and the paper was thin and almost as brown as the ink. Even so, Jenna knew it was Nicko’s work. There were doodles of boats, sketches of various sail rigs, numerous games of noughts and crosses, battleships, hangman, plus some she did not recognize and a lot of lists. But somehow instead of making her feel closer to Nicko, seeing his scribbles on such ancient, fragile things made him feel even farther away. Jenna found herself staring at a long, thin piece of paper with tears pricking the backs of her eyelids.

“What does it say, Jen?” asked Septimus.

“He...he’s made a list.”

“Typical Nicko,” said Septimus. “Go on, Jen. Read it out.”

“Oh. Okay. It says:

2 backpacks

2 bedrolls (if can find) or wolfskins from market

Food for two weeks at least. Ask at market for salted stuff.

Dried biscuits & fruit

Tinderbox

Candles

2 water bottles or flagon things

Permit to travel? Ask M.

2 warm cloaks

Boots with fur if possible



Aunt Ells’s lucky socks—remember

2 gold trinkets. For Toll-Man.

Case for Snorri’s compass.”

As Jenna finished reading the list, the paper began to crumble in her fingers. She quickly laid it down on the table. “I...I wonder where he was going,” she said.

“Somewhere cold. You can tell a lot from a list,” said Beetle, who was a big fan of lists himself.

Jenna hated to think of Nicko—five hundred years ago—setting off for somewhere cold. It made her feel terribly bleak and empty. She sat slowly stroking Ullr for comfort. The cat was curled up on her lap, apparently asleep, but Jenna knew better. She could feel a watchfulness in the way Ullr lay very still and slightly tensed, as if ready to pounce.

Septimus looked at Marcellus Pye. He knew his old master well enough to know that Marcellus had something to tell—something important. “You know something, don’t you?” Septimus said. “Tell us. Please, Marcellus.” Marcellus nodded but said nothing. He sat at the end of the table as if in a

daydream, staring at the cluster of candles, watching their flames dance in the eddies that blew through the gaps of the ill-fitting windows. Shaking himself out of his reverie, he looked up. “First,” he said, “some warmth.” Marcellus got up and, striking a flint in the old-fashioned way, he lit the fire that was laid in the grate.

As the flames leaped up around the logs, the Alchemist leaned across the table and began to speak slowly—a habit Septimus remembered from his Alchemie Apprentice days, when Marcellus had wanted his full attention. But that afternoon Marcellus did not lack attention from his audience—all eyes were on him. Accompanied by a distant rumble of thunder—and embarrassingly for Beetle, a much nearer rumble from his stomach—Marcellus Pye began to speak.

16

SNORRI’S MAP

The Alchemist spoke in a

low and measured voice. “As soon as you had gone through the Great Doors of Time the Glass liquefied,” Marcellus said. “I cannot tell you what a terrible sight that was. My Great Triumph was nothing more than a pool of black stuff on the ground...” He shook his head as if still unable to believe what had happened. “Of course then I did not know that Nicko was your brother and, seeing as he had very nearly strangled me, I did not much care who he was. But some hours later he returned with the girl Snorri and told me how they had Come Through another Glass to rescue you, Apprentice.

I was impressed with his bravery, but when he asked if he and Snorri could Go Through the Glass of Time, all I could do was show them the ghastly black pool. If I had any bad feelings about Nicko, they vanished at that moment. He looked as though he had lost everything in the world—which of course he had. And Snorri too, but she did not react. With her everything was far below the surface, but Nicko...he was like an open book.” Jenna sat twisting her hair. She found it very hard to hear about Nicko, and could not help but imagine how he must have felt.

Marcellus continued. “I could do nothing for them except offer them a place to stay and help them in any other way I could. And so for some months—I cannot remember how many—they lived here with me. At first they looked much the way you had, Apprentice—haunted and restless. But after some weeks I noticed that this had changed—they gained a purposeful air; they smiled and even laughed sometimes. At first I thought they had adapted to our Time, and maybe even preferred it—for it was a good Time—but one evening they came and told me about Aunt Ells. After that I knew better, and that soon they would be gone.”

“Aunt Ells,” Jenna mused. “I’m sure I have heard that name before.”

“’Tis likely, Princess,” said Marcellus. “Aunt Ells was Snorri’s great-aunt. They met her in the marketplace on the Way; she was selling pickled herring.”

“They met Snorri’s great-aunt?” asked Septimus. “In your Time?”

“Indeed. Nicko bought Snorri some pickled herring only to find that it was Aunt Ells who was selling it. The next thing I knew they were planning to leave for the deep forests of the Low Countries. It seems that Aunt Ells told them that there was—or is, I suppose—a place there where All Times Do Meet. It is called the House of Foryx.” There was silence around the table as this sunk in. Another rumble of thunder rolled in the distance and a gust of wind rattled the windows.

“Foryx—they’re just in stories, they don’t really exist,” said Septimus.

“Who knows?” Marcellus replied. “I used to think that many things did not exist, but now I am not so sure.”

“Nicko used to pretend to be a Foryx when we were little,” said Jenna wistfully. “He used to pull his tunic over his head and make horrible growling noises. And he used to scare me with stories about how packs of Foryx would run and run and never stop, and how they would eat everything that was in their way—including little girls. And when we had to cross the road he used to make me look out for horses and carts—and Foryx.” She laughed. “Wasn’t he awful?” Septimus felt wistful too.

Whenever Jenna talked about what she called the old days in The Ramblings, when all the Heaps still lived as a family, it reminded him of all he had missed out on. It was not always a comfortable feeling. He changed the subject. “But what about Aunt Ells—how could she possibly be in your Time, Marcellus?”

“I remember what Snorri said now,” said Jenna. “Her aunt Ells fell through a Glass when she was young. No one ever saw her again.”

“I believe that is so,” said Marcellus. “She said she fell through the Glass and came out into the House of Foryx. It was a dreamlike place, apparently, where most people lost the will to leave—but Aunt Ells was a determined child and decided to get out as soon as she could and go back home. She got out all right, but unfortunately she got out into the wrong Time. Nicko told me he was certain that if he and Snorri got to the House of Foryx they could find their way back to their own Time. Aunt Ells, I believe, was not so sure.”

“So after they left,” asked Septimus, “did you ever hear from them again?” Marcellus shook his head. “Things were difficult then. It should have been Esmeralda’s coronation, but she was in such a nervous state that she refused to come back to the Palace. She stayed in the Marram Marshes with my dear wife, Broda, for some years. I found myself in the position of Regent, running the Palace and also keeping my Alchemie experiments going. All too soon I realized that a whole year had gone by with no message. I was worried, as I had made a point of asking them to send word to let me know they were safe—the forests of the Low Countries were evil places then. I do not know how the forests are now but in my Time they were infested with monsters and monstrosities and all manner of foul things. Of course I told Nicko and Snorri all of this and more, but they would not listen. They were determined to go. I was very sorry. Well, I was sorry then,

for I thought their young lives had been cut short. But now...well, who knows?” Jenna sat up, her eyes shining with hope. “So now you know something else?” Marcellus shook his head with a rueful smile. “I know a little more now than I did then,” he said. “But who knows what it means? Let me tell you about Demelza Heap.”

“Demelza?” said Septimus. “I didn’t know there was a Demelza Heap.”

“Not now, maybe,” Marcellus replied. “But there was once. And Demelza told me that she had seen Nicko and Snorri.

Two hundred years after they left me.”

A silence descended in the room. “Two hundred years?” whispered Jenna.

A cold shiver went down Beetle’s spine. This was creepy stuff. Jillie Djinn was right about Alchemists, he thought.

Marcellus noticed Beetle’s expression. “You see, hungry scribe, I gave myself the curse of eternal life without eternal youth.” Beetle’s eyes widened in amazement. “I would not recommend it.” Marcellus grimaced. “When I reached about two hundred and fifty years of age, I was so ancient that I could no longer bear the bright lights and fast chatter of the world. Things had changed so much that I felt I scarcely belonged and I longed to retreat to a place of darkness and silence. And so I made my plans to inhabit the Old Way, which runs between the Palace and my old Alchemie Chamber.

It is a secret place belowground and it is not Sealed

with ice. You look surprised, scribe. Ah, there are still some places untouched by the cold hand of the Freeze. Anyway, I decided to sell my house while I still had the wit to do so—and that was when I met Demelza Heap. I still remember it—the moment I opened the door I recognized her. She was a striking woman, tall with green eyes and that same hair that you have, Apprentice—although I believe it had seen more of a comb than yours has recently. In my time as a young man she had kept a shop selling the fine glass apparatus that I used for my experiments. I had gotten to know her well over the years, but she disappeared on a trip to the master glassblowers of the Low Countries. She had gone to search out some special flasks for me and I always felt bad about that.

“So there was Demelza Heap on my doorstep, more than two hundred years after she had gone to the Low Countries, and she was as young as ever. She

did not recognize me, of course, for I was decrepit by then. When I told her who I was she would not believe me at first, but she humored an old man and we fell to talking over a glass of mead. I think she enjoyed speaking to someone who did not call her crazy when she spoke about what had befallen her. She told me she had become lost in a silent forest and to escape a marauding pack of Foryx—that is what she said—she had found refuge in a place where, she told me, All Times Do Meet—a place she, too, called the House of Foryx.” Jenna hardly dared ask the question. “Did...did you ask Demelza if she had seen Nicko?”

“I did.”

Jenna and Septimus exchanged excited glances.

“And...?” prompted Septimus.

Marcellus smiled. “Not only had she seen him—she had actually talked to him. She reckoned she was his great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-aunt. So at last I knew what had become of them.”

“Nicko made it to the House of Foryx,” said Jenna, excited.

“So it seems,” said Marcellus.

“So he can come back!”

“In a hundred years, maybe, so we’ll never see him anyway,” Septimus said gloomily. “Or he might have already come back a hundred years ago and now he’s de—”

Jenna stopped him. “Sep—don’t! Please, just...don’t.”

“Apprentice, enough,” Marcellus chided. “You have a dismal turn of mind at times. We must hope that they quickly understood the Rule of the House of Foryx, which poor Demelza did not—until it was too late.”

“What rule?” asked Jenna.

“She did not realize that you have to Go Out when someone from your own Time arrives. They have to remain outside the House—they may not enter. Once you step across the threshold you belong to no Time at all.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” said Jenna, jumping up in excitement. “We shall go to the House of Foryx and Nicko can Go Out with us.”

“And Snorri. Don’t forget Snorri,” said Septimus.

Jenna looked unimpressed. “If it hadn’t been for Snorri, Nicko would be here now,” she said.

“Oh, Jen.”

“Well, it’s true,” Jenna said. “Of course we’ll get Snorri too,” she added generously. “We might as well while we’re there.”

Septimus sighed. “You make it all sound so easy. We just catch a passing donkey cart to the House of Foryx, knock on the door and ask for Nik. I wish.”

“Well, that’s exactly what I am going to do, Sep, whatever you say. You don’t have to come.”

“Of course I do,” said Septimus quietly.

With a small groan, Marcellus got up from his seat. He shuffled over to the cupboard in the chimney and took out a large, folded piece of paper, which he brought back to the table. “I was not going to show you this unless I was sure that nothing would stop you from going to the House of Foryx,” he said as he very carefully began to unfold the brittle, brown paper—to reveal a map.

The map was neatly drawn. Along the bottom were the words: FOR MARCELLUS, WITH THANKS. FROM SNORRI AND NICKO. “This is a copy that Snorri drew for me,” said Marcellus. “I thought that if I ever had a message that they were in trouble then at least I might have a chance of finding them.” Feeling in awe of the fragile sheet of paper, they looked at

the faint pencil lines that Snorri had drawn so precisely, so very long ago. “So this is the way to Nicko...” Jenna breathed.

“You must treat this with caution,” Marcellus urged, afraid that he had given too much encouragement. “Remember that Ells drew the original from her memory of things that had happened when she was only nine. She had had—although I would not have dared say this to her face—at least fifty years to forget the details. This may not be accurate.” They were peering closely at the map, trying to make sense of the crowd of faded lines on the discolored paper when suddenly a loud clap of thunder sounded overhead. Marcellus jumped in surprise and caught his long trailing sleeves in the mass of candles in the middle of the table. The fine silk-edged sleeve caught fire and a horrible smell of burning wool filled the room. Marcellus yelled in panic and flapped his arms like an unwieldy bird. He succeeded only in fanning the flames and knocking over the candles, one of which set fire to the edge of the map.

“No!” yelled Jenna. She grabbed the map and smothered the flame with her hand, oblivious of the sharp sting of the burn.

“Help!” yelled Marcellus, dancing around the room, the flames licking up his sleeves. “Apprentice—help!”

“Bucket!” yelled Beetle.

“Bucket?” asked Septimus.

“Bucket!” Beetle grabbed the bucket of water he had noticed beside the grate—Marcellus, who had a horror of fire, had one in every room—and threw it over the Alchemist. A loud sizzle and copious amounts of smoke filled the room.

Marcellus collapsed onto a chair.

Marcellus sat sadly inspecting his ruined sleeves while Jenna refolded the precious map, and Septimus and Beetle retrieved Nicko’s notes from the floor.

“Are you all right, Marcellus?” Septimus asked the damp, slightly smoking Alchemist.

Marcellus nodded and got to his feet. “Fire is a terrible thing,” he said. “Thank you, scribe, for your speedy action.”

“You’re welcome,” replied Beetle. “Anytime.”

“I hope not,” said Marcellus.

Jenna placed the last of Nicko’s notes in a neat pile on the table and Marcellus went to pick them up. Jenna put her hand on them protectively.

“I’d like to keep them, please,” she said.

“Very well, Princess. They are yours.” Marcellus opened a drawer in the table and took out some tissue paper. With great care he wrapped up the brittle papers, tied them with a length of ribbon and handed them to Jenna. She tucked them under her cloak, then scooped up Ullr.

“Why don’t I take the papers, Jen?” asked Septimus. “You can’t carry them and Ullr.”

“Yes, I can,” Jenna insisted, and she set off purposefully out of the room as if she were already on her way to the House of Foryx.

As they clattered down the candlelit stairs in her wake, Septimus said, “Marcellus?”

“Yes, Apprentice? Oh! Watch your cloak on that candle.”

“Oops. Um...Do you think Nik and Snorri are still in the House of Foryx—after all this time?”

“Maybe...” said Marcellus slowly as they reached the third-floor landing. Jenna sped off down the next flight of stairs, her boots tapping lightly on the bare wood, while Marcellus stopped and considered the matter. “And maybe I shall be taking tea with the ExtraOrdinary Wizard at the top of the Wizard Tower,” he said. “Highly unlikely, but not totally impossible.”

Septimus wished Marcellus had chosen a different example. Given Marcia's opinion of Marcellus Pye—and her complete ignorance of his present existence—totally impossible seemed more like it.

Jenna was waiting impatiently in the hallway. As Septimus, Beetle and Marcellus joined her, there was a furious knocking on the door. Everyone jumped.

“Prithee open the door, Apprentice,” said Marcellus, flustered and reverting to Old Speak.

“I don't have to, not if you would rather not,” said Septimus, who had a horrible feeling that there was only one person in the Castle who would ignore a perfectly serviceable doorbell and attack a door knocker like that.

Marcellus made an effort to compose himself. “No, no. You are quite right, Apprentice. I must not hide away from this Time,” he said. “Open the door and we will be sociable, as you say.” Septimus gave the door a halfhearted pull. “I think it's stuck,” he said.

“Here, let me,” said Beetle, and he gave the handle a hefty tug. The door flew open to reveal Marcia Overstrand standing on the doorstep windswept, grumpy and soaked.

“Oh,” said Septimus. “Hello, Marcia.”

17

TROUBLE



Well,” said Marcia icily. “Aren’t you going to ask me in?”

Septimus looked around in a panic and caught Marcellus’s eye. “With pleasure, Madam Marcia,” said Marcellus, bowing one of his old-fashioned bows. “Please, do come in.” He stepped to one side only just in time to avoid Marcia treading on his sodden shoes as she swept inside.

“Shut,” she instructed the door and it did so with a loud slam that rattled the fragile walls of the old house—but it did not rattle Marcellus. In his own Time, Marcellus had had many dealings with belligerent ExtraOrdinary Wizards; he knew the best thing to do was keep a cool head and be polite at all times—whatever the provocation. And right now, as he looked at Marcia fuming in the hall, the rain dripping off her purple winter cloak and her green eyes flashing angrily, Marcellus reckoned he was in for a fair amount of provocation.

All of Marcellus’s lack of confidence at living in a Time not his own suddenly left him. Some things in life were Timeless, and an ExtraOrdinary

Wizard was one of them. Feeling quite at home, Marcellus said, “How kind of you to call. May I offer you some refreshment?”

“No,” snapped Marcia, “you may not.”

“Ah,” murmured Marcellus, thinking that this was going to be one of the tougher ones.

Marcia fixed her gaze on Septimus much in the way a snake might look at a small vole at suppertime. “Septimus,” she said icily, “perhaps you would like to introduce me to your...friend.” Septimus desperately wished that he could be somewhere—anywhere—else. Even the bottom of a wolverine pit in the Forest would be just fine with him right then. “Um,” he said.

“Well?” Marcia tapped her right foot, which was encased in a pointy purple python shoe complete with new green buttons.

Septimus took a deep breath. “Marcia, this is Marcellus Pye. Marcellus, this is Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard.”

“Thank you, Septimus,” said Marcia. “That is precisely who I thought it was. Well, Mr. Pye, my Apprentice will not trouble you any longer. He will not

be returning and I am sorry for any bother he has been over these last few months. Come, Septimus.” With that Marcia made for the door but Marcellus got there first and barred her way.

“My old and greatly valued

Apprentice has been no bother,” he said. “It has been very kind of you to let me borrow him every now and then. I am most grateful.”

“Borrow him!” exploded Marcia. “Septimus is not a library book. I have not forgotten that you borrowed him—as you put it—for six whole months and put the boy through absolute misery. Why he still wants to see you I cannot imagine.

But I am not having him corrupted by your Alchemie claptrap any longer. Good-bye. Open!” The last word was addressed to the door. It sprang open, nearly pinning Marcellus against the wall. Reluctantly Septimus, Jenna and Beetle followed her out into the rain and wind.

Septimus risked a tentative wave to Marcellus as Marcia yelled, “Shut!” and the door slammed, shaking the windows of the old house. A rumble of thunder rolled in the distance as Marcia scolded all three of them. “Beetle,” she said, “I am surprised at you. Let’s hope for your sake that Miss Djinn does not get to hear about you fraternizing with an Alchemist—especially that

one. And Jenna, I should have thought you would have learned your lesson by now to keep away from that man. He is Etheldredda’s son, for goodness sake. Come, Septimus, there are a few things I wish to discuss with you.” Jenna and Beetle shot Septimus sympathetic glances as Marcia propelled her Apprentice rapidly along Snake Lane, which led into Wizard Way. Beetle almost asked Jenna if he could walk her to the Palace gate but to his annoyance he didn’t quite dare. Jenna gave him a brief wave and rushed off along Snake Slipway toward the Palace. Beetle set off at a snail’s pace, taking the long way back to the Manuscriptorium—and a possible encounter with Jillie Djinn, which he did not relish at all.

Marcia and Septimus took the turn into Wizard Way. A sudden squall of rain blew in from the river and a gust of wind funneled up the broad avenue. They pulled their cloaks tight about them until they were wrapped up like a couple of angry cocoons. Neither said a word.

Halfway along the Way the green cocoon finally spoke. “I think you were very rude,” it said.

“What?” Marcia could hardly believe her ears.

“I think you were very rude to Marcellus,” Septimus repeated.

“That man,” spluttered Marcia, almost lost for words, “has no right to expect anything else.”

“He was very polite to you.”

“Huh. Polite is as polite does. I do not think it is polite

to kidnap my Apprentice and place him in extreme danger. Not to mention what he is up to now—exposing my Apprentice to all kinds of weird and dangerous ideas behind my back.”

“He doesn’t have any weird or dangerous ideas,” protested Septimus. “And he didn’t know I hadn’t told you about him.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?” asked Marcia. “For months

you let me think you were visiting your poor mother. No wonder she looked so puzzled when I asked her if she was enjoying seeing so much of you—I thought

she was a bit snappy. If I hadn’t gone to Terry Tarsal this morning I would never have found out. And incidentally, Septimus, I would like to know exactly how Marcellus Pye got to be looking so young again—and living in poor old Weasal’s house.”

“It was Marcellus’s house first,” said Septimus, ignoring the first question. “I lived there too, in his Time. I told you.

And you didn’t call him poor old Weasal last year. You said that he was lucky not to be sent into exile along with his housekeeper.”

“And so he was,” said Marcia.

Anxious to stop Marcia from pursuing the question of Marcellus’s youthful appearance, Septimus quickly carried on.

“So when Weasal left to go and live in the Port, Marcellus bought his house back with some gold pebbles he had hidden under the mud on Snake Slipway.”

“Did he really? Well, Marcellus seems to have it all sewn up, doesn’t he? But the point is, Septimus, that I shouldn’t have to run around after my

Apprentice like this just to find out the truth about what he is doing. I really shouldn't."

"I know. I'm sorry," muttered Septimus. "I...I wanted to tell you. I kept meaning to but, well, I knew you'd get upset and it just seemed easier not to."

"I only get upset," said Marcia, "because I want to protect you from harm. And how can I do that if you are not honest with me?"

"Marcellus is not harmful," said Septimus sullenly.

"That is where you and I disagree," said Marcia.

"But if you just talked to him for a bit. I know you'd—"

"And I would like an answer to my question."

Septimus stalled for time. "What question?"

"As I said, I would like to know exactly how

Marcellus Pye got to be looking so young. The man is over five hundred years old. And don't try to tell me he's just kept out of the sun—no amount of face cream is going to do that for him."

"It was my side of the bargain," said Septimus quietly.

"What bargain?" asked Marcia suspiciously.

"The bargain I made to go back to my own Time. I agreed to make him the proper potion for eternal youth. There was a conjunction of the planets and ___"

"What claptrap!" spluttered Marcia. "You don't really believe that ridiculous stuff, do you, Septimus?"

"Yes, I do," said Septimus quietly. "So the day after I got back to my Time I made the potion." Marcia felt hurt. She remembered how amazed and

thrilled she had been to have Septimus back and how she had fondly left him to sleep all day in his room, thinking that he must have been exhausted. And all that time he had been quietly making a potion for that appalling Alchemist who had kidnapped him in the first place. It was unbelievable. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked.

“Because you’d say it was ridiculous—like you just did. You might even have tried to stop me. And I couldn’t let Marcellus go on being so unhappy. It was horrible. I had to help him.”

“So you made a potion for eternal youth—just like that?” asked Marcia, bewildered.

“It wasn’t too difficult. The planets were right—” Marcia suppressed a splutter. “And I just followed the instructions that Marcellus had left in the Physik Chest. I put it in the golden box he had left in the chest and I dropped it into the Moat by Snake Slipway so that he could pick it up. He used to like going for night walks in the Moat.”

“In the Moat?”

“Well, under it, really. He used to walk along the bottom. It helped his aches and pains. I saw him once. It looked weird.”

“He went for walks...under

the Moat?” Marcia looked rather like a fish that had just been dragged out of the Moat herself. Rivulets of rain ran down her face, and her mouth was open as if gasping for air.

Septimus continued. “So he picked up the box and I knew he’d got it because he put the Flyte Charm in it in exchange. I fished it out, although it took me weeks to find it. There’s an awful lot of garbage in the Moat.” Marcia remembered Septimus’s sudden interest in fishing. It all made sense now—well, not quite all. “What was he doing with the Flyte Charm?”

“He took it. But later he promised to give it back. Although he didn’t know he’d taken it anyway.”

“What?”

“It’s a bit complicated. Um, Marcia…”

“Yes?” Marcia sounded a little faint.

“Can I have the Flyte Charm back now? Please. I won’t fool around with it anymore, I promise.” Marcia’s answer was what Septimus expected. “No, you may not.”

Wizard and Apprentice walked in silence along the rest of Wizard Way, but as they went across the Courtyard of the Wizard Tower, Marcia’s python shoes with their new green buttons slipped on something dragony. That was the last straw. “Septimus,” she snapped, “that dragon is going right now. I am not having it pollute this yard a moment longer.”

“But—”

“No buts. It’s all arranged. Mr. Pot will be looking after him in the big field next to the Palace.”

“Billy Pot? But—”

“I said no buts. Mr. Pot is very experienced with lizards and I am sure he will be absolutely fine with what is, after all, nothing more than one enormous lizard with an attitude problem. The rain’s blowing over; you can take him there right now before more comes in.”

“But Spit Fyre’s still asleep,” protested Septimus. “You know what happens if I wake him up.” Marcia did know—they had only just finished reglazing all the ground-floor windows of the Wizard Tower—but she didn’t care. “No excuses, Septimus. You will take him over to Mr. Pot. Then you will come straight back here to make a start on your first Projection. It is high time you got some Magyk back into your head and got rid of all this Alchemie stuff once and for all. In fact, Magyk is what you are going to be doing full-time from now on, as you are not setting foot out of the Wizard Tower for the next two weeks.”

“Two weeks!” protested Septimus.

“Possibly four,” said Marcia. “I shall see how it goes. I expect you back in an hour.” With that, Marcia Overstrand strode off across the Courtyard. She ran up the marble steps; then the silver doors of the Wizard Tower swung open and swallowed her up.

For once Spit Fyre woke without any trouble. He allowed Septimus to climb up and sit in his usual place, the dip behind the dragon’s neck, and there was none of the usual snorting and tail thumping that Spit Fyre had recently taken to doing when Septimus climbed up. Today he was almost docile—apart from the quick burst of scalding hot air that he aimed at the passing Catchpole’s cloak, which resulted in a foul smell of burned wool and old toast.

As this was a last chance for the Wizards to see the dragon take off at such close quarters, Septimus decided to give them a good view. On his command of “Up, Spit Fyre,” the dragon beat his wings slowly and powerfully, sending a great downdraft of air whipping through the Courtyard. It was a perfect liftoff. Septimus took Spit Fyre up slowly past each floor, getting as near to the Tower as he dared. Windows were thrown open, blue-robed Wizards excitedly leaned out and the sound of applause rippled out from the Tower. As the dragon reached the twentieth floor a large window was thrown open and Septimus got a less appreciative response.

“Fifty minutes!” Marcia yelled and slammed the window shut. Spit Fyre wheeled away from the Tower in surprise but Septimus brought him back. They flew once around the golden pyramid at the top for luck, then set off. The storm had passed and clearer skies were coming in from the Port. The sun broke through the clouds and, far below, the rooftops glistened in the rain and glints of brilliant light sparkled from the puddles in the street. After six months of regular dragon-flying and three months before that of intense tuition with Alther Mella, Septimus was a confident flier. He decided to make the most of what would be his last flight for a while and take the long route to the Palace.

Septimus took Spit Fyre out over the North Gate and back above his favorite part of the Castle, The Ramblings.

Entranced by the sight of so many peoples' lives going on below him, Septimus gazed down and let Spit Fyre choose his own way. He saw people out after the storm, hanging out their washing, tending their rooftop gardens or watching the rainbow that had just appeared over the Farmlands. At the sound of the dragon wings beating far above, they stopped and waved—or just stared in amazement. Children, let out of stuffy rooms to play in the sun, ran along the open



walkways of The Ramblings. Septimus heard their voices yelling with excitement, “Dragon, dragon!” But with Marcia’s words ringing in his ears, Septimus knew he did not have much time for lingering and, reluctantly, he pointed Spit Fyre in the direction of the Palace. All too soon he was approaching Billy Pot’s new vegetable field.

Septimus thought he made a good landing, but Billy Pot thought otherwise.

“Careful! Watch them lettuces!” Billy yelled as Spit Fyre folded his wings and set his tail down with a dull thud on some lettuce seedlings.

Septimus slipped down from Spit Fyre's neck. "I've brought Spit Fyre," he said rather unnecessarily.

"So I see," said Billy.

Billy Pot waited while Septimus patted the dragon's neck, rubbing his hand over the smooth scales, which were still chilled from the flight. After a minute or two he said, "Well, aren't you going to introduce us?"

"Yes," said Septimus, reluctant to leave his dragon.

"Dragons are sticklers for etiquette. They like to be introduced properly."

"Do they?" asked Septimus, surprised. "Well, Spit Fyre, may I introduce Billy Pot? And Billy, this is Spit Fyre, the best dragon ever. Aren't you, Spit Fyre?" Septimus gently patted the dragon's velvety nose.

Spit Fyre ducked his head and snorted a plume of air, which scorched some nearby carrot tops. Billy stepped up close.

He met Spit Fyre's red-rimmed dragon eye and said, "I am honored to make your acquaintance, Mr. Spit Fyre." Spit Fyre leaned his head to one side, considering what Billy Pot had said. Then he ducked his head once more and pushed his nose into Billy's rough tweed coat. Billy staggered back with the push and fell into a bed of parsley. But he jumped straight back on his feet and, after wiping his muddy hands on his corduroy tunic, he patted Spit Fyre's neck.

"There," he said, "I can tell we'll be friends."

18

IN PIECES

Jenna was making her way

back to the Palace. The squall that had caught Marcia and Septimus in Wizard Way had ambushed her, too. The driving rain stung her eyes and the wind sent her cloak flapping around her ankles as if it were trying to trip her

up. Jenna put her head down and ran, one hand holding on to Ullr and her cloak, the other tightly clasping Nicko's notes and Snorri's precious map. She headed straight past the Palace Gates and ran for the relative shelter of the alleyway at the side of the Palace, which would take her to the kitchen garden. As she scooted into the alley she was going fast—so fast that even if she had been looking she would not have had time to stop—when a dark, lanky figure dashed around the corner and hurtled toward her.

The collision with Merrin sent Jenna flying backward; she hit the wall with a thud that knocked the breath out of both her and Ullr. Merrin went sprawling to the ground but, like a gangly spider, he scrambled back onto his feet. He glared angrily at Jenna and raced off, determined not to be late.

Dazed, Jenna allowed Ullr to untangle himself from her cloak. She stood up and rubbed the back of her head, where a large bump was already beginning to form. For a moment she felt confused and, as she glanced down, she wondered about the strange brown confetti floating in the puddles at her feet. And then she knew.

Feeling suddenly sick, Jenna kneeled down and stared in disbelief. All Nicko's notes—and worse, Snorri's map—had been crushed in the collision and were now in hundreds of wet pieces on the ground. Their last chance of finding Nicko was gone.

Beetle was wandering slowly across the front of the Palace, oblivious to the rain, which was soaking through his woolen jacket and finding its way into his boots. The excitement of the last bizarre hour he had spent with Septimus and Jenna had evaporated in the downpour, and Beetle had begun worrying about what awaited him at the Manuscriptorium. He wondered if Marcia had already paid a visit to inform Jillie Djinn that he had been in the company of the Alchemist.

Beetle was also worrying about how to get his sled back. Unlike the Wizard Tower sled, it did not respond to a whistle.

It didn't even have

a whistle. Even worse, the sled was prone to wandering off and Beetle could not remember if he had tied it up or not. He had been so keen to see Jenna that he had completely forgotten about his job. How was he going to explain that? Beetle felt very annoyed with himself and swore that he would never, ever again let the thought of Jenna get in the way of his work—and then he caught sight of her down the Palace alleyway kneeling in a puddle.

“Princess Jenna?” Beetle’s concerned voice intruded on Jenna’s despair. “Are—are you all right?” Jenna shook her head. She did not look up.

Feeling as though he was doing something he shouldn’t, something that only someone who knew her well would do, Beetle kneeled down beside her. “Can I help?” he asked.

Jenna looked at him. Beetle was not sure whether it was raindrops or tears running down her face. He had a feeling it might be both. Jenna pointed at the flurry of paper floating in the puddle and said angrily, “I’ve messed up. It’s all my fault. We’ll never find them now.”

Beetle had a terrible feeling that he knew what the bits of paper were. “Oh no,” he murmured. “That’s not…” Jenna nodded miserably.

Tentatively, Beetle picked up a soggy fragment and laid it on the palm of his hand. “Maybe…” he said slowly, thinking very hard.

“What?”

“Maybe if we collected it all we could do something.”

“Really?” A small note of hope crept into Jenna’s voice.

“I—I don’t want to promise too much, but the Manuscriptorium is good at this kind of stuff. It’s worth a try.” From his pocket, Beetle took a small packet and unfolded it until he had a large square of fine silk balanced on his knee. He licked his finger and thumb and rubbed the edges of the silk so that they parted. The silk square revealed itself to be a pouch with many compartments. “I always carry one of these,” said Beetle. “You never know when you might find something you want to put in it.”

“Gosh,” said Jenna, who never seemed to carry anything useful with her.

With the rain still falling—and to the accompaniment of miserable mewing from a sodden orange cat—Beetle and Jenna spent the next ten minutes meticulously picking up the delicate scraps of five-hundred-year-old paper and laying them in Beetle’s silk pouch. When they had satisfied themselves that they had found every last piece, Beetle carefully rolled up the silk and said, “Would you like to carry it under your cloak, Princess Jenna? I think it will keep drier there.”

“I’m just Jenna, Beetle. Please.” Jenna smiled and tucked the roll of silk inside her cloak.

“Um. Shall I...?” Beetle pointed to the shivering Ullr, faithfully waiting beside the puddle.

“Oh, yes please,” said Jenna.

Beetle picked up the cat and tucked the soggy animal inside his jacket. Then together he and Jenna set off for the Manuscriptorium. As they walked along Wizard Way, it occurred to Beetle that if it were not for the niggling fear that the Manuscriptorium would not be able to put Nicko and Snorri’s papers back together, he would be completely and utterly happy just then.

All that changed when he pushed open the door to the Manuscriptorium. He was confronted by Jillie Djinn and Merrin Meredith, who were about to go into the Manuscriptorium itself. At the ping of the door and the click of the counter, both of them looked back.

“And where have you been?” demanded Miss Djinn.

“I—I was doing a hatch Inspection. Marcia—I mean Madam Overstrand told me to—”

“You are not employed by Madam Overstrand, Mr. Beetle. You are employed by me. I have had to take a scribe out to cover you. Which leaves

precisely nineteen left for the Duties of the Day. Nineteen is not enough. Luckily for you, I have a promising candidate for the vacant post.”

Beetle gasped.

Merrin smirked.

Jillie Djinn continued. “And what, pray Beetle, do you mean by removing my advertisement, crumpling it up into a ball and throwing it in the garbage? You are getting above yourself. In fact I may well consider this young man for your post if you continue in this manner.”

Beetle went pale.

“Excuse me, Miss Djinn,” said Jenna, emerging from the shadows of a teetering stack of books by the door.

Jillie Djinn looked surprised. She had been so angry at Beetle that she had not noticed Jenna. In fact, Jillie generally found dealing with more than two people at one time confusing. The Chief Scribe gave a small bow and said, a little awkwardly, “How may I help you, Princess Jenna?”

Jenna put on her best Princess voice. She thought it sounded pompous but she had noticed it generally got her what she wanted. “Mr. Beetle has been engaged on very important Palace business. We have come to give you our personal thanks for allowing us to have the benefit of his expert knowledge. We do apologize if we have kept him too long. It is our fault entirely.”

Jillie Djinn looked confused. “I was not aware of any Palace business this morning,” she said. “It was not in the diary.”

“Highly confidential,” said Jenna. “As we are sure you are aware.” Jillie Djinn was not aware of any such thing, but she did not want to be shown up in front of her possible new recruit.

“Oh,” she said. “Well, yes. Highly

confidential. Of course. I am glad we could be of service, Princess Jenna. Now, please excuse me, we are already two and three quarter minutes late

for the interview.” With that Miss Djinn ushered Merrin into the gloom of the Manuscriptorium, gave another small bow in Jenna’s direction and was gone.

Beetle extricated Ullr and set him gently on the desk. “Phew,” he said. “I don’t know how to thank you, Prin—Jenna. I really don’t.”

“Yes, you do.” Jenna smiled. She handed him the rolled-up silk pouch.



“Yes,” said Beetle, looking at the pouch. “I guess I do.”

19

MR. EPHANIAH GREBE

Foxy?” said Beetle in a hoarse whisper.

Nineteen scribes looked up from their work and the sound of nineteen scratching pens ceased. “Yeah?” said Foxy.

“Would you watch the office for me? There’s something I need to do.” Foxy was not sure. “What about her?” he whispered, jabbing his thumb in the direction of a firmly closed door just off the Manuscriptorium, where Jillie Djinn was interviewing Merrin.

“She won’t be out for twenty-two-and-a-half minutes,” said Beetle, thinking that sometimes Miss Djinn’s obsession with timekeeping had its advantages.

“You sure?”

Beetle nodded.

Glad of an excuse to stop copying out Jillie Djinn’s calculations about the projected price of haddock for the next three-and-a-half years, Foxy slipped down from his high stool and padded out to the front office. At the sight of the soaking wet and disheveled Jenna he raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

Beetle gave Foxy a thumbs-up sign and said to Jenna, “I’d better go and take this down while I’ve got a chance.”

“Can I come?” asked Jenna, to Beetle’s amazement.

“What—with me?”

“Yes. I’d like to see what’s going to happen to the map.” Jenna was reluctant to let her only hope of getting Nicko back out of her sight for one moment.

“Well, yes. Of course. It’s, um, through here.” Conscious of Foxy’s stare, Beetle held open the door that led from the front office into the actual Manuscriptorium, and Jenna walked through. Eighteen pens stopped their scratching and eighteen pairs of eyes stared as Beetle and the Princess walked past the rows of desks toward the basement stairs.

The basement was actually a collection of cellars. Over many hundreds of years the Manuscriptorium had annexed its neighbors’ cellars, usually

without any of them noticing, and it was now in possession of a long network of underground rooms in which Beetle hoped to find Mr. Ephaniah Grebe, the Conservation, Preservation and Protection Scribe.

Ephaniah Grebe not only worked in the basement, he lived there. None of the present scribes could remember ever seeing Ephaniah upstairs, although it was rumored that he did emerge at night when everyone had gone home. Even Jillie Djinn had seen him only once, on the day she was inducted as Chief Hermetic Scribe—but Beetle knew him well.

Usually anything in need of Conservation, Preservation or Protection was left in a basket at the top of the basement stairs every evening. In the morning it would be gone and in its place would be some of the Conserved, Preserved or Protected objects that had been left over the last week or so. Beetle would not have dreamed of leaving the precious fragments of paper in an unattended basket, so while Foxy kept an uneasy watch for Jillie Djinn—but no customers, as he had locked the door to prevent any danger of that—Beetle and Jenna set off in search of Ephaniah Grebe.

At the foot of the stairs was a long, dark corridor that ended with a door covered in green baize and big brass rivets.

Beetle gave it a hefty push and the door swung open on well-oiled hinges. The appearance of the basement was not what Jenna was expecting; it was light and airy and smelled fresh and clean. The walls were painted white, the flagstone floor was scrubbed, and from the vaulted ceiling hung lamps that burned with a bright white flame and emitted a constant hiss—which was the only sound that Beetle and Jenna could hear.

The first cellar was the one Beetle was familiar with—this was where Ephaniah had helped him rebuild his timepiece. It was what the Conservation Scribe called his mechanical cellar, and it was peopled by tiny and not-so-tiny automatons.

One of which—a rower in a boat followed by a circling seagull—suddenly sprang into action as Jenna walked by, and it was all she could do not to scream. But of Ephaniah Grebe there was no sign.

The next cellar was full of shelves that were stocked with a large array of colored bottles, each neatly labeled. On a table under a glass dome was a crushed Remember Me

Spell that Beetle remembered a distraught woman bringing in a few days previously. This cellar too was empty.

Feeling as though they were intruding, Beetle set off with Jenna deeper into the interlinked cellars, their footsteps echoing with the tinny sound that brick gives back. Beetle was amazed at the mixture of work in progress. In one cellar was a tiny book, laid out page by page, each one attached to a thick piece of paper by a long, thin pin. To one side were a pair of tweezers and a pot of newly collected paper beetle larvae. Another cellar held a small snake, rearing up as though about to strike. Beetle jumped back in shock and then, embarrassed, realized it was actually a stuffed snake, and a box of assorted snake fangs sitting beside it told him that its fangs were being replaced.

But still there was no sign of Ephaniah Grebe. Worried that time was ticking away, Beetle sped up. They scooted through one cellar after another, each with an ongoing project set out neatly on a table and each one devoid of Ephaniah Grebe, until at last they arrived at the wide archway that opened into the final and largest cellar.

Underneath Jenna's cloak, Ullr unsheathed his claws.

At first sight this cellar also appeared empty, apart from a round table in the center with a bright white, hissing light suspended above it. But as they stood in the archway a slight movement drew their attention to a figure, bent over a task that they could not see, sitting on a tall stool at a bench in the far corner. The figure was wrapped in a white cloak, blending in perfectly with the whitewashed wall behind him.

"Ahem," coughed Beetle quietly. There was no response. "Excuse me," he said. Still there was no reaction. The figure continued with whatever painstaking task he was busy with. Increasingly worried that Miss Djinn's interview would soon be at an end, Beetle hurried over and tapped him on the shoulder. The figure leaped with shock and spun around.

“Ephaniah, I’m sorry to bother you,” said Beetle, “but I—”

“Argh!” Jenna screamed. Too late she tried to smother it, her hand flying to her mouth in horror. Half the man’s face was that of a rat.

Rat nose, rat whiskers and two long, yellow rodent teeth. The rat’s mouth opened in shock, showing a pointed pink tongue. Quickly, the rat-man covered the lower part of his face with a long white silken cloth that had gotten loose and fallen around his neck. He readjusted it, winding it round and round until the swathes of silk covered the pointed bump of the rat nose.

“Oh,” gasped Beetle, realizing he should have warned Jenna what to expect. “I am so sorry, Ephaniah. I didn’t mean to interrupt like this.”

Ephaniah Grebe nodded and squeaked something. Then he pushed his thick bottle-glass spectacles up onto the top of his head. Beneath the spectacles, Jenna saw a pair of sparkling, decidedly human, green eyes and she relaxed. Beetle began to apologize once more but Ephaniah Grebe held up his hand to stop him, wriggled off his stool and bowed deeply to Jenna. Then he took a long silver box from his pocket.

Inside the box was an index of hundreds of small white cards. Ephaniah Grebe leafed swiftly through it, took a card and laid it on the table. He beckoned Jenna and Beetle forward and pointed to a well-thumbed card. It said: DO NOT BE

AFRAID. I AM HUMAN.

“Oh. What...happened?” asked Jenna.

Another, equally well-thumbed card took its place: PERMANENT RAT HEX. AMBUSHED AGE 14 BY DARKE

HEX DIARY AND DARKE RAT REBUS IN WILD BOOK STORE.

Beetle gulped. He had never asked what had befallen Ephaniah, but he wasn’t surprised. He had always wondered what would happen if two Darke

books got together and ganged up on him.

Another card: WITCH MOTHER MORWENNA SAVED ME. NOW PARTIAL HEX ONLY. He held out his hands, which were human—although Jenna thought the nails looked strangely long and thin, a little like rat claws.

Beetle realized he had not introduced Jenna. “Ephaniah,” he said, “this is Princess Jenna.” Ephaniah Grebe bowed and, after some frantic leafing through the index, he placed an unused, pristine white card on the table: WELCOME, YOUR MAJESTY.

It was followed by another, well-thumbed card: WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?

In answer, Beetle laid his roll of silk on the table and unrolled it. He groaned, horrified at the sodden mash of paper that lay in its folds. He realized that he had been so busy comforting Jenna that he had not really taken in the enormous damage caused by not only the collision, but also the water. The ink had run, most of the pencil markings were rubbed off, and many of the fragile pieces were now stuck together. It reminded Beetle of the papier-mâché mix he used to play with at his nursery school.

Ephaniah Grebe made a long aaaah

kind of sound, more like a concerned sheep than a rat, Beetle thought. The Conservation Scribe pulled his bottle-glass spectacles back down onto his long nose and peered at the disaster. Soon another card was placed on the table: WHAT

IS IT?

And so Beetle explained as best he could what it was and how the papers had come to be in such a bad state. While he was speaking Jenna looked more and more agitated until she burst out, “Please, Mr. Grebe. Say you can put them all back together again. Please.”

Another card on the table: IT IS DIFFICULT.

Then, seeing Jenna's face fall, another: NOT IMPOSSIBLE.

"Those pieces of paper are my only chance of ever seeing my brother again," said Jenna simply.

Ephaniah Grebe's eyebrows were raised in surprise and he put his head to one side in a way that reminded Jenna—rather comfortingly—of Stanley. He reached for a pad and a pencil and wrote: I will do my utmost. I promise.

"Thank you, Mr. Grebe," said Jenna. "Thank you!"

They left Ephaniah Grebe poking at the sodden mess with a pair of tweezers. As they left the cellar, Jenna turned back for a last look at the precious fragments—and nearly screamed once more. Snaking out from under Ephaniah Grebe's voluminous white robes was a long, giant pink rat's tail.

Beetle was heading fast through the cellars. "We've gotta run," he said as Jenna caught up with him. "Miss Djinn will be out any minute now." Jenna nodded. Together they raced back through the cellars, shot up the stairs—and were just in time to see a smiling Jillie Djinn emerging from the interview room, followed by a grinning Merrin Meredith.



The Chief Hermetic Scribe's smile faded as she saw Beetle emerge at the back of the Manuscriptorium. "What are you doing away from your post again?" she demanded. And then, noticing Jenna, a little irritably, "Good afternoon, Princess Jenna. We are honored to see you so very many times in one day. Can I help you?"

“No, thank you, Miss Djinn,” Jenna replied in her Princess voice. “Your Inspection Clerk, Beetle, has already been most helpful. We are sorry to have kept him from his post. Naturally, Beetle ensured that it was not left unattended. We will take our leave now, as we have important business to attend to.”

“Ah,” said Jillie Djinn, feeling somehow wrong-footed once more, but not sure why. She gave a small half bow and watched the nearest scribe to the door jump down from his stool and hold the door open for Jenna, who swept out in the manner of Marcia Overstrand. Jillie Djinn turned to Beetle. “In that case, Beetle, now that the Princess no longer requires your services you can spend the rest of the afternoon showing our new trainee scribe the ropes.”

“What?” gasped Beetle.

From behind the voluminous blue silk robes of his new boss, Merrin Meredith made a rude sign at Beetle. Beetle very nearly returned it but stopped himself just in time.

“B—but he hasn’t taken the exams yet,” Beetle could not help protesting.

“It is not your place, Mr. Beetle, to suggest the criteria I apply when appointing my scribes,” Jillie Djinn replied icily.

“You

may well have needed to take the Manuscriptorium examinations, but Daniel has shown enough knowledge to convince me that the examinations would serve no purpose whatsoever in the selection process. Now, I would be grateful if you would do as I have requested and take our new scribe on his induction tour. You have one hour and thirty-three minutes.

I suggest you make a start. I shall leave it to your own initiative to decide where.” Beetle grinned. He knew exactly where he would make a start—the Wild Book Store.

REUNITE

That evening another gale came

in from the Port. It howled up the river, whisking slates off roofs and making everyone irritable and edgy.

Septimus was marooned in the Wizard Tower under the eagle eye of Marcia Overstrand. He was beginning the complicated preparations for his first Projection, which was an important milestone in an Apprentice's studies. A first Projection traditionally involved the Apprentice choosing a small domestic item and then trying to Project a realistic image of this object inside the communal areas of the Tower in the hope that it was believable enough to pass for the real thing. All Projections

were mirror images of the original but, providing the Apprentice was careful not to choose something with lettering on it, this did not usually matter. Sometimes a seemingly innocuous "broom" would be propped up in a dark corner, a small

"ornament" would sit high up on an inaccessible window ledge or a new "cloak" would hang in the closet. Throughout the time of the first Projection, an air of excitement would pervade the Tower as the Wizards, busy pretending they were doing something entirely different, went around prodding all manner of suspicious objects—and taking bets on what exactly the Apprentice would Project.

With Septimus shut away in the Projection

room, Marcia made a start on removing the traces of Spit Fyre from the yard—or rather, she got Catchpole to do it for her. However, by that evening Catchpole had locked himself in the Old Spells cupboard and would not come out.

Exasperated, Marcia sent a message to Hildegarde, the sub-Wizard on door duty at the Palace, to come to the Wizard Tower straightaway.

Hildegarde arrived windswept and out of breath, having run all along Wizard Way, thrilled that at last she had received the summons to the Wizard Tower that she had long wished for. But instead of being offered a post as an Ordinary Wizard, Hildegarde was given a large broom and an even larger bucket. Hildegarde, determined as ever, rolled up her sleeves and got to work, telling herself sternly that any job at the Wizard Tower brought her one step nearer to her dream. The next morning Hildegarde was Terry Tarsal's first customer. She bought a sturdy pair of waterproof boots.

With the eagle-eyed Hildegarde gone from the Palace, Merrin began to get cocky. He no longer crept along the corridors but walked with a swagger. Twice he nearly bumped into Jenna coming unexpectedly around a corner. The second time he was tempted to walk past her and see if she noticed, but at the last moment he thought better of it and hid behind a curtain.

Jenna may well not have noticed Merrin even if he had walked past her. She was too preoccupied thinking about Nicko and the map. Unable to keep away from the Manuscriptorium, she stopped by to see Beetle at least twice a day. Beetle had mixed feelings about this. He loved to see her but every time the door went ping—or rather, pi-ing, in the particular way he was convinced it did only when pushed by Jenna—he braced himself to tell her that there was no news from Ephaniah Grebe. But on the third day that Jenna came by, Beetle did have news—and it was not good.

It was late in the afternoon and the dark clouds made it feel even later. Beetle had just lit a candle and placed it on his desk. He was getting ready to do the last round of the day—the LockingUp round—when pi-ing, the door flew open and Jenna was blown in. She pushed the door closed, pulled her windswept hair from out of her eyes, jammed her gold circlet securely down on her head and, with an anxious look, said, “Any news?” Beetle had been dreading this moment. “Well, yes...but, um, not good news, I'm afraid. This note was on my desk this morning.”

He handed the large piece of white paper to Jenna. On it was written: Re: Ancient Paper Fragments. Vital piece missing.

Please advise.

“I suppose it’s not surprising,” said Beetle with a sigh.

“But we searched everywhere,” Jenna protested. “And I looked again when I went back. And the next day just to make sure. There can’t be…” Her voice trailed off. Now that she thought about it, she knew it would be a miracle if there wasn’t a piece missing.

“I went to ask Sep what to do but they wouldn’t let me see him,” said Beetle. “Wouldn’t even take a message. Said he was not to be disturbed. Marcia’s as good as got him prisoner up there. I’m sure he could find the missing piece. There must be some kind of spell or something.”

“We could ask Ephaniah,” said Jenna. “He might know of a spell. Maybe we could get an Ordinary Wizard to do it for us.”

It seemed like a long shot to Beetle, but he couldn’t think of anything else to suggest. “Okay,” he said.

The Manuscriptorium was empty. All the scribes had gone home, allowed to leave early before the wind became stronger at nightfall. Even Jillie Djinn had retired upstairs to the Chief Hermetic Scribe’s rooms. As the wind rattled the office partition door, Jenna and Beetle crept through the rows of desks, which rose high above them like skeletal sentries and gave Jenna the creeps. At the top of the basement steps was a basket with that day’s offerings—a couple of spells to be ReSet and an old treatise in need of rebinding. Beetle picked it up and took it down with them.

Beetle and Jenna pushed open the green baize door and set off through the cellars, which were almost blindingly bright in contrast to the shadowy Manuscriptorium. Once again the cellars were empty, but this time they walked briskly through and headed for the last one. There they found Ephaniah Grebe peering through a large magnifying glass and hunched over the table, which was covered with hundreds of tiny scraps of paper spread out like a huge, impossible jigsaw puzzle.

“I brought your basket,” said Beetle, setting it down on the floor.

Ephaniah started and turned to greet them. Both Beetle and Jenna braced themselves for the sight of the rat face, but this time Ephaniah was swaddled in his wraps and all they saw were his green eyes, hugely magnified behind their bottle-glass spectacles. The Conservation Scribe made a low squeaking noise and beckoned them over. He handed them a piece of paper. On it was written: I have succeeded in ReUniting all papers bar one.

Ephaniah waved his hand toward a neatly stacked pile of papers on a shelf behind him.

“Well, look at those,” said Beetle, trying to cheer up Jenna. “They’re all back together. There’s only one missing—that’s not bad, is it? I bet the missing piece is one of those boat doodles, there were lots of those. Chances are it won’t be important, just a scribble.”

Jenna was about to say that all of Nicko’s scribbles were important to her when Ephaniah placed another piece of paper in front of them:

I have strengthened all the papers but for future safekeeping I should like to bind them. Do I have your permission?

Jenna nodded.

Ephaniah’s eyes smiled—this was a job he loved. From a drawer in the table he took two thick pieces of card, covered in the new Jillie Djinn rebranding reddish purple Manuscriptorium cloth. Taking an eyelet punch, he made five holes down one side of each card and then picked up the sheaf of ReUnited papers and sandwiched them between them. Now Ephaniah took a long length of blue ribbon and deftly laced the covers together so that Nicko’s notes and jottings were now safely bound between the thick red card. Next the Conservation Scribe tied the corners together with yet more ribbon; then with a final flourish he produced a large stamp and thumped it down onto the cloth. When he lifted the stamp the words **CONSERVED, CHECKED AND GUARANTEED BY EPHANIAH GREBE** were imprinted in gold on the red.

With his white wraps wrinkling as though underneath them his rat whiskers were twitching with a smile, the Conservation Scribe proudly handed the beautifully bound papers to Jenna. “Oh...thank you,” she breathed. Now at last she had Nicko’s papers back in her hands; Jenna felt a huge sense of relief. Everything was going to be all right. She would go to see Sep, they would look at the map together and figure out how to get to the House of Foryx, and then they would go and get Nicko back. Her thoughts running far ahead, Jenna found herself wondering if she could persuade Jillie Djinn to give Beetle some time off—it would be great if Beetle could come with them too. Just as Jenna was planning what she would say to Miss Djinn when she refused to let Beetle go, Beetle’s voice broke into her thoughts.

“Have you seen what’s missing?” he asked anxiously.

“Missing?” Jenna came down to earth with a bump.

“Yes. The one that wouldn’t ReUnite. Which one was that?”

“Oh.” Jenna opened Ephaniah’s beautifully bound book and began to leaf through the papers, which were now clean and strong, the writing clear and unsmudged with no signs of any joins—the Conservation Scribe had done a wonderful job.

There were many things Jenna had not seen—lists for food supplies, clothing, a messed-up application for two travel permits, numerous to-do lists and several urgent must-do lists. Then there were the things she remembered seeing in Marcellus’s attic—the boat doodles, the knot diagrams, the winter market list, the games that Nicko and Snorri had played. They were all there except for one thing—the map.

Jenna looked at the mess on the table in despair. Tears pricked the back of her eyelids as she took in the fact that the key to finding Nicko lay strewn in a thousand pieces in front of them, with a memo beside it in Ephaniah’s neat hand: Incomplete.

Ephaniah had seen Jenna’s expression and was hastily scribbling: All is not lost. Maybe a Seek can be done for the missing piece. Ask EOW.

“Who is Eow?” asked Jenna.

Ephaniah picked up his pen again, but Beetle said, “ExtraOrdinary Wizard. It’s the shorthand we use here. Like CHS is Chief Hermetic Scribe or GFOAIC—that’s me. But nobody uses it because it’s shorter to say Beetle.”

“GFOAIC?” asked Jenna.

“General Front Office and Inspection Clerk.”



“Ah,” said Jenna. “Well, GFOAIC, would you come with me to find Marcia...please? She might listen to two of us.” She turned to Ephaniah and said, “Thank you, Mr. Grebe. Thank you for giving me back Nicko’s things.” She clutched the beautifully bound book close to her.

Ephaniah nodded and produced a neatly written card, which he presented to Jenna with a flourish: I have enjoyed your visits very much, Princess. I

would be honored to see you again and hope I may be of service in the future.

Jenna smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Grebe. I shall be back very soon with the EOW, and then you can do the final ReUnite,” she said, sounding much more confident than she felt.

21

TERTIUS FUME

Jenna and Beetle left

the bright lights of Ephaniah’s realm and stumbled out into the darkness of the Manuscriptorium basement.

“I’ve got to check to see if the Vaults are secure and do the LockUp, but it won’t take long,” said Beetle.

Jenna was longing to rush and get Marcia but she realized that Beetle had a job to do. “I’ll come and help you check the Vaults if you like,” she offered.

Beetle did like—very much. “Okay. Yep. Fine,” he said, trying not to sound too pleased but overdoing it a little.

“But I don’t want to get in the way.”

“No! I mean no, of course you won’t get in the way.”

Jenna followed Beetle along the musty-smelling passageway that wound its way down to the Vaults, which were dug deep into the bedrock of the Castle below the cellars. As they reached the last turn of the passageway, the sound of voices could be heard—one of which had a low, booming resonance that Beetle knew was Tertius Fume. It was the other voice that surprised him. Beetle put his finger to his lips and began to move quietly. Jenna cast him a questioning glance.

“Trouble,” Beetle mouthed in reply. He slipped into an alcove at the top of the steep flight of steps that led down to the Vaults. Jenna joined him.

Beetle's heart was pounding so fast that at first he could not hear what the voices were saying.

He took a few deep breaths and made himself calm down.

"Who is it?" mouthed Jenna.

Beetle risked a quick glance. It was exactly who he had thought it was. Sitting sprawled on the bottom step half hidden in the dancing shadows cast by the pair of rushlights outside the Vaults was Jillie Djinn's brand-new employee, gazing with rapt attention at the Ghost of the Vaults. The sound of the conversation drifted up the steps, the voices sounding hollow in the empty brick-lined passage.

"Of course

it is difficult, boy." Tertius Fume's voice reverberated up to the two eavesdroppers in the alcove. The ghost sounded cranky. "That is why it is at the end of the book. You are meant to have done what goes before."

"But I didn't want to do them. I only wanted to do the end one."

"Practice perfect makes. A fool the shortcut takes," Tertius responded.

"But I did everything it said—and it worked. I even got the Thing. In fact I got stacks of Things."

"Stacks? What is stacks?"

"Lots. Lots and lots. Um...many."

"Many? How many?"

"I dunno. About twenty, maybe more."

"Twenty Things ? Thou art more a fool than I took you for. They will dog thy life forever more."

"No, they won't. I locked 'em up. They can't get me now."

“Did you indeed? Then how angry they will truly be, when next they catch a sight of thee.”

“Do you always talk in rhymes?”

“Yes. Now what do you want, boy? I am tired of this chatter.”

“I wanted to ask you about the Darkening the Destiny thingy.”

“Thingy?”

“I mean the Darke

Hex. I did it on someone but I don’t think it has worked. Nothing has happened to him yet and I’m sure I would have heard if it had.”

Tertius Fume sounded amused and somewhat mocking. “So you’ve tried to Darken AnOther’s Destiny, have you?” he asked. “And why would a young snake like you want to embark upon such a Darke journey, hmm? When I was your age I’d have chanced my luck with a sharp blade first. Much more satisfying.” The ghost chuckled as though reliving fond memories.

The new scribe sounded taken aback. “Oh. Well, I don’t really like knives,” he mumbled.

“Ah, you prefer others to do your work for you, do you? Employ a little subterfuge, a little deceit, hey? I’ve seen your kind before. You prefer to be the puppet master pulling the strings. But, be warned, when you dabble with the Darke you may find that you become the puppet.”

“Oh...” The boy’s voice faltered and if Beetle had dared to take another look he would have seen him nervously fingering the ring on his left thumb. “But I thought that...well, as you wrote this book—and I think it’s a really, really good book, the best I’ve ever read in fact and—”

“Don’t waste your breath trying to flatter me, boy. I couldn’t give a tinker’s monkey whether you like my book or not,” Tertius Fume snapped. “Just tell me what you want from me. Come on, out with it.”

“I would like you to help me make the Darkening work. Big time.”

“And why should I help you, boy? What’s in it for me?”

“I could help you, too. We could work together.”

Tertius Fume gave a loud snort. “Me—work with you? Me, the very first Chief Hermetic Scribe, me work with a jumped-up little pinchbrain—just give me one reason why on earth I would want to do that?” There was a silence and then Jenna and Beetle heard the words, clear as a bell, “Because I am alive and you are dead.” Beetle raised his eyebrows at Jenna. That Daniel Hunter kid had nerve.

“Careful, boy,” Tertius Fume growled. “That state of affairs is easily remedied.”

“Oh. But I didn’t mean to...” The boy’s voice sounded thin and scared.

Tertius Fume ignored him and carried on. “However, it is true that I do miss some of the powers of the Living—and though I would not trust a lettuce leaf like you to do my bidding, I would trust your interesting companion here.” Beetle raised his eyebrows at Jenna as if to say What interesting companion? He risked a quick glance but could see only the ghost and the dark-haired boy in the shadows—no one else.

“You can have him.” The boy sounded relieved. “He gives me the creeps, following me everywhere.”

“Very well, Transfer his allegiance to me and I will make the Darkening work.”

“And then—then will you help me?”

“I am a man of my word, whatever others may say,” said Tertius Fume. “The Other whose destiny is to be Darkened will find himself cast onto the Precipice of Peril. How does that sound?”

“Great!” said the new scribe. “Really great. That

will show him. That stuck-up, goody-goody Septimus Heap kid will wish he never stole my name.” Jenna and Beetle looked at each other. “Sep!” they both gasped, then clapped their hands over their mouths. But it was too late.

“What was that?” Tertius Fume’s suspicious growl echoed up the steps.

“What was what?”

“I thought I heard...a rat. Or rats. Lurking at the top of the steps. Go and see, boy. Go on. Now.” Horrified, Beetle grabbed Jenna’s hand and ran.

“There was no one there,” said Merrin, returning to his place at Tertius Fume’s feet.

“Very well,” said the ghost. “So now we have a Contract to complete, do we not?” Merrin nodded warily. Suddenly he felt very scared.

Tertius Fume fixed his dark eyes on Merrin and said, “Look at me, boy. Look...at...me.” Unable to resist, Merrin met the ghost’s stare. “The Contract,” said Tertius Fume, “is this: you will Transfer the allegiance of your servant Thing

to me in Perpetuity throughout the Universe and into the Great Beyond. In return I will make effective your pathetic attempt to Darken the Destiny of one Septimus Heap. Do you accept?” Merrin managed a feeble croak. “How?”

“You just say yes, boy. It’s not complicated,” snapped Tertius Fume.

“But, um, how will you Darken his Destiny?”

“You dare to question me?” Wide-eyed with terror, Merrin shook his head. “If you question a Contract it must be answered, however stupid the question,” Tertius Fume said. Merrin squirmed at being called stupid yet again. “I shall Darken the Heap boy’s Destiny by sending him upon the Queste. No one returns from the Queste—no one. Do not look at me like an idiot, boy.” The ghost sighed; the boy had seemed promising at first but was

turning out to be a big disappointment. In the interest of making sure the Contract was valid, he continued his explanation. “To work its best, Darke Magyk

must not be suspected. We must not give those who may wish to countermand it a chance to.” Ignoring Merrin’s puzzled look he carried on, “No one will suspect that the Queste is a Darkening, for over the centuries some twenty other Apprentices have also been dispatched. Has that answered your pre-Contract Inquiry?”

“Um...” Merrin mumbled.

“Oh, give me patience. Do you want to Darken the Heap boy’s Destiny or not? Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

“Very well.” The ghost rubbed his hands in anticipation. “Now, to make the Contract binding you will need to give your servant Thing something precious from you in thanks for its services, something that it will wear as a symbol of the Contract. Though ’tis but a poor copy of the real thing, that ring on your thumb will do.”

“But it is

the—” Merrin stopped and thought the better of what he had been about to say. “It won’t come off,” he said lamely.

Tertius Fume smiled malevolently. “If I could still wield a knife it would.” Merrin went pale.

“So find something else, boy, before I am tempted to try.”

In a panic, Merrin went through his pockets and was about to hand over Sleuth when he found his very last licorice snake. “This!” he said, pulling out the snake in triumph.

Beetle and Jenna were nearly at the end of the long, winding passage back up to the Manuscriptorium when Jenna realized something was missing.

“Nicko’s pin!” she said with a gasp, her hand flying to her cloak. “It’s gone!” Beetle stopped. In the candlelight he could see Jenna’s tears welling. “What’s it like?” he asked.

“It’s a gold ‘J.’ Nicko brought it back from the Port. I always wear it in my cloak...always, and now it’s not there.”

“You had it down by the Vaults. I remember.”

“Did I?”

“I’m sure you did.” Beetle had noticed how Jenna kept checking the pin and had wondered who had given it to her.

“Wait here. I’ll go get it.”

“But that ghost—”

“I’ll be really quiet. He won’t know a thing. Be back in a sec.” Jenna leaned against the cold brick wall of the passageway and listened to the sound of Beetle’s footsteps padding back to the Vaults. Without the reassuring presence of Beetle, the candlelit passage with its flickering shadows unnerved Jenna and she held Ullr tightly for comfort. Ullr mewed irritably and Jenna felt a tremor pass through the cat. Suddenly Ullr twisted out of her grasp and landed heavily in front of her. For a brief moment Jenna had an awful feeling that he was about to chase after Beetle and give them away—and then she realized what was happening. The sun had set. Ullr was Transforming.

Although Jenna had seen Ullr Transform

many times now, it still fascinated her. She watched almost in awe as the black tip on the little orange cat’s tail began to grow. She saw the fur rippling as the muscles below the skin grew thick and strong. Now the little cat grew fast, the black from his tail spreading across his body like the shadow of an eclipse running over the land, turning the scraggy mottled orange fur to a sleek shiny black and, finally, his blue eyes to a glittering green. Within the space of forty-nine seconds, the DayUllr had become the

NightUllr and Jenna had a panther—with an orange-tipped tail—for company in the passageway.

Beetle found Jenna's pin in the alcove. Feeling very pleased, he picked it up. As he was about to rush back to Jenna, Tertius Fume's menacing laugh echoed up the steps. Beetle froze.

"You share the taste I once had for licorice, I see," he heard the ghost say.

What was the ghost talking about? Beetle wondered. Curious, he lingered for a moment.

"What is this...thing?" Tertius Fume sneered.

"It's a snake. My last one." The boy sounded aggrieved.

Beetle could not resist a quick look. The new scribe was clumsily trying to tie the snake into a circle. "See," he said sounding panicky, "I can make it smaller—I can. Then it can be a ring, a really nice ring." Beetle saw the boy close his eyes and guessed he was doing a Shrink

Spell. To Beetle's surprise it appeared to work. The snake disappeared in a puff of black smoke and the boy held out his hand to show something to Tertius Fume.

"So be it," said the ghost. "Give the Thing its ring and we will proceed." Beetle dared not stay any longer—he had left Jenna alone for long enough. He sped back up the twisting passage and, as he was nearing the end, his heart gave a fearful lurch. Two glittering green eyes were staring out of the shadows where he was sure he had left Jenna.

"Jenna?" he whispered, hardly daring to imagine what might have happened. "Jenna?" Jenna stepped out of the shadows by the walls. "Did you find it?" she asked anxiously.

"Shh," said Beetle. "Don't move."

"Why not? Oh, Beetle, wasn't it there?"

“Just...don’t...move. Okay?”

Jenna froze. Something was wrong. She watched as Beetle stealthily crept along the wall, keeping to the shadows. A low rolling growl came from Ullr. “Ullr, shh,” whispered Jenna.

Beetle pounced.

Ullr snarled.

“No! Stop! Beetle, it’s only Ullr. Ullr let go!” There was a tearing sound as Beetle wrenched his sleeve out of Ullr’s jaws and Jenna hauled Ullr away. “No, Ullr. Leave.” Ullr glared at Beetle angrily. He didn’t like being pounced on—he was the one who did the pouncing. “Leave,” Jenna repeated sternly.

“Ullr?” gasped Beetle.

“Yes. You know he was Snorri’s cat? He’s a Transformer.”

“Really?” said Beetle faintly. “Wow...”

“Beetle, um, did you—”

Beetle shook off the awful fear that something terrible had happened to Jenna. He uncurled his hand and showed Jenna a



small gold ‘J’ lying in his palm.

“Oh, Beetle!” Jenna picked up the pin and fastened it back in her cloak. “Oh, Beetle, thank you!” And she threw her arms around his neck. Beetle grinned. That was worth fighting a hundred panthers for.

Down by the Vaults, Merrin was not receiving such an enthusiastic response from the Thing. It peered at the licorice ring in disdain—what a cheapskate, it thought. The Thing

sighed a hollow sigh; unfortunately it was no more than it would have expected. And things were not so bad; its new Master looked infinitely more promising. The Thing

took the sticky black ring as though it were picking up a particularly disgusting insect, and placed it on its left thumb.

The Contract was complete.

22

FIRED

Beetle, Jenna and the NightUllr

stepped through the concealed door in the bookshelves into the shadowy Manuscriptorium, lit only by the windswept Wizard Way torches, which cast a red dancing light through the glass of the office partition.

“That boy,” said Jenna as she followed Beetle through the towering ranks of dark, empty desks. “I think I know who he is.”

“Yeah,” said Beetle gloomily. “He’s the new scribe. Miss Djinn must need her head examined employing someone like him. You think she’d be able to see—”

“See what exactly, Beetle?” Jillie Djinn’s voice came out of the dark.

“Argh!” yelled Beetle, still jumpy after the Ullr incident. “What...where?”

“Up here,” said Jillie Djinn from somewhere above them. Beetle looked up and saw to his dismay that Jillie Djinn was perched on Partridge’s seat, peering at a sheaf of papers through her tiny illuminated magnifying glass. Jillie Djinn turned her attention to Beetle and Jenna, not noticing the NightUllr in the shadows. She gazed down with a face like thunder. “I was occupied in checking Mr. Partridge’s work. It has not been up to scratch these past three days. I have been examining his calculations for the increase in the rate of paper wastage by scribes of less than one year’s experience averaged out over the past three-and-three-quarter years,” she informed them. “I was just coming to the conclusion that they do not possess the standard of accuracy that I expect from my scribes, when not only do I hear the state of my head being so insolently discussed with a mere outsider but—”

“Jenna’s not an out—”

“Do not interrupt. However important Princess Jenna may be, she is not a member of the Manuscriptorium, ergo, she is an outsider. And you, Mr. Beetle, have just taken an outsider through a Restricted Access passageway.”

“But I—”

Jillie Djinn’s tirade swept on, “Not only that, Mr. Beetle, you have been discussing sensitive Manuscriptorium business with the aforementioned outsider and

insulted your Chief Hermetic Scribe, to whom you have taken an oath to show respect at all times. You have broken three of the sworn tenets of the Manuscriptorium.”

“But—”

“Do not

interrupt. I am not finished. In addition, Mr. Beetle, it has not escaped my notice that you have neglected to take due care of the Inspection sled.”

A small groan escaped Beetle.

“My new scribe, Daniel Hunter, informed me of a conversation he overheard between you and Mr. Fox. I understand that two days ago you took Mr. Fox on an unauthorized errand into the Ice Tunnels to retrieve the Inspection sled, which you had neglected to secure in the approved manner. I also understand that Mr. Fox then spent the remainder of the day in the sick room after encountering the Ice Wraith and thus we were yet again one scribe short that afternoon. Is that correct?”

Beetle nodded miserably.

“Answer me!”

“Yes. It is correct,” mumbled Beetle. Jenna gave Beetle a sympathetic glance, but Beetle, who was staring wretchedly at his boots, did not notice.

Unfortunately, Jillie Djinn was still not finished. “Normally, on receipt of a written apology and an undertaking to conform to the regulations of the Manuscriptorium at all times, I would be prepared to overlook such poor behavior.” Beetle glanced up at Jillie Djinn but she looked straight through him. Even in the red glow from the torchlight through the window, Beetle looked pale. He knew there was a but coming. A big but.

It came.

“But,” said Jillie Djinn, “one thing I am not

prepared to overlook is my Inspection Clerk colluding with a successful attempt to UnSeal a hatch. And then, so I understand, entering through the hatch into a forbidden area.”

Beetle felt sick. Jillie Djinn had found out—just as he had known she would.

Jillie Djinn looked down from her lofty height. She seemed unwilling to get down from the desk—possibly, thought Jenna, because Beetle was a good six inches taller than she. But right then, Beetle could not have felt any smaller. He just wanted to curl up and disappear somewhere for a very long time.

“Mr. Beetle.” Jillie Djinn drew herself up straight and, like a judge about to deliver a particularly harsh sentence, she announced, “I give you notice that I hereby terminate your employment at the Manuscriptorium immediately. Your Indentures shall be burned. You will leave now and take your personal effects with you.” Both Jenna and Beetle gasped. “What?”

“You’re fired,” snapped Jillie Djinn, who could be horribly concise when she wanted to be.

“You can’t do that!” protested Jenna. “Beetle is brilliant

here. This place couldn’t run without him. You’re crazy to get rid of him—he’s the best person here.” Jenna stopped, realizing too late what she had said.

“It is no concern of yours, Princess Jenna,” Jillie Djinn replied coldly. “I shall run the Manuscriptorium as I see fit and will not be dictated to by anyone. Not even you.”

Beetle could not speak. The great looming shapes of the desks seemed to dance mockingly around him as he struggled to take in what had just happened. Jenna took Beetle’s arm and led him toward the front office. “Don’t worry,” she whispered. “She doesn’t mean it. She can’t mean it.”

But Beetle knew better. He knew that once Jillie Djinn got an idea into her head that was it—nothing could change it.

As Jenna pulled open the door to the front office, Jillie Djinn’s voice echoed through the empty Manuscriptorium: “You have five minutes to clear your desk, Mr. Beetle.”

After that the Chief Hermetic Scribe said nothing more—for she had just caught sight of the NightUllr padding through the shadows behind Jenna. Jillie Djinn had a horror of wild animals. She remained motionless, marooned on Partridge’s desk until well past midnight, when she finally plucked up the courage to make a run for it to the safety of her upstairs chamber.

Jenna propelled Beetle—who moved as if he were sleep-walking—into the front office and angrily slammed the door.

One look at Beetle told her that he was not going to be doing any desk clearing. Beetle just stood and gazed around the office, taking in all the things he loved: the great stacks of papers and books piled up in the window, his desk, his swivel chair, the sausage sandwich that Foxy had bought him that morning and he had forgotten to finish—even the door to the Wild Book Store. All these things Beetle stared at, knowing that he would never see them again in the same way. Even if he ever dared to venture into the Manuscriptorium—which he didn’t think he would—they would not be the same.

They would belong to another clerk who would be sitting at his desk, eating Foxy’s sausage sandwiches.

“Is there anything you want to take with you?” asked Jenna.

Beetle shook his head.

Jenna looked at Beetle’s desk, which he had tidied and made ready for the end of the day. His Manuscriptorium pen sat in its pot along with other, more workaday pens. “I’ll bring your pen. You don’t want to leave that behind.” But Beetle didn’t want to take anything to remind him. “Foxy,” he croaked. “Give it to Foxy.”

“Okay.”

Quickly, Jenna wrote a brief note to Foxy, found some Spell-Binding twine and tied the note to Beetle’s Manuscriptorium pen—a beautiful black onyx with an ornate jade green inlay that, if you looked closely, you could see that the complicated swirls spelled out BEETLE

along the length of the pen. Jenna left it on the desk and hoped that Foxy would notice his name, which she had written on the outside of the note in her large, looping handwriting, which her essay tutor complained got bigger every day.

Gently, Jenna took Beetle by the elbow and steered him toward the door. She tugged the handle hard and the door flew open with a pi-ing. Outside the wind whined and spots of cold rain splattered onto the windowpanes. The evening was oppressively dark, almost untouched by the light from the torch flames, some of which had blown out. Eddies of litter and leaves came skittering into the Manuscriptorium and swirled around their feet. Beetle stood motionless on the doorstep until Jenna linked her arm through his and stepped outside, taking him with her.

Behind them the door slammed with a great crash.

23

THE PROJECTION



High on their silver

torch posts, the last pair of torches at the end of Wizard Way struggled to stay lit in the wind, their flames thrown about like wet rags in a storm.

“Come on, Beetle, you’ve got to fight this!” Jenna yelled above the howl of the gale as they approached the Great Arch.

“She can’t just dump you like that. You wait—when Marcia hears about this Jillie Djinn won’t stand a chance.” Beetle did not have the energy to reply. As Jenna propelled him through the Arch and into the Courtyard, all Beetle could think about was how he was going to break the news to his mother, who frequently told anyone who would listen that the proudest day of her life was the day that Beetle passed the Manuscriptorium entrance exam. But something his mother never mentioned was the fact that it was Beetle’s weekly pay—a silver half crown—that paid the rent on their tiny rooms in The Ramblings and bought them a steady supply of potatoes and fish.

The Wizard Tower Courtyard was sheltered from the wind, and the light from the torches in their holders along the walls was steady and bright.

Jenna thought the Courtyard looked unusually clean—gone were the nasty surprises, and even the precarious slippery feeling underfoot had disappeared. As she and Beetle approached the great white marble steps that led up to the Wizard Tower, the reason for this sudden attack of hygiene appeared carrying a shovel and a very big bucket.

“Hildegarde!” said Jenna in surprise. “What are you doing here? I thought you were having some time off.” Hildegarde swept a grimy hand across her forehead, stopped and leaned wearily on her shovel. “I wish,” she said.

Jenna noticed that the sub-Wizard’s blue robes were soaked and splattered with mud—or worse—and her short brown hair had been blown into something resembling a bird’s nest. “I suppose it’s not quite the job you wanted at the Tower,” said Jenna sympathetically.

“No, it’s not,” replied Hildegarde and then, realizing she had been curt, she said, “But of course I am happy to help out while the Apprentice is unable to look after his dragon and—”

“Why, what’s happened?” Jenna interrupted, suddenly alarmed. “Is Sep ill? Has he had an accident?”

“Oh, it’s nothing to worry about, Princess Jenna. He’s doing his first Projection. It’s tricky stuff; he mustn’t be disturbed until it’s finished. It will be ending soon and then we’ll all find out what it was. He’s obviously very good at it, as no one has guessed what it is, although”—Hildegarde’s voice took on a disapproving tone—“some of the more elderly Wizards have been placing bets.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Jenna sighed. “For a moment I thought we were too late.”

“Too late? No, I think he has about ten minutes left until the end.”

“The end?”

“Of the Projection. I suggest you try the Great Hall. I have a feeling all is not right in the Old Spells cupboard.” Hildegarde winked conspiratorially.

“But please excuse me, I must put these things away and I will join you there.” She clattered off hurriedly.

Jenna and Beetle climbed the steps up to the massive silver doors that formed the entrance to the Wizard Tower. Jenna muttered the password and the doors silently opened. As they stepped into the Great Hall, the words WELCOME, PRINCESS ran across the floor in flickering, multicolored letters. It did not escape Beetle’s notice that there was no WELCOME, INSPECTION CLERK to greet him—as there had been in the past. Beetle wondered how the Wizard Tower could possibly know. He felt even worse, if that was possible. Somehow it made it official.

There was a buzz of expectation in the Great Hall. A throng of Wizards was milling about, some clutching small pink slips of paper, others chatting or hanging around trying to look as if they just happened to come to the Great Hall for important business. Jenna had never seen so many Wizards in one place. It was a colorful scene: the blue of the Ordinary Wizard robes set against the backdrop of the bright, fleeting pictures that moved over the walls showing fabled moments from the Wizard Tower’s past.

As always, Jenna felt a little overawed by the Wizard Tower. Although as Princess she was always welcome—and was even in possession of the password—the Tower was a strange and intimidating place. It seemed to her as though it were a living being. The pictures on the walls brightened and faded as if the Tower itself were breathing in and out, in and out. Light and dark, light and dark. The heady scent of incense, and the odd smell of Magyk—of old Spells and new, all combined to make Jenna feel unsettled. She wanted to understand everything that went on in the Castle and did not like the fact that she could not quite work out what the Wizards actually did. She had once asked Marcia what she did all day and, although it all seemed to make sense at the time, later she could not remember a word of what Marcia had said. It had even crossed her mind that Marcia had done a Forget

Spell on her, but when she had mentioned it to Septimus he had laughed and told her that he never remembered what Marcia said to him either. But even so, Jenna was beginning to understand the old Castle saying: A Queen and a Wizard shall never agree—what one calls two, the other calls three.

Jenna's thoughts were interrupted by a sudden bout of shushing among the assembled Wizards. On the far side of the Great Hall, at the point where the silver corkscrew spiral stairs emerged through the high vaulted ceiling, Jenna saw the distinctive purple pointy python shoes of Marcia Overstrand appear. In order to make a more dramatic entrance, Marcia had placed the stairs on the slow nighttime mode. She had learned from bitter experience that spinning round at the relatively fast daytime speed was apt to give rise to some hilarity when a crowd of Wizards was assembled. And so, as though she were descending from the heavens, Marcia elegantly rotated down through the height of the Great Hall until she reached the ground. She jumped off and clapped her hands for silence.

"Word seems to have gotten around that my Apprentice, Septimus Heap, is about to finish his first Projection," she said.

An excited murmur arose. "I do not entirely approve of this fuss," Marcia continued. "Frankly, I would have hoped you all had better things to do. But unfortunately it has become a tradition—in fact I seem to remember the same thing happening to me some time ago. Presumably, as you are all gathered here, you think that this is where the Projection has been placed."

A general muttering ensued and one brave Wizard shouted out, "Give us a clue, ExtraOrdinary!"

"I know no more than you," Marcia replied. "My Apprentice has made his own choice about what to Project. He has not informed me of his decision."

Excited murmurs spread as the Wizards propounded their own pet theories of what Septimus had actually Projected.

Marcia raised her voice. "However...excuse me, can I have silence please? Now? Thank you. There are some things I must insist upon. One: until the Projection comes to an end, please do not move about more than necessary. Two: if, when the Projection is finished, it is not immediately apparent what has been Projected I do not want an undignified stampede around the Tower searching for it. If you haven't spotted it already, then you are hardly going to notice it once it has disappeared, are you?"

There was an outbreak of obedient nodding among the crowd.

“And three—positively no betting.”

A stifled groan came from the Wizards. The little slips of pink paper that Jenna had noticed were hastily stuffed into deep pockets.

“I will now give a countdown to the end of the Projection. Five...four...three—” A loud crash came from the Old Spells cupboard and the next moment Catchpole staggered out, pursued by a large, clattering trash can. The can proceeded to chase the unfortunate Catchpole around the Great Hall, to the great amusement of the audience. Marcia looked on in disbelief—if this was a Projection then she had never seen anything like it before. It had both substance and sound, something that was thought to be impossible. When she had been a young Apprentice, Marcia had once managed to coax a small baa from a troupe of dancing sheep she had Projected as a joke on Alther’s birthday, but it had been a short and rather faint baa and Alther, who was getting hard of hearing by then, had not even heard it.

“Why’s he so scared of an old trash can?” Jenna shouted to Beetle above the excited hubbub.

“I reckon Sep’s done a double bluff,” said Beetle.

“A what?”

“We see a trash can. Catchpole sees something else.”

“Like what?”

“Probably the thing he fears most. That usually works. And it means that Sep didn’t have to decide what Catchpole sees—Catchpole has done that for him.” Jenna flashed Beetle an admiring look—how did he know all that stuff? Beetle caught the look and went red.

Pursued—or so he thought—by his old boss, the Hunter, Catchpole shot back into the Old Spells cupboard and slammed the door, leaving the trash can outside. The trashcan/Hunter retracted its legs, straightened up its lid,

folded its little hairy arms and settled down outside the door, until it looked like any other can with little hairy arms left outside for the trash collection.

Amid the excitement, no one had noticed the stairs suddenly speeding up to emergency fast mode and a flash of green whizzing down them. A few seconds later, with perfect timing, Septimus leaped off the stairs and skidded to a halt next to Marcia, with the words CONGRATULATIONS, APPRENTICE, ON YOUR SUCCESSFUL FIRST PROJECTION

swirling around his feet.

An outburst of applause greeted Septimus's arrival at Marcia's side. Septimus grinned happily. He pointed to the can, clicked his fingers and, to a delighted chorus of oooooohs, the can disappeared with a bang and a flash of green smoke.

Marcia was not amused. "There is no need for that, Septimus. We are not putting on some kind of cheap Magyk show.

This is serious business."

Marcia did not know how true her words were. At that very moment the doors to the Wizard Tower swung open—to reveal Tertius Fume silhouetted against a blinding flash of lightning.

24

THE GATHERING



The excited hub-bub was replaced by an eerie silence.

“What’s going on, Marcia?” A lone shout came from the Wizard who had been running the bets and, with this unexpected turn of events, could see a windfall coming his way. “Is this part of the Projection too?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course it’s not,” Marcia snapped. And then, as a small flicker of doubt crossed her mind she muttered to Septimus, “This isn’t still your Projection, is it?”

“No, it’s not,” replied Septimus, who wished that it were. He had a bad feeling about Tertius Fume.

On the threshold of the Wizard Tower, Tertius Fume regarded Marcia with a mocking gaze. “Well,” he said, “aren’t you going to invite us in? It is customary, you know. In fact, as I understand it, it is obligatory.”

“Obligatory?” said Marcia, peering into the gloom behind the ghost, wondering why he had said us. And then she saw the reason—behind Tertius Fume was a sea of purple. It covered the white marble steps and flowed down into the Courtyard shifting like water in the dim light as hundreds of ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghosts floated about. Marcia went pale. “Oh,” she whispered.

“Oh indeed.” Tertius Fume said with a smirk.

With a shock Marcia recognized what this was—the Gathering

of the Ghosts. It was something she had not expected to see until the very last day of Septimus’s Apprenticeship—the day when the Gathering would arrive and the Apprentice must draw a stone from the Questing Pot. That was a terrible moment. Everyone knew that if the Apprentice drew one of the Questing Stones, then he or she would be sent off on the Queste

immediately—and no one had ever returned. Like all ExtraOrdinary Wizards before her—apart from DomDaniel, who had been rather looking forward to his Apprentice getting his comeuppance—Marcia dreaded that day; indeed it was one of the reasons why Marcia had hesitated in taking on an Apprentice for many years.

Marcia knew that the Gathering, which consisted of the ghosts of all previous ExtraOrdinary Wizards, must be admitted to the Wizard Tower at all times. She also knew that its unexpected Appearance only happened in times of peril in order to give the Living ExtraOrdinary Wizard the benefit of all her predecessors’ collective wisdom. As she looked at the long line of ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghosts flowing down the steps, Marcia felt sick with apprehension—and Tertius Fume was pleased to see it.

Tertius Fume was hovering well above the broad white marble step—he had been short in Life and liked to float about eight inches above the ground to give an impression of height. He pressed his advantage, his booming voice echoing through the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower. “It is considered polite for the Living ExtraOrdinary Wizard to invite the Gathering

over the threshold of the Wizard Tower,” he informed Marcia. “But it is not essential, for we have a right to enter.

Indeed, there have been some misguided ExtraOrdinary Wizards in the past who have not invited us in and they always regretted it. Always. I will ask you for the last time—are you going to invite us in?”

“Tertius Fume, you are no ExtraOrdinary Wizard,” Marcia retorted. “I have no obligation to invite you in.” The ghost looked triumphant. “I am afraid you are mistaken there, Miss Overstrand,” he declared. “I held the office in locum tenens for seven days, in honor of which I was given purple to wear upon my sleeve. There.” He pointed to the bands at the end of his sleeves. Reluctantly Marcia looked. There, between the two gold strips set on the dark blue was a color that could, she supposed, have been purple. “Added to which, Miss Overstrand, it is I who have convened the Gathering and as Convener I demand entry.”

“You convened it? But why—what has happened?”

Tertius smiled, pleased that it was now Marcia asking the questions. “You are forgetting procedure, Miss Overstrand.

First the Gathering is admitted. Then—possibly—we may answer your questions.” Marcia knew she had no choice. “Very well,” she said.

Tertius Fume smiled with his mouth but not with his eyes. “Very well what, Miss Overstrand?” Marcia knew what she had to say. It was one of the many Articles of Conduct that she had had to memorize in the frantic few days following her sudden appointment as ExtraOrdinary Wizard. But she didn’t want to say it, and Tertius Fume knew it. And she knew that he knew it. She could tell by his mocking smile and the way he folded his arms, just as he had done the morning she had paid a visit to the Vaults.

Marcia took a deep breath and began to speak, her defiantly confident voice filling the Great Hall. “As ExtraOrdinary Wizard I hereby invite the Gathering

into the Wizard Tower. Upon your entry I do declare that I lay down my authority as ExtraOrdinary Wizard and become but one voice among many. We are all equals in this place.”

“That’s more like it,” said Tertius Fume. He stepped over the threshold and wagged his forefinger at Marcia.

“Remember, one voice among many. That’s all you are now.” The ghost strode in and gazed around the Great Hall as though he owned it.

Taking advantage of everyone’s attention being focused on Tertius Fume, Septimus slipped away from Marcia, into the shadows at the edge of the Great Hall. He made his way around to the doors, where he had just noticed Jenna and Beetle.

“Hello, Jen, Beetle,” he whispered.

“Oh, Sep,” said Jenna, “thank goodness you’re okay. Tertius Fume is—”

“Shh…” Septimus laid a finger on his lips.

“But he’s—”

“Shh! I’ve got to concentrate, Jen.” Septimus looked so fierce that Jenna did not dare go on.

Septimus was rapidly running through his memory of the gigantic Rule Book that governed all aspects of being an ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Marcia made Septimus read a section each day and he had just gotten to Gebblegons: Health and Safety Regulations part ii.

As he watched the river of purple ghosts begin to flow into the Wizard Tower, Septimus rewound some pages back to Gathering: Rules of Convening, concentrating hard on each ghost as it stepped over the threshold.

As the Great Hall of the Tower began to fill, the Living Ordinary Wizards respectfully drew back to make room for the ghosts—no one wanted to Pass Through

an ancient ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Still the ghosts kept on pouring into the Great Hall, until the Ordinary Wizards were pressed against the walls, a thin rim of blue around a huge circle of purple. A surprising number of Ordinary Wizards were crammed into the various cupboards and alcoves that led off the hall. In fact the record for Wizards in the broom closet—set by eighteen Wizards at the end of a memorable banquet some years previously—was broken that night.

As each ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghost stepped over the threshold, as a matter of courtesy, he or she Appeared to all inside the Tower, and Septimus watched each and every one. Some were faded and extremely ancient; some were newer ghosts who looked quite substantial. Some were old, some young, but all wore an expression of wistfulness as they stepped inside the Wizard Tower once again.

Fascinated, Beetle watched too. At the sight of so many ghosts he could not help recalling some calculations that Jillie Djinn had once made. Although an individual ghost is always somewhat transparent, the combined density of a group of ghosts will soon add up to enough to block an object from view. The number of ghosts necessary for this will depend upon their age, for ghosts become more transparent over the years. Jillie Djinn had worked on a formula to predict this, but she had had trouble with it, as a ghost's emotional state can also affect how transparent he or she becomes. This, like emotional states in general, irritated Miss Djinn; but she had calculated that the number of ghosts of average range of years of age and stable emotional state needed to obscure a Living being was five and a quarter. Which was why, as the ghosts poured in, Septimus soon lost sight of Marcia at the far side of the hall, but he made sure he did not lose sight of any of the ghosts as they filed in one by one. There were two he was particularly looking out for—one that he wanted to see and one that he did not.

His job was made easier by the bottleneck that had begun to build up at the doors, as virtually each ghost stopped for a moment and gazed at the place he or she had left so long ago. A patient line formed on the steps, each ghost eventually floating through the doors, looking around and finding a place to be. The very last ghost was the one that Septimus had been longing to see—Alther Mella. A tall and relatively new ghost, Alther stood out. He

still had a bright look to his robes, and a purposeful way of moving. He was neat and tidy, much more so than he had been when Living, due to the fact that—as he often joked—the upkeep was considerably easier. His hair stayed neatly tied back in its long gray ponytail and his beard remained a manageable length and no longer got bits of food stuck in it. Alther stepped almost reluctantly into the Wizard Tower, leaving the white marble steps behind him empty and glistening in the rain.

“Alther!” whispered Septimus.

Alther’s face lit up. “Septimus!” Then his expression darkened. “You know what this is?” he muttered.

Septimus nodded.

Silence had fallen in the Great Hall and the huge silver doors were slowly closing. Marcia climbed up the first few steps on the Stopped spiral stairs so that she could look down upon the Gathering. Her mouth felt dry and her hands were shaking; she shoved them deep into her pockets, determined not to show any trace of fear.

A solemn, expectant atmosphere pervaded the Tower and all eyes were on the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Marcia scanned the sea of purple, looking for Septimus—where had he gone? There was no sign of him, which annoyed her. At a time like this, her Apprentice should be at her side. She would, she thought, be having words with him about his slap-dash attitude when all this was over. Marcia could see no sign of Alther, either. She felt disappointed and a little hurt. She had expected Alther to come find her, but he obviously hadn’t bothered. She was on her own.

Marcia was not completely on her own, however. Standing close to her—far too close and deliberately invading her personal space—was Tertius Fume. The ghost had positioned himself on the spiral stairs and was hovering a good ten inches above the step in order to make himself taller than Marcia, who was a tall woman. Marcia looked down and noticed that the purple sea of ExtraOrdinary Wizards was parting to let a speck of green through. With a feeling of relief she watched Septimus make his way toward her—at least now she knew where he was.

Tertius Fume surveyed the scene with an air of satisfaction. “Aha,” he said. “I do believe I see the very reason for our Gathering approaching.”

Marcia frowned. What did Fume mean—the very reason?

Septimus reached the foot of the silver spiral stairs and Marcia looked at him, worried now. “Where have you been?” she asked.

Septimus did not want to say what he had to tell her in front of Tertius Fume. “Could you come down here a moment, please?” he asked Marcia.

There was something in Septimus’s voice that made Marcia Pass Through Tertius Fume’s cloak with no hesitation whatsoever and join her Apprentice at the foot of the stairs. “Unauthorized communication is not allowed,” boomed Tertius Fume as Septimus whispered something to Marcia.

Unauthorized or not, the communication was just what Marcia wanted to hear. “You’re absolutely sure?” she whispered in return.

“Yep.”

“Thank goodness. I was so

worried. It’s his ring—the Two-Faced Ring. You see, I never took it out of the sludge after I did the Identify. I looked for it after I did the Deep Clean

and it wasn’t there so I thought it was all right. But, well, I have sometimes wondered if the reason it wasn’t there was because it had put him back together and he’d actually gotten away.”

“But he was just a puddle of sludge,” said Septimus. “And he was all over the place. How could he get back together after that?”

“Well...you never know. That ring’s a powerful thing. Got him back together after the Marsh Brownies ate him.

Anyway, I was looking out for him coming in, but I couldn’t tell from over here. They all look the same.”

“He doesn’t.”

“No. You’re right. That awful old hat—he’d be wearing that, wouldn’t he?”
Septimus grinned. “I guess he would.”

Marcia rejoined Tertius Fume with a spring in her step. “I do not need any authorization to talk to my Apprentice,” she informed the ghost.

Tertius Fume smiled. “That, Miss Overstrand, is where you are wrong. For you are no longer mistress of your own domain.”

“Indeed?” Marcia replied, raising her eyebrows as though amused by what the ghost had to say.

“Indeed, Miss Overstrand. Those are the Rules. Once the Gathering is in the Wizard Tower we are—as you so rightly said—all equals in this place.”

“I understand the Rules perfectly well, Mr. Fume. It seems that you are the one who does not. There is no Gathering in the Wizard Tower. As such a stickler for procedure, Mr. Fume, you will surely be aware that for a Gathering to exist it must be Complete. This one is not.”

“Of course it is.”

“It is not.”

“Prove it!”

“A certain DomDaniel is not here.”

A faint cheer went up from the thin blue line of Ordinary Wizards. Tertius Fume looked furious.

“And, Mr. Fume, he never will be. I DeepCleaned him last year. The Gathering is not Complete—and indeed it never can be. So I suggest, Mr. Fume, that you and all these delightful ExtraOrdinary Wizards—whom it is a great pleasure to see, thank you all so

much for turning out in such nasty weather—you can all go back to your haunts and do far more interesting things with the rest of the evening. Good night, all.”

Outside the Wizard Tower, a thin figure wearing a brand-new scribe’s uniform stood in the shadows of the old dragon kennel, sheltering from the rain. He was clutching a beautiful urn of lapis lazuli bound with gold bands. The urn was almost as big as he was. It was also extremely heavy and the muscles in his arms felt as though they were on fire, but Merrin didn’t dare put down the urn, as he was not sure he would be able to lift it again. He felt miserable and more than a little annoyed—this was not what he had had in mind when Tertius Fume promised him what the ghost had called a strategic role in the Darkening of Septimus Heap’s destiny.

As the rain dripped from his hair and ran down his nose, Merrin knew that he could not hang on to the heavy pot much longer—he decided to dump it and go. Merrin was staggering across the Courtyard clutching the urn when a horribly familiar voice stopped him in his tracks. “Get out of my way, Apprentice. How many times do I have to tell you, boy?” Terrified, Merrin dropped the urn; it landed on his foot. “Ouch!” he yelled. He grabbed hold of his foot and looked around in panic for the source of the terrifying voice from the past—where was he? And then, very slowly, the owner of the disembodied voice began to Appear. Merrin screamed. He couldn’t believe it—the cylindrical black hat...the piggy black eyes. He thought he might be sick—it was all his worst nightmares come true. DomDaniel had come back to haunt him.

Quickly Merrin shoved his hands in his pockets. He didn’t want his old master to see the Two-Faced Ring.

“Take your hands out of your pockets and stand up straight,” growled the ghost. “You’re a disgrace.” With that, to Merrin’s great relief, the ghost of DomDaniel continued on its unsteady way, floating haphazardly across the Courtyard and wobbling up the steps to the Wizard Tower. As DomDaniel reached the top step Merrin saw the silver doors open and a stream of bright light from the Great Hall illuminate the white marble steps. Even from where he was standing Merrin heard the collective gasp of surprise come

from inside the Tower. He watched the doors slowly close and he smiled—he wouldn't want to be Septimus Heap in there now. No way.

Merrin's hand closed around a small bag of coins in his pocket—his advance pay for his first week at the Manuscriptorium. He brightened a little—the coins were enough to buy thirty-nine licorice snakes from Ma Custard's.

The thought of Ma Custard's welcoming sweet shop and the memory of Ma Custard's kindly smile as she had watched him choose his first ever sweet made Merrin suddenly feel happy. Why stay where he wasn't wanted?

Merrin was not quite brave enough to completely disobey Tertius Fume so, with a huge effort, he lifted the urn and heaved it up the marble steps. As Merrin stood shakily on the top step, wondering how to drop the urn without it landing on his toes, two tall Magykal

figures dressed in ancient chain mail stepped out of the shadows on either side of the door. In synchrony they each drew a dagger, took another step toward Merrin and then leveled their daggers at his throat, the purple lights from the Wizard Tower flashing on the sharp blades. Terrified, Merrin forgot any worries about his toes; he let the urn drop with a great thud and fled. The Questing Guards stepped back and melted into the shadows once more.

Merrin did not look back. He ran, leaping down the steps, tearing across the Courtyard, his footsteps echoing through the Great Arch. There he stopped and from his pocket he took what looked like a scruffy old tennis ball.

"Sleuth," he addressed the ball, "show me the quickest way to Ma Custard's." The tracker ball bounced slowly up and down as if thinking, then it shot off, taking a sharp left turn down Cutpurse Cut and then an immediate right into Dogbreath Dive. It was a three-mile run to Ma Custard's but Merrin didn't mind. The farther away he was from his old boss, the better. He followed the ball through rush-lit tunnels, over tall brick bridges and through countless back gardens, and then, tiring at last, lost sight of it down a narrow, dark cut. But he was lucky—the cut led straight

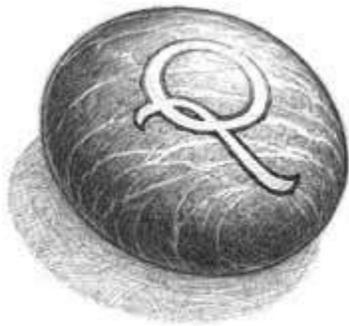
to the sweet shop and as he arrived, puffing and panting, Sleuth was bouncing on the spot, impatiently waiting for him.

Merrin caught the ball, shoved it into his pocket and barged into the sweet shop. He was going to need a whole truckload of licorice snakes to help him get over the shock of seeing his old master again. And maybe some slug sherbets, too.

And some spider-floss—lots of spider-floss.

25

SIEGE



The ghost of DomDaniel was

enjoying himself. It had been a long time since he had been out anywhere interesting. The loss of the Two-Faced Ring had taken him out of a kind of limbo that he and his ghost had existed in after Marcia's Identify. The Call to the Gathering had been so strong that at last his ghost was set free—a little shaky maybe, but out in the world at last.

DomDaniel was particularly enjoying the dramatic effect of his entry into the Wizard Tower. The look on the face of that awful woman, what was her name—Ghastlier Overland? Nastier Underhand?—well, that was worth waiting for.

And it was good to see old Fume again. There were others he recognized too: that scruffy boy with the Dragon Ring—an Apprentice by the look of it. He'd seen him before...somewhere...what was his name? Oh, his

memory was terrible. Almost wiped out by the...thingy. It was so unfair. What was that—what, what? Was someone saying his name?

Marcia Overstrand was indeed saying DomDaniel's name. "DomDaniel—it can't be! I do not believe it. It is absolutely not possible."

Tertius Fume was triumphant. "Clearly, Miss Overstrand, it is perfectly possible. The Gathering is now Complete." Pleased that all eyes were upon him, the ghost of DomDaniel bowed extravagantly to his audience and, forgetting that he was a ghost, he tried to sweep off his cylindrical hat but his ghostly hand went right through it. A little flustered, he straightened up and, aiming for the middle of the action, DomDaniel shuffled over to Septimus and Marcia, who were perched uncertainly on the spiral stairs, watching the crowd part to allow the rotund ghost room to advance toward them.

DomDaniel favored the three occupants of the spiral stairs with another bow, this time remembering to leave his hat alone. Marcia returned his oily smile with a fierce glare.

Tertius Fume began to speak. "This Gathering

has been Called on the momentous occasion of the Draw for the twenty-first Apprentice Queste." A gasp came from the assembled ghosts—particularly loud from the nineteen who had lost their Apprentices to the Queste.

"Don't be ridiculous," snapped Marcia.

"I would not call the Gathering ridiculous

if I were you, Miss Overstrand." There was a general murmur of agreement from the floor and Marcia realized she had to tread carefully.

"You deliberately misunderstand me, Mr. Fume. It is the very idea that Septimus should make the Draw for the Queste that is ridiculous. That—as even you

must know, Mr. Fume—happens in the very last hour of the Apprenticeship. My Apprentice, Septimus Heap, is only just beginning his third year—thus he is not eligible for the Queste Draw.” Tertius Fume laughed. “It is no more than mere tradition that the Draw takes place at the end of an Apprenticeship. A Draw may be called at any time.” The ghost raised his voice and called out the password for the doors. A gasp of dismay came from the Ordinary Wizards. No one ever

shouted out the password to the Wizard Tower—it was considered highly unlucky and extremely rude. But the doors to the Wizard Tower did not have the finely turned sensibilities of the Wizards and they opened obediently to reveal—to Tertius Fume’s surprise—the Questing Pot

standing forlornly on the top step, like the last guest to arrive at a party. Suppressed giggles erupted from some of the younger Ordinary Wizards.

What, wondered the Ghost of the Vaults angrily, was the Pot doing there on its own? Where was that idiot of a scribe?

Tertius Fume jumped down from the stairs in an athletic leap he never would have dared make when Living. He strode through the Gathering

and positioned himself in the very center of the Great Hall. “You!” he bellowed to Hildegarde, who was closest to the door. “Bring in the Questing Pot!”

“Not so fast, Fume,” said Marcia. “You are forgetting something—one voice among many. Your voice may be extremely loud but it is still only one. What about the many? What does the Gathering have to say?” Tertius Fume sighed loudly and reluctantly addressed the Hall. “All ye Ghosts Gathered here—is it your wish that the Questing Pot be brought in?”

Over seven hundred and fifty ghosts had not left their cozy haunts on a windy evening—the one kind of weather that a ghost finds difficult—for nothing. There were only twenty-one against—the nineteen ExtraOrdinary Wizards who had lost their Apprentices to the Queste, plus Alther Mella and Marcia. The resounding vote was to bring in the Pot.

A large blue circle with a Q

in the center began to appear in the illuminated floor right beneath the feet of Tertius Fume, who hastily stepped back.

With an apologetic glance at Marcia, Hildegarde placed the Pot on the circle.

The Questing Pot

was a beautiful thing. Tall and elegant, the blue lapis lazuli shone in the bright candlelight and the burnished gold bands that ran around it had a deep glow—as did the large golden stopper that sat in the top. With a shudder Marcia remembered drawing out the very same stopper on her last morning as Apprentice to Alther Mella—her whole future suddenly hanging in the balance. Marcia remembered her relief and joy as she had drawn out a plain lapis pebble with no sign of the gold Q that would have sent her away from the Castle forever.

“Now, boy,” Tertius Fume said. He fixed his gaze on Septimus. “It is time for you to make the Draw. Come hither.”

“No!” said Marcia. She put her arm protectively around Septimus’s shoulder. “I will not allow Septimus to make the Draw.”

“What you will or will not allow is of no consequence,” Tertius Fume told her. “Each of us is—as you so rightly pointed out—but one voice among many. However, as Convener I am required to put it to the Gathering if you so wish.” Marcia did wish, although with little hope of success.

Tertius Fume addressed the Hall. “All ye Ghosts Gathered here—is it your wish that the Apprentice make the Draw?” Again it was an overwhelming vote in favor, with, once again, the same twenty-one against. Septimus was to make the Draw.

“I’ll do it,” Septimus said to Marcia. “I probably won’t get the Questing Stone anyway. Then at least I won’t have to do it at the end of my Apprenticeship like you did.”

“No, Septimus,” said Marcia. “No. There’s something not right about this.”

“I’ll be okay.” Septimus smiled at Marcia. “Anyway, we’ll never get rid of this bunch if I don’t do it.” Without waiting for her reply, Septimus plunged into the crowd of ghosts, which parted respectfully. As Septimus drew near to the Questing Pot, a ghost with copious bloodstains running down the side of his face put his arm across his path. Septimus stopped, unwilling to Pass Through.

“Apprentice,” whispered the bloodstained ghost, “I fear you will not be able to escape this Queste. But heed this: when you have the Stone, escape the Questing Guards

and you will escape the worst of the Perils. I wish you well.” The ghost let his arm fall to allow Septimus to pass.

“Oh,” whispered Septimus, the danger of the situation beginning to dawn on him. “Um...thank you.”

“You should not have told him that, Maurice,” said a neighboring ghost as Septimus walked on, more hesitantly now, toward the Questing Pot.

Maurice McMohan—ExtraOrdinary Wizard some three hundred years ago, who had lost a much-loved Apprentice to the Queste—shrugged. “I don’t see why not,” he said. “There are too many secrets around here. I’d have told mine if I had known at the time. Give the boy a fighting chance.”

“On your own head be it,” replied his neighbor. “Oh, sorry, Maurice. I didn’t mean it like that.” For Maurice McMohan had been killed by a candlestick that had fallen from a window on the eighteenth floor of the Wizard Tower, and he had a very nasty candlestick-shaped dent on the top of his head.

As Septimus moved through the now silent ghosts, Alther appeared beside him and told him all he could about the Queste—for Alther knew what would happen if Septimus Drew the Questing Stone. There would be no time then for talking.

As Septimus and Alther moved toward the Questing Pot, the walls of the Wizard Tower, which usually showed uplifting pictures of important events in the life of the Wizard Tower, began to show scenes of previous Apprentices setting off upon the Queste. These were anything but uplifting. Sad farewells were said as the Apprentice was escorted away by Tertius Fume and seven heavily armed Questing Guards. Some Apprentices went bravely, others were in tears, and one girl—forgetting in the heat of the moment that Tertius Fume was a ghost—had tried to punch him in the nose, which gave rise to a few sniggers from the floor. But at the sight of the pictures many of the ghosts remembered the reality of an Apprentice embarking on a Queste

and began to regret their support of the Draw. However, it was too late to change their minds now.

Alther dropped back into the throng of ghosts and, to the accompaniment of excited murmurs, Septimus reached the Questing Pot. The atmosphere in the Wizard Tower was electric. Septimus looked at the Pot, which was almost exactly the same height as he was, and it seemed to him that it looked back at him. He hesitated, remembering Marcia's words.

Something was wrong—there was something Darke nearby. No—not nearby. There was something Darke inside the Pot.

Tertius Fume was losing patience. “Make the Draw,” he commanded.

Septimus did not move.

“Are you deaf, boy?” demanded Tertius Fume. “Make the Draw!”

Septimus reached out as if to pull out the stopper of the Questing Pot, but instead he raised his right hand and made a circle with his index finger and thumb—the classic symbol that accompanies a See Spell—the advanced kind that can See through precious metals and stones.

“Cheat!” cried Tertius Fume. “You are trying to See inside the Pot. Cheat!”

“I am not the cheat,” said Septimus, his voice carrying clear through the shocked silence. “It is not I who have placed a Thing inside the Pot ready to put the Questing Stone into my hand.” Tertius Fume was almost speechless with rage. “How dare

you? I shall give you one last chance to redeem yourself. Remove the Stopper and make...the...Draw!”

“I will not.”

“You will!” Tertius Fume looked as though he was about to explode.

“He will not.” Marcia’s voice came from beside her Apprentice.

“Are you telling me that you and your Apprentice are refusing the Rule of the Gathering?” Tertius Fume asked, incredulous.

“I am telling you that my Apprentice will not make the Draw. If that also means we refuse the Rule of the Gathering, then so be it,” Marcia replied.

A loud muttering spread through the Great Hall—had this ever happened before? No one thought so. Many sympathized with Marcia but there was a core of Rule-loving ghosts who were outraged. The muttering grew into a hubbub of heated discussion.

“Silence!” shouted Tertius Fume. He glared at Septimus. “I shall give you one last chance to accept the Rule of the Gathering or there will be serious consequences,” he said. “Make...the...Draw!” Septimus felt himself wavering. Maybe he should make the Draw. Would he be putting everyone in danger if he didn’t?

Then Marcia squeezed his shoulder and he heard her whisper, “No. Don’t.”

“No,” replied Septimus, “I will not.”

Tertius Fume’s brief look of amazement was quickly replaced by fury. “Then I shall have no option but to put the Wizard Tower under Siege until you accept the Rule of the Gathering,” he bellowed.

Marcia's green eyes flashed with rage. "You would not dare," she told Tertius Fume, her voice shaking with anger.

Tertius Fume mistook the shake in her voice for fear, and laughed. "I do dare," he said. He began to chant a fast and furious torrent of words. A cry of dismay rose from the Ordinary Wizards.

"Quick, Septimus," whispered Marcia, "you must get out of here. Out through the Ice Tunnels—you know the way. Get out of the Castle; go to Zelda's—or to your brothers in the Forest. When it's safe I'll come and Find you wherever you are—I promise."

"But—"

"Septimus—it takes only two minutes and forty-nine seconds to put us in a state of Siege. Go!"

"You must go," said Alther, suddenly behind him. "Now!"

Marcia Extinguished

all the candles, and some of the more nervous Wizards screamed. The Hall was plunged into gloom, the only light coming from the depressing pictures flickering around the walls, but Tertius Fume did not even notice. Nearly halfway through the Siege Incantation now, his voice had an unstoppable rhythm as the ancient Magykal words filled the Wizard Tower and sent shivers down the spines of the Living and dread into some of the Dead.

"Sep!" Jenna grabbed Septimus's hand and pulled him into the crowd of ghosts. Some stepped back to let them go, but many did not and they were Passed Through, their complaints lost in the ever-rising volume of Tertius Fume's Incantation. Septimus was running now, behind him he could hear the heavy pad of Ullr's paws, and behind Ullr was Beetle, he was sure of that—he could smell the lemony hair oil that Beetle had unaccountably started using recently.

They reached the line of Living Ordinary Wizards and dozens of willing hands guided them into the broom closet. The closet was packed to

bursting, but a path was rapidly made for them—and even more rapidly for Ullr. With the help of the glow from his dragon ring, Septimus quickly found the catch that opened the concealed door to the Ice Tunnels. As he pushed open the door, to his surprise Hildegarde was there. She pressed something into his hand with the words,

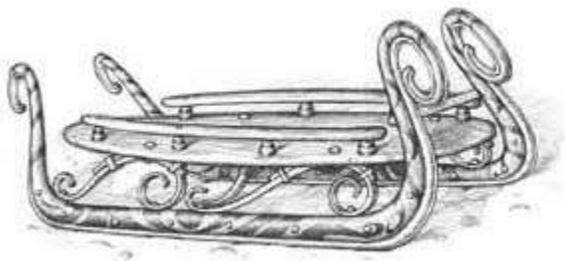
“Take my SafeCharm.”

“Thank you,” muttered Septimus. He shoved it into his pocket and rushed through the door, closely followed by Jenna, Ullr and Beetle. As the cold air from the Ice Tunnels hit them, Tertius Fume bellowed triumphantly, “Siege!” At once the door to the Ice Tunnels slammed shut and they heard the whirr-clunk of the door being Barred—just as at that very moment the occupants of the packed Great Hall were listening to the huge iron bars inside the doors to the Wizard Tower slide across and make them prisoners. Then, as all the Magykal lights and sounds of the Wizard Tower were Extinguished, they heard a muffled cry of dismay.

The Siege had begun.

26

ON THE RUN



Beetle was back on his

own territory and he knew what to do—he took out his tinderbox and lit his Ice Tunnel lamp. The blue light showed a steep flight of steps cut into the ice disappearing down into the darkness. Beetle and Septimus—who both knew the steps—started down, but Jenna and Ullr held back.

“But where—where does this go?” she asked.

Septimus had told Jenna so much about the Ice Tunnels that he had forgotten she had never actually been in them before. In fact, at first he had had a lot of trouble persuading her that they even existed, and whenever he had mentioned them to her he always got the feeling that she didn’t quite believe him. As he held out his hand for her to take, he could see the look of amazement on her face that they were real.

Jenna took the offered hand and, with Ullr padding behind, she followed Septimus down the steps, which were covered in a crisp frost and were not as slippery as she expected. At the foot of the steps they went through a tall, pointed archway where the ghost of an old ExtraOrdinary Wizard would normally sit guarding the entrance, but was now otherwise occupied in the Tower above. Glad that he did not have to explain himself to the ghost—who, to Septimus’s annoyance, had formed the opinion that he was not the brightest of Apprentices—Septimus followed Beetle through the arch and into the tunnel that led from the Wizard Tower. Beetle’s blue lamp shone down the long tunnel and lit up the glittery surfaces of the billions of ice crystals that stretched away into the distance. Septimus heard Jenna whisper,

“Wow.”

He grinned. “I told you they were really something.”

“But, not like this. I had no idea. So much ice. It’s weird. And freezing.” Their breath hung in great white clouds on the icy air and Jenna thought she had never felt so cold in her life. She had, but she did not remember it.

There was something about the Ice Tunnels that gave Jenna goose bumps and it wasn’t just the bitter cold—she was sure she could hear a faint moaning echoing somewhere far away. Her goose bumps were not helped by the blue light from Beetle’s lamp, which gave their faces a deathly hue and made their eyes look dark and scared.

“Ullr,” she whispered. “Komme, Ullr.” She ran her hand along the big cat’s warm fur, which was bristling and raised all along his back, and she could

feel the watchfulness in him. “So, where’s the way out?” she asked.

“Wait a minute, Jen,” said Septimus. He took a silver whistle from his Apprentice belt, put it to his lips and blew. No sound came. He took the whistle out of his mouth, shook it and then tried again. Nothing happened.

“Careful, Sep,” warned Beetle. “You only need to do it once, you don’t want to upset it. The Wizard Tower sled is really sensitive. I heard it used to get frightened and run away if you blew too loudly.”

“But the whistle didn’t work,” Septimus protested.

“You don’t hear

it, Sep. Only the sled hears the whistle. In fact, the only way you’d know it wasn’t working would be if you did hear it.

See?”

“Not really. But—”

“Shhh,” Beetle interrupted. “Did you hear that?”

“No—what?”

“Oh, bother.” The moan was no longer quite so faint or so far away. It was, in fact, getting louder and nearer by the second. “Rats. It’s Moaning Hilda. I didn’t think she came this way.”

“Moaning Hilda?” asked Jenna, taking a firm grip on Ullr. She could feel the big cat’s muscles tensing, getting ready to flee.

“Ice Wraith. Quick—back under the arch and whatever you do don’t breathe in as she goes past. Got that?” A wild wind came roaring down the tunnel, blowing the hoarfrost from the walls and spraying it into the air in a thick white mist. They dived for the safety of the archway. The shrill, hollow wail of the Ice Wraith began to fill the tunnel.

Ullr howled and quickly Jenna put her hands over the panther's sensitive ears. A blast of frozen air shot past and Jenna was overwhelmed by the feeling of being dragged under ice-cold water. Instinctively she turned away, closed her eyes and held her nose as an ear-drilling
aaiiiiiieeeeeeeeeeeeeee

filled the tunnel. And then it was gone. The Ice Wraith went careening on her way, screaming through the tunnels as she had done for hundreds of years.

Jenna, Ullr, Beetle and Septimus emerged from behind the archway. "That was horrible," whispered Jenna.

"Hilda's all right, really," said Beetle airily. "You get used to her. Kind of a shock at first, though. Oh, look, here it is." Beetle shone his lamp along the tunnel and a glint of gold met the blue light. Silently coming along the tunnel toward them was the Wizard Tower sled, its fine runners skimming along the ice. With a soft swish, the sled drew up in front of them and nuzzled up to Septimus's knee like a faithful hound.

"That is beautiful," breathed Jenna, who was developing quite an appreciation of finely worked gold.

"It is, isn't it?" said Septimus proudly, picking up the purple rope. "It's my sled—well, it is while I'm Apprentice.

However long that's going to be."

"Don't be ridiculous, Sep. You'll be Apprentice for ages," said Jenna, who felt considerably more chirpy now that the sled had arrived.

"You never know how long anything will last," said Beetle gloomily. He thought how much he would miss the tattered old Inspection sled—and even more how much he would miss his double whiz reverse turns.

"Oh, Beetle, I'm sorry," said Jenna. "I didn't mean—"

"S okay," mumbled Beetle.

“What’s okay?” asked Septimus.

“Nothing. Tell you later,” said Beetle grumpily. “Come on, Sep, you going to drive this thing or just stare at it?”

“Keep your hair on, Beetle. I’m doing

it.” Warily, Septimus climbed onto the front of the sled, half expecting it to shoot off like a rocket. But the sled sat patiently while Jenna insisted that Beetle get on next so she could sit in the back and make sure Ullr followed. There was scarcely room for three on the sled, let alone a large panther.

Slowly, the heavily laden Wizard Tower sled trundled off along the tunnel, closely followed by an obedient Ullr, and was soon crawling down what Septimus considered to be a dangerously steep slope.

“It’s not actually illegal to go faster than your average snail,” said Beetle, not taking easily to his new role of passenger.

“Be quiet, Beetle. I’m just getting used to it,” said Septimus touchily, well aware of what Beetle thought of his sledding skills.

At the bottom of the slope Septimus carefully negotiated two easy bends, crawled up a gentle incline and took the sled slowly along a straight stretch with the smoothest ice Beetle had ever seen. Beetle heaved a loud sigh and tried not to think of the amazing speed he could get from the Wizard sled on such perfect ice.

They were now approaching a fork in the tunnel. “Hey, Beetle, which way?” Septimus asked.

“Depends where you’re going,” said Beetle a trifle unhelpfully.

“Out of the Castle,” said Septimus. “Like Marcia says—except not the Forest or Aunt Zelda’s. We’re going to find Nik and Snorri, aren’t we, Jen?”

“Um, well, first we’ve got to—” Jenna mumbled.

But neither Beetle nor Septimus heard. “So which way d’you want to go out, then?” grumbled Beetle. “Make your mind up.”

“Beetle, what is the matter?” asked Septimus. “You’re like a bear with a sore head.”

“Well, maybe it’s because you’re crawling along like a little old lady pushing a shopping cart,” Beetle snapped.

“I am not. Shut up, Beetle.”

“Go easy, Sep,” said Jenna. “Beetle’s really upset. Jillie Djinn sacked him this afternoon.”

“What?” Septimus looked horrified. “I don’t believe it. She couldn’t have. Why would she do a stupid thing like that?”

“Exactly. But she did. Horrible old cow.”

“But why didn’t you tell me before?” Septimus asked Beetle.

Beetle shrugged.

“He doesn’t want to talk about it,” said Jenna.

“Oh. I see. I’m really, really sorry, Beetle,” said Septimus.

“’S okay,” muttered Beetle. “Let’s just get going.”

Jenna took a deep breath. She had been dreading this. “Um, Sep. Um, it’s about the map...”

“Oh, yes. We’ve got to go to the Palace and get it, right?”

“No,” said Jenna miserably. “There’s something you don’t know...”

Half an hour later, in the quiet, whitewashed cellars of the Manuscriptorium, Ephaniah Grebe was entertaining his second batch of unexpected visitors in one day. He had been very pleased to see Beetle and

the Princess again so soon, and meeting the young ExtraOrdinary Apprentice was something he had wanted to do ever since Septimus had arrived in the Wizard Tower—but the panther had been a nasty shock, a very nasty shock indeed.

There was more rat to Ephaniah than met the eye. Morwenna had done her best to make him appear as human as possible, but the essence of Ephaniah Grebe was rat—and Ullr knew it. And now that the size difference was no longer to Ullr's disadvantage, he longed to take his chance against the giant rat. But Ullr was a faithful creature and Jenna had told him, very firmly, "No, Ullr. No!" And so the panther lay disconsolately at her feet—but the orange tip to his tail twitched and he did not take his glittering green eyes off Ephaniah Grebe for one second.

Well aware that he was being watched by the biggest cat he had ever had the misfortune to meet, Ephaniah did his best to concentrate while everyone clustered around the worktable, looking at the muddle of confetti that had once been Snorri's map.

"The Seek hasn't worked," Septimus was saying disconsolately. "I can't see the missing piece anywhere."

"Are you sure?" asked Jenna.

"Of course I'm sure. I always get a picture in my head of exactly where the thing is that I'm Seeking. Last week I did a Seek

and found one of my socks in the coffee pot. I didn't believe it when I got this weird picture of my sock floating in the coffee but when I looked—there it was. My Seeks always work, Jen. Promise." Jenna sighed. "I know they do. It's just I was hoping—well, I was sure you'd find it." In front of Ephaniah was his usual pen and paper. He wrote: What is the range of your Seek?

Septimus took the pen and began to write a reply but Jenna stopped him. "Mr. Grebe can hear you, Sep. He just can't talk, that's all."

"Oh," said Septimus, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I didn't think."

Ephaniah Grebe placed a dog-eared card in front of Septimus: DO NOT WORRY. IT IS A MISTAKE THAT MANY

MAKE.

Septimus smiled and received in return a twinkling of Ephaniah's green eyes and the twitching and rustling of the swathes of white silk below. "It's about a mile," he replied.

It would reach all places that the map has been while in your possession?

"Yes. Definitely."

Then it seems that the piece is lost. Maybe a bird has taken it far away for its nest. Or the wind has blown it into the river. Who knows?

"Ephaniah," said Jenna, "can you ReUnite the map without the piece? Then at least we would have most of it." An incomplete ReUnion will generate much heat. There is a risk that the pieces may combust.

"It's worth the risk," said Jenna, glancing at Septimus and Beetle. They nodded.

Ephaniah's eyes smiled and he made a small bow to Jenna—he liked a challenge. I have already coated every fragment with melding fluid, paying particular attention to the edges. I shall now select the Charms. He uncorked a large glass flask; inside was a collection of yellow and black striped discs, which Jenna immediately recognized as Charms.

Stand well back, please.

They retreated to the doorway and watched. Delicately holding a Charm in each hand between the long nails of his finger and thumb, the Conservation Scribe moved them over each and every fragment of paper. As he did so a dull yellow haze appeared above the table and settled over the fragments of paper like a soft blanket of fog. Then, as if conducting an unseen orchestra, Ephaniah raised his arms and opened his long, scrabbly hands, palms down above the table. Like two large, lazy bumblebees, the Charms

drifted down and began to circle in opposite directions above the haze while Ephaniah made long, slow gathering movements over the fragments. The smell of hot paper filled the air and Jenna closed her eyes—if the map was going to burst into flames she didn't want to see it.

Suddenly Ephaniah let out a loud squeak and Septimus and Beetle applauded. Jenna opened her eyes just in time to see the yellow blanket rolling up to reveal a large piece of paper below—the map had ReUnited.

Ephaniah turned to his audience, bowed and beckoned them over. Jenna could hardly believe how good the map looked.

It was smooth and flat, and looked as if it had never even been folded—let alone crushed into pieces and stamped into a muddy puddle. Snorri's neat lines were crisp, clear and full of detail. For a moment Jenna was convinced that Ephaniah had been mistaken and the map was complete, but Septimus set her straight.

“There's a hole in the middle,” he said. “A great big hole.”

It was true. And somewhere in the middle of the hole was the House of Foryx—the Place where All Times Do Meet.

Jenna refused to be downcast. “It doesn't matter,” she said. “There's enough of the map to get us most of the way, and by the time we get to the hole in the middle we'll probably be able to see the House of Foryx anyway.”

“But Snorri had drawn all sorts of stuff on the missing part, don't you remember?” said Septimus. “I bet it was really important.”

“You don't know that for sure,” said Jenna, exasperated and wishing that for once Septimus would look on the bright side. “Look, Sep, I'm going whether you come or not. I'm going to get the Port barge and find a ship and then—”

“Hey, wait a sec, Jen—of course I'm coming. Try and stop me. And Beetle's coming too, aren't you, Beetle?”

“Me?”



“Oh, please come, Beetle,” said Jenna. “Please.”

Beetle was astonished—Jenna

wanted him to come too. Suddenly Beetle felt liberated. He was no longer tied, day in and day out, to the Manuscriptorium. He could do what he wanted; he could live his life and do the kind of interesting things that Sep did. It was amazing. But...Beetle sighed. There was always a but.

“I’ll have to tell my mum,” he said. “She’ll be frantic.”

MESSAGE RATS

The East Gate Lookout Tower

was, strangely enough, on the west side of the Castle. It had been moved by a particularly fussy Queen so many years in the past that no one could now remember why. The small, round tower perched jauntily on top of the wide Castle walls.

If you climbed to the top you could see for miles over the Forest that bordered the west and southwest of the Castle.

In the old days, when the Message Rat Service had been thriving, the whole tower had been full of rats, but now it boasted just one solitary—and very disconsolate—rat. A dim light from a single candle shone from the tiny window on the lower floor of the tower, and on the battered old door were three increasingly desperate notices. The first read: RATS WANTED FOR MESSAGE RAT DUTIES

NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

FULL TRAINING WILL BE GIVEN

APPLY WITHIN

The second read:

BEST RATES OF PAY

WE PAY DOUBLE THE PORT RATE!

DON'T MISS OUT ON THIS WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY!!

And the third:

FREE FOOD!!!!!!

Stanley was settling down for his fourth night in the East Gate Lookout Tower. He had set up camp in the old office on the ground floor. In front of him were the remains of his supper that he had salvaged from a very productive garbage can outside a little house a few doors along the Castle walls. That night the shepherd's pie had been particularly good, and Stanley had very much enjoyed its topping of cold custard and squashed tomatoes—although he was less sure about the crunchy bits, which he suspected of being toenail clippings. But overall it had been a good supper and he was pleased to discover he had not lost his scavenging touch when it came to other people's garbage.

Scavenging successes aside, things were not going well. The Message Rat Service was proving very difficult to get going, even though Stanley had done everything he could think of. He had even cleaned up the office, dusting down Humphrey's old desk and mending the wobbly leg, then rescuing the Message Ledger, Diary, Patent Rat Journey Scheduler and Pricing Schedules from a tin trunk under the floor. All was now set up, ready and waiting, but there was one big problem—no rats. Try as he might, Stanley could not find a single rat in the Castle.

But that night as Stanley sat behind his lonely desk with the unusual combination of a full tummy and a feeling of gloom, he suddenly—to his joy—smelled a rat. Stanley sniffed the air in excitement. It was a very strong rat smell—it must be more than one rat, that was for sure. At least a dozen, he reckoned—and all of them coming to answer his advertisement. What luck.

At the sound of the knock on the door, Stanley restrained himself from rushing to answer it. Instead he picked up his pen, opened the Message Ledger and began to peruse it as though he were catching up with a hectic day's work. Then, doing his best to sound busy and preoccupied—rather than brimming with excitement—Stanley called out, "Come in." The door flew open and the biggest rat Stanley had ever seen in his life marched in. Stanley promptly fell off his chair.

Ephaniah Grebe waited patiently while Stanley picked himself up off the floor and, with as much dignity as he could muster, clambered back onto his

chair. “Just testing,” Stanley muttered. “We like our rats to be unflappable. You passed.

Now when can you start?”

“I haven’t come for a job,” said Ephaniah, relieved to be able to converse out loud with someone who understood him.

Stanley was horribly disappointed. “Are you sure?” he asked. “How about a bit of part-time Messaging? We are taking on part-timers for this week only. I’d get in while you can. It’s a great opportunity.”

“No doubt it is, but I am already fully employed, thank you. I have come to send a message.”

“Oh,” said Stanley. He then realized he did not sound as pleased as he should have been about what was, after all, his very first customer. So much for his daydreams of sitting at his desk while a team of fit young rats did all the Message-running. He would have to do this one himself. “Where to?” he asked, praying that it was not to the Marram Marshes.

Ephaniah Grebe took out a piece of paper and read Beetle’s writing with some difficulty. ““The blue arched door, Top Turret, Echo End, The Ramblings,”” he read.

Stanley breathed a sigh of relief. “And the message is?”

““Dear Mum,”” said Ephaniah, a little self-consciously. “I have been called away on urgent business but will be back soon. There is some money hidden in the old jar in the window seat. Please don’t worry. Love, Beetle xxx.”” Stanley wrote the message in the Message Ledger with a happy flourish. He could remember that. Short and sweet, that’s how he liked them.

“It’s urgent,” said Ephaniah. “As soon as you can, please.”

Stanley sighed. All the frustrations of his Message Rat days were coming back to him. It was always urgent in his experience. No one ever thought

ahead. No one ever said, “I’d like to send a message in three days time, please. Just fit me in when it is most convenient for your schedule.” But a customer was a customer, and at least it meant some money coming in. Stanley made a big show of flicking through the Pricing Schedules, even though he knew perfectly well that The Ramblings was in Price Zone One.

“Now, let me see...that will be one penny outward message. Two pence for the rat to wait for a reply. Three pence for next-day reply collection. Terms are strictly cash, payment in advance.”

“The message is sent on behalf of Princess Jenna,” said Ephaniah Grebe. “I understand she has a special introductory offer—free messages for a year.”

“Only for those messages originating from the Palace and placed in person,” said Stanley briskly. “For all others normal rates apply. Now, is it outward only or return?”

Ephaniah Grebe left the East Gate Lookout Tower three pence poorer—he had also sent two other messages, one to Sarah Heap and one to Marcia Overstrand—but underneath his rat whiskers was a happy smile. Leaving his face unswaddled and his rat nose free to sniff the night air, he took the wide path that ran along the top of the Castle walls and walked slowly back to the Manuscriptorium. He enjoyed the feeling of his sensitive tail trailing behind him as it was meant to do, touching the cool stones and balancing his upright gait. Sometimes it was a relief to be true to his real rat nature.

As Ephaniah wandered along the Walls—as he sometimes did when the confines of the Manuscriptorium basement became too much for him—he gazed down at the roofs of the little houses tucked in tight against the old stones. He saw the candles in their attic windows burning bright into the night, and inside the tiny rooms with their sloping ceilings Ephaniah saw people—fully human people with no trace of rat in them—going about their business. Whether they were sewing by the fireside, clearing away a meager supper, feeding a baby or just fast asleep in a comfortable chair, all were unaware that outside their very windows a shy half man, half rat, was wandering by, looking at a life he might have had.

Ephaniah shook off his sad thoughts as a rat will shake off a well-aimed bucket of dirty water and strode briskly on. As the tinny chimes of midnight drifted up from the Drapers' Court clock he arrived at the top of the flight of steps that led down to the Manuscriptorium. He stopped and took a last look at the broad sweep of the Castle below him before he descended once more into his bright basement. It was breathtakingly beautiful. The moon was riding high in the sky, casting its cool, white light across the rooftops and sending long shadows down the streets far below. A myriad of pinpoint candlelights glittered across the vast expanse of the Castle, in a way that Ephaniah had never seen before.

Puzzled, Ephaniah stood for a moment wondering why he could see so many candles—and then he realized. The bright, Magykal purple and golden lights that lit up the Wizard Tower every night were gone. It was as if the Tower were no longer there. But as Ephaniah stared into the darkness he could just about make out the outline of the Tower against the moonlit clouds. But not a flicker of light came from it—the Wizard Tower was under Siege.

28

THE QUESTING BOAT



Marcia was stumbling

around the Wizard Tower, unable to see. Desperately she called, “Septimus...Septimus...where are you?”

“I’m here, I’m here!” yelled Septimus.

“Go back ’sleep,” mumbled Jenna.

“Wearghaahh,” mumbled Beetle, who was in the middle of his own dream in which Jillie Djinn had locked him in a dungeon with a giant rat.

They were sleeping—or trying to—on the floor of a small storeroom at the entrance to Ephaniah’s domain. Jenna and Beetle both slipped back into sleep, but Septimus was wide awake, his dream of the blind Marcia still frighteningly vivid. He sat up, all the events of the previous evening crowding in on him. What was happening at the Wizard Tower?

Surely Tertius Fume had discovered his escape by now? And if so had he sent people, or—more likely—ghosts, out to search for him? And what was happening to Marcia? Was she all right? Septimus put his hand in his pocket to find his last memento of the Wizard Tower and drew out the

SafeCharm that Hildegarde had given him. It was so nice of Hildegarde to do that, he thought. By the comforting yellow glow of his Dragon Ring, he looked fondly at the SafeCharm—and a shot of fear ran through him like a knife. No! No no no no no. It couldn't be. It couldn't possibly be.

Septimus stared at the heavy, oval lapis lazuli stone in his hand, and the golden Q inscribed deep into it glinted back at him mockingly. And, when he turned it over, the number 21

began to show and Septimus knew with a horrible certainty what he had—the Questing Stone .

He stared at the Stone, trying to remember what Alther had told him at the Gathering. But it was all a blur—only the phrase Once you Accept the Stone , your Will is not your Own came into his head.

Septimus tried to think clearly. But he hadn't accepted the Questing Stone, had he? He had accepted what he thought was a SafeCharm. So surely that was different—wasn't it? He stared hard at the Stone. It was a beautiful thing; silky smooth, slightly iridescent with delicate veins of gold winding their way through the brilliant blue. And the dreaded Q—that was beautiful too. The gold was set deep into the stone and polished to such smoothness that as he ran his fingers over it he could feel no join at all. In fact he could almost convince himself that the Q was not there. But as soon as he looked down at the stone in his palm there it was, winking up at him in the dim yellow light, refusing to go away.

Septimus shoved the Questing Stone

back into his pocket. He would ignore it, he decided. He wouldn't tell Jenna or Beetle either. There was enough for them to think about without worrying about some stupid Queste, which he wasn't going on anyway.

Septimus threw himself back onto the hard bedroll and pulled the thin Manuscriptorium emergency blanket up over his head. He tried to block the Questing Stone

from his thoughts, but it would not go away. He began to remember more of Alther's words—how the Stone was a Magykal thing and as the Questor drew nearer to his or her goal, it changed color. And at the Queste's end it was the deepest blue, so dark that it looked black—except in the light of the full moon. Alther had gabbled a rhyme, trying to get across as much information as possible, but just then Septimus did not even want to think about it. He didn't need to, he decided. He was not going on the Queste. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep—with little success.

About an hour later from behind the storeroom door, Ephaniah watched the NightUllr change. As the panther slept, Ephaniah saw the orange tip on his tail expand and grow, the bright color traveling across the creature like the sun chasing away the shadows. And as it grew, the sleek panther fur became a mottled tabby orange and its muscled body shrank so fast that Ephaniah was sure that Ullr would disappear completely. Indeed, when the Transformation was complete it looked as though he almost had—the DayUllr was a small and scraggly cat, who looked as if he could use a real meal. The only reminder of his nighttime attire was a black tip at the end of his tail, ready for the moment that the sun would once again set.

Now that the storeroom was guarded only by a small cat, Ephaniah dared venture in to wake its occupants. Sleepily, Jenna, Septimus and Beetle rolled up their bedrolls and stacked them back onto the orderly shelves. And then, at Ephaniah's insistence, they gathered around the big worktable in the first cellar and ate the oatmeal that he had cooked over the small burner he generally used for melting glue. Ullr, after some persuasion from Jenna, warily accepted Ephaniah's offering of a bowl of milk.

It was not a lively breakfast.

Jenna was anxious to get away to the Port. "If we hurry we can catch the early-morning barge to the Port," she said, scraping the last of the surprisingly good oatmeal from the bowl.

"Good," said Beetle, who had taken a lot of persuading to spend the night back at his old workplace and wanted to be off as soon as he could.

Ephaniah returned from putting the previous day's work in the basket at the top of the stairs. He flapped his hands, signaling them to wait, and laid a large sheet of paper down beside the bowls. It was covered with his now familiar handwriting. He ran his thin finger along the words:

The journey to the Forests of the Low Countries is long and perilous by ship. But there is another way. There is an old saying, "A journey to a Forest is best begun in a Forest."

Jenna knew the saying but had never understood what it meant. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Ephaniah wrote:

In the Forest there are ancient Ways that lead to other Forests. Morwenna knows. I can take you safely into the Forest by the old charcoal burners' gulleys.

"We used to use those in the Young Army," said Septimus. "The witches still do. Some of the Ways go to their winter quarters."

Ephaniah nodded and wrote: We will find Morwenna. I will ask her to show you the Forest Ways.

"What do you think, Jen?" asked Septimus.

Jenna shared Sarah Heap's mistrust of the Wendron Witches, but if it helped them to find Nicko—and get Septimus far away from the Castle, fast—then it was fine by her. "Okay," she said. "Let's do it."

"Beetle?" asked Septimus.

"Yep," said Beetle. "The sooner we're out of here, the better."

Ephaniah Grebe led the way down Lichen Twitten, a long, dank alleyway that went to the Manuscriptorium boathouse.

The boathouse was a tumbledown shed set a few yards down a hidden inlet off the Moat. Inside was the Manuscriptorium ferryboat, a little-used

rowboat that had escaped Jillie Djinn's new colors. Septimus and Beetle offered to row, but Ephaniah insisted on taking the oars himself. Rowing was something he had enjoyed in his younger, pre-rat days and it was a long time since he had been out in a boat.

It was a cold, blustery morning, but it was good to be out in the open air once more. Ephaniah had lost none of his old rowing skills and he maneuvered the boat skillfully out of the cut. But as he rowed into the choppy, gray waters of the Moat an unexpected sight met them—an exotic, three-masted sailboat was moored at the site of the old Wizard Tower landing stage. The landing stage had rotted away, as the great days of the maritime ExtraOrdinary Wizards were long gone, but the boat was tied to one of the few remaining gold-and lapis-covered poles. It rose and fell gently with the small Moat waves, and as the tide took the Manuscriptorium rowboat ever closer—despite Ephaniah's efforts to the contrary—they could see the faded blue and gold of the hull, the tattered azure ropes, and the peeling golden masts that must have once shone like the sun.

Only Septimus could see the dull, Magykal

haze of purple that surrounded the boat, but as a sudden eddy pulled Ephaniah's oar from his grasp and sent the rowboat spinning toward the peeling blue hull, everyone could see the faded name in gold letters painted along the prow: QUESTE.

Beetle grabbed Ephaniah's lost oar just before it disappeared into the water. Ephaniah squeaked his thanks. He moved across to give Beetle space and together he and Beetle managed to get the rowboat back under control—but not before it had bumped into the hull of Queste with a loud, hollow thud.

As Beetle and Ephaniah frantically pulled away from the Questing Boat, there came the sound of running footsteps on the deck of Queste. Quickly, Jenna undid her red cloak and threw it over Septimus, hiding his distinctive fair hair and green tunic, so that when three Questing Guards

peered over the side they saw a shivering Princess, with her arm protectively around a hunched little old lady, being ferried across the Moat. Where the Princess might be going with the little old lady was of no

concern to the guards; they were more concerned about what had happened to the final Questor.

The final Questor stepped out of the rowboat and risked a quick glance back at Queste. She was not a bad boat, he thought. She looked fast and very maneuverable—the kind of boat that Nicko would like. The thought of Nicko made Septimus forget his own troubles.

Ephaniah led the way along the bank past the Infirmary with its early morning candles lighting up the small windows—it still had a few elderly victims of the Sickenesse regaining their strength. They took the footpath around the back of the Infirmary and were at last out of sight of the Questing Boat. Relieved, Septimus shrugged off his little-old-lady mode and handed Jenna back her cloak, which she carefully fastened with Nicko's precious gold pin.

Behind the Infirmary was an overgrown path, sunk between two deep banks, well-trodden long ago by generations of charcoal burners. They followed Ephaniah as he limped through the ferns and drifts of leaves that covered the old path, and soon they came to a low escarpment of rock, which seemed to block their way. Ephaniah turned and pointed to a narrow gap in the rock. With some difficulty, the rat-man squeezed through (he had been a little thinner when he had last made the journey as a fourteen-year-old) and Septimus, Beetle, Jenna and Ullr easily followed him.

In front of them stretched a deep and narrow cutting through the rocks, shaded by overhanging trees high above.

“The charcoal burners' gulley,” squeaked Ephaniah proudly, pleased to have found the way after all the years. “The best way into the Forest.”

“I wish Stanley were here,” said Jenna. “He'd tell us what Ephaniah was saying.”

“Eventually, he might.” Septimus grinned. “But first he'd tell us all about his third cousin twice removed who followed a giant rat into the Forest and was never seen again and then he'd tell us all about the time that he and Dawnie had—”

“All right, all right,” laughed Jenna. “Maybe I’m glad Stanley isn’t here.”
29

SILAS’S SEARCH



While Jenna, Ullr, Septimus and

Beetle were setting off along the charcoal burners’ gully, Silas and Maxie were waking up in a cold, damp tepee in the Wendron Witches’ Summer Circle.

Maxie had enjoyed his night in the Witches’ Circle—Silas had not. The tepee had leaked and the bedding had gotten wet and begun to smell of rancid goat. To make matters worse, Silas had been kept awake by the giggling of a gang of teenage witches planning a raid on what they called Camp Heap, which was where Sam, Edd, Erik and Jo-Jo Heap lived.

Silas, who had no wish to know what his four sons were up to when it came to the Wendron Witches, had stuffed his ears full of rancid goat wool—big mistake—and tried to get to sleep by counting sheep—even bigger mistake, as the sheep had turned into rancid goats and started chanting. After a while Silas had realized that the chanting was in fact the witches chanting around the campfire. Exasperated, he had thrown a pile of stinking goat fur over his head to drown out the noise and had finally fallen asleep.

As Silas lay staring blearily at the top of the tepee, a young witch put her head around the door flap and said, “The Witch Mother requests that you join her for breakfast.”

Silas struggled to sit up, and the young witch suppressed a giggle. Silas’s straw-colored curly hair looked like a bird’s nest—the kind of nest that would belong to a large untidy bird with a hygiene problem. From the middle of the nest, Silas’s green eyes peered out, trying to focus on the young witch. “Um, thank you. Please tell her that I would be delighted.” Even though Silas felt as if he had spent the night with a wet goat sitting on his head, he knew that any invitation from the Witch Mother must always be treated with reverence and respect.

A few minutes later, Silas and Maxie were sitting beside a blazing campfire. A strong smell of damp dog with subtle notes of none-too-clean wool filled the air as Silas’s Ordinary Wizard robes steamed in the heat. Behind him the young witch who had woken him poured out a cup of hot witches’ brew and avoided breathing in too deeply.

Sitting opposite Silas was Morwenna, the Witch Mother—a large woman with piercingly blue witches’ eyes and long graying hair held back with a green leather headband. Morwenna wore the Wendron Witches’ summer tunic of green and, as Witch Mother, she had a broad white sash around her more than ample waist.

The young witch passed Silas a steaming cup of witches’ brew and he warily took a sip. It was, as he feared, disgusting—but it was also strangely warming. Morwenna was watching him with a fond smile, so Silas slowly drank a few more mouthfuls. As he did so he felt the ache in his bones fade

and his spirits begin to drag themselves up from the deep pit where they had spent the night.

The young witch passed Silas a wooden bowl containing what looked, at first impression, like cereal with caterpillars.

Silas inspected it dubiously but, telling himself that that flecks of green were most likely some kind of fleshy herb, he took a spoonful. His first impression had been right. They were caterpillars. Silas swallowed with some difficulty—because you never, ever

spat out food given to you by a witch. Gloomily he surveyed the enormous amount of caterpillar cereal that he still had left to eat and wondered if he could sneak any to Maxie. He decided not to risk it.

“I trust it is to your liking?” asked Morwenna, noticing Silas’s expression.

“Oh. Yes. It’s very, um...”—Silas bit through a particularly large caterpillar with legs—“crunchy.”

“I am so pleased. They are a late spring delicacy and give great strength and will clear your head. I thought you looked in need of them.”

Silas nodded, unable to speak right then due to a mouth full of caterpillars and a sudden inability to swallow. One ghastly gulp later Silas decided he had to be tough—he would herd all the caterpillars together and get it over with.

Gathering his courage, he scooped up and quickly swallowed two large spoonfuls of caterpillars. With great relief he looked at the remains of his cereal, which was now caterpillar-free. But, as Silas was taking a great gulp of the witches’

brew to wash down the last resistant caterpillar that had got stuck between a gap in his teeth, the young serving-witch stepped forward with a small bowl full of writhing green tubes and dutifully added three more spoonfuls to his porridge.

“You seem preoccupied, Silas Heap,” said Morwenna.

“Ahem,” said Silas, overwhelmed by the latest caterpillar incursion.

“Thank you, Marissa, you may leave us now,” said Morwenna, waving the young witch away. She took Silas’s bowl from him with a smile and gave it to a deeply grateful Maxie. “Too many caterpillars this morning, perhaps?” she said.

“But, um, very...remarkable caterpillars. I feel much better, thank you.” And it was true, Silas did suddenly feel better.

In fact he felt very good indeed. Clear-headed, strong and ready for the day.

“Ever since I heard about Nicko’s disappearance I have been expecting you,” Morwenna said.

Silas looked amazed. “Oh. Oh, Morwenna, I Know Nicko is in the Forest. But I do not Know where.”

“And I Know that he is not,” said Morwenna.

“Are you sure?” asked Silas, who had great respect for Morwenna’s knowledge.

Morwenna leaned forward and placed her surprisingly dainty hand on Silas’s arm. Very gently she said, “Silas, I must tell you that Nicko is not in this world.”

Silas went pale, the tepees surrounding him began to sway and he wanted to be sick. “You mean he’s dead,” he said.

Hastily Morwenna said, “No. He is no more dead than those who are not yet born are dead.” Silas put his head in his hands. He found what Sarah Heap scathingly called witchy-talk difficult at the best of times, and now was most definitely not

the best of times. He needed to talk to his father. Silas’s father had been a practical man—a good, honest Shape-Shifter Wizard who was now living as

a tree somewhere in the Forest. He would know what to do.

“Morwenna,” said Silas, “there’s a tree I need to find.”

“There are many trees in the Forest,” Morwenna observed. Silas wondered if she was making fun of him but then she said, “And some are more tree than others. Some were born trees and some became trees. I believe the tree you seek was not a born tree, I am right, Silas Heap?”

“Yes,” said Silas.

“To seek a tree not born of tree is no easy task. They grow in the Ancient Groves, which are dangerous places. Some are pleased with their choice to be tree and others weep and wail and wish to be as they once were. These are the ones that prey upon the traveler and lure her to her doom. Who is it you wish to find, Silas Heap?”

“Benjamin Heap. My father.”

“Ah, your shape-shifter father. It is true what they say—your family runs deep and dark, Silas Heap.”

“Do they? I don’t know why. Dad just liked trees, that’s all. He was a quiet man, very slow in his ways. I think it probably suits him. But...well, last year the boys—Septimus and Nicko—they found him. And I need to see him, Morwenna. He’ll know how to find Nicko. He must. He must.”

Morwenna had never seen Silas Heap so desperate. Remembering the time many years ago when Silas had saved her from certain death by the Forest wolverines, she made him a generous offer. “I will take you to your father,” she said.

Silas gasped. “You know where he is?”

“Of course. I know each tree in the Forest. How could I be Witch Mother and not know this?” Silas was speechless. He had spent the last twenty-five years searching for his father and Morwenna had known all the time.

“You are strangely silent, Silas. Perhaps you do not wish to see your father after all?”

“Oh...no, I do. I really do.”

Five minutes later Silas and Maxie were following the Witch Mother down the spiral path to the Forest floor. They took a narrow track that Silas knew would lead them past Camp Heap, where Silas had spent the last few days—until both he and the occupants of the camp had become totally exasperated with one another. Quietly, they skirted Camp Heap which, at that time of the morning, was still a slumbering circle of what looked like great piles of leaves. These were in fact what the Heap boys called benders—simple shelters made from bent willow branches and leaves. The only sign of occupation was the smoldering of the campfire, which the boys always kept burning, and the sound of snoring drifting out of Sam Heap’s bender. Silas felt the urge to go wake them all up and tell them to get up and do something—which was what had led to much of the trouble during his stay—but he resisted.

Silas, Maxie and Morwenna walked deeper into the Forest, through dark glades and gulleys and into hidden places where Silas had never been before. They traveled fast, with Morwenna moving swift and agile through the trees. Silas concentrated hard on following the witch’s Forest green robes, which took on the shadows and shapes of their surroundings and he knew would quickly disappear if he looked away for one moment. Maxie loped behind, his stiff old joints complaining at the long trek, but not letting Silas out of his sight for one second.

Suddenly, Morwenna dived into a thicket of giant ferns. Silas followed her but the thick stems would not let him pass.

He pushed and shoved, he even insulted them under his breath, but they would not move. He succeeded in nothing more than getting an impressive collection of giant burrs and two sticky toads stuck to his cloak. Silas fought the temptation to call out Morwenna’s name, for he knew that the sound of a human voice in the Forest, even in daytime, can draw the kind of attention a human does not necessarily want. So he waited, hoping that Morwenna would soon notice he was no longer following her. Maxie

gratefully lay down and licked his weary paws, but Silas was not so patient. He kicked his heels, he scratched his itchy head and dislodged three tree beetles, he prized the sticky toads from his cloak and stuck them onto a nearby sapling, and then one by one he picked off twenty-five giant burrs that had stuck onto his cloak and threw them into the ferns. But still there was no sign of the Witch Mother.

Silas decided to risk a whisper. “Morwenna...Morwenna...”

A few moments later Morwenna emerged from the ferns. “There you are,” she said. “Come on. Keep up.” She plunged into the ferns once again but this time Silas followed her so closely that he was very nearly treading upon her heels. The thick stems made way for the witch—but not for Silas. As soon as Morwenna had passed through, the giant ferns began to close ranks again, forcing Silas and Maxie to be quick and slip through the narrowing gap. It was lucky, thought Silas, that Morwenna was so much wider than him.

As they moved through the ferns, the light faded to a green dimness. At last they stepped out into a great green cathedral of trees—the tallest trees Silas had ever seen in his life, their branches arching gracefully up into the canopy of the Forest hundreds of feet above him. An unexpected feeling of awe came over him. Maxie whimpered.

“Your father is here,” Morwenna said quietly.



“Oh...”

“I shall leave you now, Silas Heap,” Morwenna half-whispered. “I have business at our Winter Quarters. I will return for you on my way back.”

Silas did not answer. He could not imagine ever leaving such a peaceful place.

“Silas?” Morwenna prompted.

Silas shook himself out of his trance and answered, “Thank you, Morwenna. But...I think I want to stay here for a while.”

Morwenna saw the faraway look in Silas’s eyes and she knew she would get no more sense out of him. “Well, take care,” she told him. “Be sure to spend the hours of darkness off the Forest floor. The Ancient Groves are dangerous places at night.”

Silas nodded.

“May the Goddess go with you.”

“Morwenna?”

“Yes, Silas Heap?”

“Where exactly is my father?”

Morwenna pointed to the tangle of gnarled mossy roots below Silas’s boots.

“You’re standing on his toes,” she said with a smile. With that she was gone.

30

PROMISED

After watching Silas—and a

very bemused wolfhound—being slowly lifted up into the branches of Benjamin Heap, Morwenna headed straight for the Old Quarry. Morwenna’s predecessor, Madam Agaric, had run the Wendron Witch Coven from the vastness of a large cave set high up in the walls of the Old Quarry deep in the Forest. Madam Agaric’s reign had come to an unexpected—and generally unlamented—end one cold winter’s night at a full moon when the old witch had taken a fraction of a second too long to Freeze

a werewolf that she had found lurking in the heaps of mouldy clutter at the back of her cave.

One of the first things Morwenna had done when she became Witch Mother was to start the Witches’ Summer Circle on the hill. It put an end to all the petty feuds and personal hexes that had been rife among the witches, which life in the oppressive Quarry had encouraged. Morwenna liked to oversee all the details of the move—and one of these details was making the Old Quarry safe and welcoming for their eventual return on the day of the Autumn Equinox.

Morwenna took the shortcut to the Old Quarry—a hidden path that descended into the secret valley of the Blue Star Firs, trees that grew nowhere but there. As she entered the valley a heady scent of Blue Fir resin filled the air, a scent that made unprepared travelers sleepy and easy prey for the blue snakes that infested the high branches of the firs. But Morwenna was well prepared. She took out her green-spotted handkerchief, shook a few drops of peppermint oil onto it and pressed it against her nose. Morwenna emerged from the valley and stopped for a moment by the Green Pool—an ancient pond cut deep into the stone floor of the Forest. She kneeled down, dipped her hands into the cold water and drank. Then she filled a small water bottle and continued on her way.

About half an hour later, Morwenna was clambering down the end of the steep, rocky path that led to the Old Quarry.

She jumped nimbly from the last boulder and stepped onto the smooth Quarry floor. She stood for a moment to catch her breath and looked up at the expanse of rock rising up in front of her. The Old Quarry was roughly semicircular in shape.

Although it was formed from the pale yellow stone that had built many of the Castle's older houses—and indeed, the Palace—the rough-hewn walls that stretched up into the tops of the trees were ominously dark, streaked and blackened with soot from the fires from hundreds of years of occupation by the Wendron Witches. The walls were also home to a local Forest slime-lichen, which was a nasty greenish-black color and gave off a dismal smell whenever it got damp.

Dotted here and there in the rock face were the even darker shapes of entrances to various caves that had been exposed by the quarrymen all those years ago. Each cave had steps leading up to it that the witches had laboriously hacked from the rock when they first took over the Quarry. It was in these caves, safe from the marauding night creatures of the Forest—most of the time at least—that the Wendron Witches lived in winter.

Today Morwenna wanted to check and secure the lower caves. It was no fun to return to the Quarry on a cold, wet Autumn day, laden with grubby tepees and damp bedding, to find that a pack of Forest wolverines had

decided that your caves suited them much better than you—and were ready to prove it.

The only thing Morwenna actually liked about the Old Quarry was that it was one of the few places in the Forest with some flat, open ground. She headed purposefully across its wide, yellow stone floor. She approvingly noted that all looked swept and tidy and nothing had been left outside—or if it had, something had already eaten it and saved her the trouble of clearing it away. As she neared the bluish-black shadows at the foot of the rock face, a sudden movement inside a large cave startled her. Morwenna stopped dead. Very, very slowly, she drew her green cape around her so that the mottled underside showed, making her blend into the shadows. And then she waited, chanting under her breath the witchy words, “Though you may see, you see not me...not me...not me...” But Morwenna made sure that she

saw. Her piercing blue eyes took on a bright glow as she stared into the shadows, searching, scanning—and suddenly a flash of white caught her eye. Morwenna caught her breath—what was it? What great white creature was inside the cave?

Morwenna saw the white shape move toward the front of the cave. Quickly she did a basic Safe Shield Spell—one of the organic witch ones. She was preparing to do a Freeze

on the creature as soon as she could see it properly when the large white shape almost fell out of the cave. Morwenna gasped and dropped the Safe Shield.

“Ephaniah!” she cried out. “Ephaniah!” For there was no mistaking the rat-man even from a distance.

Ephaniah Grebe stopped and blinked into the light. He looked startled at hearing his name, but he recognized the voice immediately. “Morwenna,” he squeaked excitedly. “I had so hoped to find you. And here you are!” He set off toward the witch, limping as he went.

They met halfway. Morwenna hugged Ephaniah so tightly that the rat-man coughed, his little rat lungs squashed by the witch's grasp.

Morwenna stepped back and looked Ephaniah up and down. "You're limping," she said, concerned.

"Oh, just my bumblefoot," muttered Ephaniah.

Morwenna, like many witches, understood Rat and Cat Speak. "Come to our Circle. I'll make you a compress," she said sympathetically.

Ephaniah's eyes smiled, but he shook his head regretfully. "Unfortunately I cannot stay. I have some small charges of my own to take care of," he said.

Morwenna raised her eyebrows. "You have?" She sounded surprised, although she had not meant to.

Hastily Ephaniah said, "No, no. Not my own children. No, something has occurred at the Wizard Tower. I have the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice with me who is fleeing from the Queste."

"The Queste?" said Morwenna. "So it is time again for that, is it? How very sad. Such a waste of young talent. What a terrible reward for seven years of hard work." Morwenna stopped, confused. "But surely the boy is too young? He has not been Apprentice for three years yet."

Ephaniah's squeak fell to a whisper. "Morwenna, I have come to ask for your help. Although they are escaping the Queste, they are also—"

"They?" asked Morwenna.

"I also have the Princess and an ex-member of the Manuscriptorium staff with me."

"Well, well. You don't do things by halves, do you, Ephaniah? The Princess in the Forest, eh? That must be a first."

"I need your advice. They have lost their brother."

“In another Time, so it seems.”

“You know?”

“A witch must keep up with the gossip.” Morwenna smiled.

“I...have a favor to ask,” said Ephaniah hesitantly.

“There is no harm in asking.”

Ephaniah took a deep breath. “I have come to ask you to show them the Forest Way.”

“Ah.” Morwenna’s light-heartedness at seeing Ephaniah vanished. She took a step back as if to distance herself from him.

“Please.”

Morwenna sighed. “Ephaniah, this knowledge is not mine to give. It must be paid for.” Ephaniah’s eyes pleaded. “But it may save two young lives—or more.”

“Then you have just raised the price.”

“Morwenna—please.”

Morwenna smiled, a little distant. “Ephaniah, enough,” she said. “Spend the day at our Circle. I will dress your foot and then we shall talk. Yes?”

Septimus and Beetle enjoyed the Summer Circle that afternoon—Jenna did not. While Morwenna was fussing with a large green poultice on Ephaniah’s swollen foot, Septimus and Beetle chatted with the young witches. Septimus even had some beads braided into his hair—much to Beetle’s amusement. But Jenna sat at the door of the guest tepee, keeping a tight rein on Ullr and watching with a marked air of disapproval. Jenna did not take to the young witches. She mistrusted their talk of goddesses and spirits and their haughty, confident attitude. Compared with the sober Castle inhabitants they seemed so foreign—with their bright beaded tunics, fingers

heavy with silver rings, the tangles of beads and feathers woven into their hair and their general air of sunburned grubbiness.

Ephaniah sat by the campfire with his foot covered in an uncomfortably hot poultice, trying to think how he could persuade Morwenna to show them the Forest Way. Having—foolishly, he now realized—promised Morwenna’s help, he could not bear to let Jenna and Septimus down. He was willing to pay anything that Morwenna asked, but she would not name her price. “We will talk tonight under the moon,” was all she would say.

Darkness began to fall and—with the Transformation

of the DayUllr into the NightUllr—the atmosphere became electric. The witches crowded around Jenna and the panther.

They said not a word but their bright blue eyes glittered in the darkness: everywhere Jenna looked two points of blue would meet her gaze briefly and then look away. Ullr seemed unconcerned. He lay down at Jenna’s side and, apart from a watchful twitch of the end of his tail, he did not move a muscle.

At long last, the uncomfortable evening around the witches’ campfire came to an end and Jenna, Septimus and Beetle threw themselves gratefully onto the pile of rancid goat furs in the guest tepee. Exhausted, Jenna fell fast asleep with her arm around Ullr. But Septimus lay wide awake, listening to the desultory chatter of the witches settling down for the night and the sporadic screeches and screams of the nighttime creatures far below in the Forest.

Septimus was angry with Morwenna. His mother was right, he thought, as he lay under a damp goatskin and sneezed for the umpteenth time. You never really knew where you were with a Wendron Witch. The events of the evening kept going through his head. It had started well enough, even though Jen had seemed a bit twitchy. Morwenna had made them guests of honor. Rugs and cushions were spread for them to sit on and the entire Coven had been introduced and had joined them in a large circle around the campfire. Huge logs—needing three witches apiece to carry them—were hauled off the woodpile and thrown onto the fire. He had watched the

flames and sparks leap into the night sky and felt the surge of hope and possibilities that an evening around a blazing campfire brings.

The young witches on cooking duty had served an extremely tasty wolverine stew, and even the witches' brew had tasted good. All was going well, until Ephaniah had once more made his request to Morwenna. In an instant—as though someone had thrown a switch—a frosty silence fell. Suddenly Septimus felt as though he was surrounded by a circle of wolverines rather than witches.

Recklessly, Ephaniah had repeated his question. “But, Morwenna, I beg you to show us the Forest Way. Surely, for me, you will do it?”

Septimus had not understood the squeaks, but the replies were clear enough.

“Have I not done enough for you already?” Morwenna snapped.

Ephaniah looked shocked and hurt. “Yes,” he squeaked. “You have done so much for me. I can never repay you.

Never.”

Morwenna's witchy blue eyes pierced the dark. “I never asked for payment, Ephaniah,” she told him. “I freely gave what was mine to give. But the knowledge you ask is not mine to give. I am but the Guardian of the Forest Way.

Therefore, I must exact a price.”

“I shall pay whatever you ask,” he recklessly replied.

Morwenna looked surprised. “Very well. I shall give you my price in the morning. And when I ask it, you must pay it.” Ephaniah nodded somberly. “I understand,” he squeaked.

With that the Witch Mother got to her feet and the whole circle of witches had silently followed suit. And that was the end of the evening.

Septimus sat up and threw off the disgusting goatskin. He was, he decided, allergic to goats—especially rancid ones. He wondered if he could swap his goatskin for Beetle’s blanket without Beetle waking up.

“You awake, Sep?” Beetle’s whisper came from the other side of the tepee.

“No. I always sleep sitting up.”

“Really?”

“Of course I’m awake, Beetle. You awake too?”

“Nah. Fast asleep.”

“Ha ha. Hey...what’s that?” Tall, distorted shadows had suddenly appeared in sharp focus on the side of the tepee. A bout of hastily smothered giggling gave the game away—a group of young witches were on the other side of the tepee.

“No...is that really what she’s going to ask the rat-man for?” an incredulous voice was asking.

“That’s what she said. She always tells me stuff when I help her get ready for bed. She likes to unwind and talk about things.”

“You’ll be Witch Mother-in-Waiting if you don’t watch out, Marissa.”

“Oh, ha ha. I don’t think so.”

An earnest voice chimed in. “But the rat-man doesn’t have to give what she asks for, does he?”

“He does. He agreed, didn’t he?”

A new voice said, “He squeaked. Could mean anything. Could mean get off my foot you great fat—”

“Shhh. You’re crazy

calling the Witch Mother fat. You know how touchy she is about her weight. You'll end up a frog for a day—or worse." The earnest voice chimed in again. "But why would she want the Princess anyway?" Septimus's and Beetle's eyes widened in shock. They both strained to hear what was coming next.

"She wants the panther." This was Marissa. "Morwenna's always wanted a Day to Night Transformer."

"So why doesn't she just ask for the panther?"

"Two for the price of one," Marissa said, giggling. "If she asks for the panther that's all she gets. But if she asks for the Princess the panther comes too. Clever, huh?"

"Yeah..."

"And having the Princess would make her really

powerful, wouldn't it? Morwenna says that the Palace is full of tons of old Magyk stuff that the Queens pinched from us in the first place. She just wants back what's rightfully ours."

"So she really is going to ask for the Princess?"

"Yep. She is. First thing tomorrow. So we'll have little Miss Royal Fusspot and her scrappy cat living here. She'll soon learn. Ho-ho."

There was another flurry of giggling—a little nastier this time—and to his dismay, Septimus felt another sneeze coming on. He grabbed hold of his nose and held his breath. He must not sneeze. He must not, not, not, ah... ah...ah...Beetle saw what was coming. He leaped up and shoved his hand over Septimus's nose and suddenly Septimus most definitely did not want to sneeze anymore. He just wanted to breathe.

The young witches' conversation continued, unaware of the listeners right next to them, divided only by a thick sheet of canvas. Marissa was speaking

now. She sounded impatient. “Sam will be here soon. I can see his torch coming along the track. We can’t wait for Bryony much longer.”

“Give her a couple of minutes more, Marissa. She had to clean the cooking pot. Which is more than you did this morning. It’s disgusting.”



“Well, I hate

cleaning the pot. No one notices a bit of breakfast in their wolverine stew. Oh, I’m tired of waiting. I’m going to go get her. She can come now or forget it.”

“Okay. We’ll come with you.” The tallest shadow left the group and the three other shadows quickly followed.

Beetle and Septimus stared at each other, goggle-eyed. “Did you hear that?” mouthed Beetle.

Septimus nodded. “We’ve got to get Jen out of here,” he whispered.

CAMP HEAP

Thirty seconds later

a very drowsy Jenna was outside the tepee with Septimus and Beetle standing on either side of her like sentries. She blinked into the bright moonlight and looked around, puzzled. Ullr yawned and stretched, digging his claws into the damp grass.

Far on the other side of the Summer Circle an argument about a cooking pot was developing. Under the cover of the raised voices Septimus whispered, “Jen—we’ve got to get out of here. Right now. Come on.”

“But why? I’m so tired, Sep.”

“Too bad, Jen. You can’t stay here. Come on.”

“But where to? I’m not going into the Forest at night. No way.”

“Come on, Jen.” Septimus gave Beetle a look—then they both grabbed an arm and lifted her off her feet.

“Hey!” Jenna protested.

“Shhh...” Septimus and Beetle hissed.

“Put...me...down,” Jenna whispered, and then, veering into Princess voice, “Right now.” Beetle and Septimus put Jenna down.

“Come on, Jen,” Septimus pleaded. “You have to trust us. Please.” Jenna trusted Septimus completely, but what she did not trust was the Forest at night. Reluctantly, she walked down the hill with Septimus and Beetle, leaving behind the warmth of the campfire and the circle of illuminated tepees like upturned yellow cones on the hilltop, and headed to the dark uncertainty of the Forest. Even with the NightUllr by her side, Jenna felt fearful—and then she saw something that made her feel very afraid. Far below, half hidden in the trees, was a flickering flame coming toward just

the point they were heading for. Jenna stopped and glared at Septimus and Beetle, daring them to even think

about picking her up again. “There’s a Forest Wraith,” she whispered. “It’s heading straight for us.”

“It’s not a Forest Wraith, Jen.” The moonlight caught Septimus’s grin and Jenna saw his green eyes shine. “It’s Sam.”

“Jo-Jo will kill me,” said Sam, sounding remarkably cheerful about the prospect.

“I’m really sorry,” said Septimus as they followed him along the track between the tall Forest trees.

“I’m

not,” Sam replied. “I’ve had enough of those giggling witches keeping me awake at night. They’re a pain. I don’t know what Jo-Jo, Edd and Erik see in them.”

Beetle thought he did know, but he didn’t say anything. He was too busy trying to keep up. Sam set a fast pace. He was carrying a long branch of oak that had been dipped in tar and burned with a strong flame, and Beetle wanted to keep as close to it as he possibly could. The track narrowed and plunged into a particularly dark patch, and the group was forced to travel single file, with Beetle the last in line. Stories about wolverines picking off the weakest stragglers kept going through his head, and he was determined not to give the slightest impression of straggling.

Sam was a confident leader. He strode on steadily and slowed only once when a long, rolling growl rumbled out of the darkness in front of them. Despite an answering snarl from Ullr, the growl continued and on the path ahead Beetle saw the yellow glint of two pairs of eyes. Suddenly Sam jabbed his torch into the dark—there was a sharp yelp and a smell of singed fur. Quickly, they hurried on, with Beetle almost treading on Septimus’s heels in an effort to keep up. But he kept glancing behind just in case the yellow eyes had decided to try their luck.

A few minutes later the track broadened and Beetle began to feel much better—he could see the dancing flames of a campfire flickering through the trees and he knew they must be approaching Camp Heap. As they followed Sam into the wide clearing, three gangly figures jumped up from where they had been lolling around the fire and ran to greet them.

Beetle had never met Septimus’s Forest brothers before, although Septimus had told him all about them. Beetle was surprised; he realized he had been expecting larger versions of Septimus but they were all young men—tall, thin and gangly with a wild look to them. They wore an assortment of furs and colorful tunics, woven by various admiring young witches, and they looked, thought Beetle, as though they belonged in the Forest even more than the witches did. The only similarity between Septimus and his brothers was the Magykal green eyes and the Heap hair—straw-colored curls that the Forest Heaps had turned into long, matted rat tails.

“That was quick,” said one with feathers woven into his rat tails.

“Yeah,” replied Sam, “and a lot quieter than usual.”

“Marissa...Marissa?” Another Heap with a collection of plaited leather headbands around his rat tails peered at the group behind Sam. “Hey, he’s brought a load of kids. Where’s Marissa?”

“For your information, Jo,” said Sam, “this load of kids

is your brother and sister, not to mention your sister’s panther.” Sam waved his hand at Ullr, who was almost invisible in the shadows. The boys whistled, impressed. “Oh...” Sam tried to remember what Septimus had called the older boy with the black hair. “Oh yeah, and there’s Cockroach.”

“No, actually it’s Bee—” But Beetle’s protests were lost in the argument that was rapidly developing between Jo-Jo and Sam.

Jo-Jo Heap looked angry. “So you haven’t brought Marissa?”

“No.”

“Pigs, Sam. It’s been ages. All that time Dad was hanging around here I couldn’t see her and then when he was up at the Circle I couldn’t, and now he’s gone and I can and you haven’t brought Marissa.”

“Well, you

go get her, then,” said Sam, thrusting the burning torch into Jo-Jo’s hands. “I’m tired of doing all the night stuff anyway.

You can do it.”

“All right, then, I will.” Jo-Jo strode off with the branch and Sam watched him go with a surprised look.

“Will he be okay?” asked Septimus.

Sam shrugged. “Yeah. I expect so.” Then he grinned. “He’ll be fine on the way back that’s for sure. Marissa will scare anything away.”

The two remaining brothers—Edd and Erik—laughed. Then one of them said, a little shyly, “Hello, Jen.”

“Hello, Edd,” said Jenna, equally shyly.

“Hey, you can tell.”

“Of course I can. I never got you muddled up, did I? Not even when you tried to fool me.” Edd and Erik both laughed. “No, you didn’t, not once,” said Erik, remembering that they could sometimes fool even their mother—but never Jenna.

Sitting by the warmth of the campfire, with the comforting snap and crackle of the logs and the faint sizzle of a row of tiny fish cooking in the background, Jenna listened to Septimus and Beetle as they related what they had heard that night from the other side of the tepee.

“Well, that’s just stupid,” she said. “Ephaniah wouldn’t do that. Anyway, he couldn’t. No one can give a person to someone.”

“It’s different with witches,” said Septimus.

“I’d like to see them try,” said Jenna scornfully.

“He’s right, Jen,” said Sam. “It is different with witches. There are different rules—their rules. You think you are doing what you want, but then you find out that all along you’ve been doing what they want. Look at Jo-Jo.”

“Jo-Jo’s doing exactly what he wants,” sniggered Edd and Erik.

“Yeah. He thinks,” Sam muttered.

There was silence. Septimus picked up a stick and began to poke it into the fire.

“What about Ephaniah?” Jenna suddenly said.

“He’ll understand,” said Septimus.

“He won’t. All he’ll know is that we’ve gone.”

“We had to go, Jen. You were going to end up as a Wendron Witch.” Jenna snorted in disbelief. “Well, you were.” Jenna sighed. She, too, picked up a stick and jabbed at the fire angrily. She felt as if Nicko was forever just slipping out of reach. And somehow it was always something to do with her.

“You want some fish?” asked Sam, who had a great belief in the power of fish to keep the peace around the campfire.

No one felt very hungry after the wolverine stew, but they nodded anyway.

Sam had his own system of cooking fish. He threaded each one onto a thin skewer of damp wood and laid it on the Sam Heap Fish-Cooker—a rickety metal tripod set up over the fire that had an alarming habit of collapsing when least expected. Sam selected the three best fish and passed them to Jenna, Septimus and Beetle. Beetle took his fish-on-a-stick a little reluctantly; he was not a great fish fan and it didn’t help that his fish seemed to be staring at him reproachfully.

Beetle stared back at the fish and steeled himself to take a bite.

“Something wrong with your fish, Cockroach?” asked Sam.

“’S not Cockroach, Sam,” said Septimus with a mouth full of what was, in fact, extremely good fish. “It’s Bee—” He was interrupted by a sudden crashing through the trees behind them. With well-tuned Forest reflexes, Sam, Edd and Erik leaped to their feet brandishing sticks, ready to defend the camp. A small Forest leopard shot out of the trees, ran straight at the campfire in a blind panic, swerved to avoid it—and Ullr—and disappeared into the Forest on the other side.

“That’s weird,” said Sam. “What got into him?”

The answer to Sam’s question emerged from the trees brandishing a torch, and strode into Camp Heap with a proud air.

Beside him was the young witch, Marissa. Marissa was as tall as Jo-Jo with long wavy brown hair held back with a plaited leather headband that was identical to the one Jo-Jo wore. She allowed Jo-Jo to usher her to the campfire, where he tossed the burning torch into the flames with a triumphant flourish.

Jo-Jo threw himself down beside the fire and pulled Marissa down with him. Marissa settled, fussing with her dark green witch’s cloak—over which she had sewn dozens of little bunches of colored feathers. She looked like an exotic bird roosting with a troupe of scruffy sparrows. Still on a high from his successful and scary—though he would be the last to admit it—trip through the nighttime Forest, Jo-Jo grabbed a fish and gulped it down in one bite. A little late, he remembered his manners and offered one to Marissa, but the young witch did not notice. Her eyes were fixed on Jenna, Septimus and Beetle on the other side of the campfire. “What are you doing here?” she asked suspiciously.

“Same as you,” said Septimus, determined to give nothing away.

“But you’re the Witch Mother’s guests.” Marissa was indignant. “You can’t leave just like that. No one does that.” Septimus shrugged and said nothing,

the ways of Camp Heap rubbing off on him. He was learning from his brothers that you didn't have to explain yourself if you didn't want to—and that sometimes, with a witch, it was better not to.

Marissa sat frowning at the fire. Jo-Jo offered her the fish once again but she angrily shook her head. "I ought to go back," she muttered.

"Back?" asked Jo-Jo, incredulous.

"Yes. Back. Take me back, Joby-Jo."

Jo-Jo looked stunned. "What—now?"

"Now." Marissa's lower lip stuck out crossly and her witch-blue eyes flashed in the firelight.

"But—"

Jo-Jo's protests were interrupted by Sam. "Jo-Jo is not going anywhere tonight. It's too dangerous. It's past midnight and it's time for bed." Jo-Jo flashed Sam a grateful glance but Sam ignored him. He stood up and said, "Sep, Jenna and Cockroach can have Wolf Boy's old bender. Come on, you guys," he said, looking in their direction. "I'll show you where it is."

Septimus was about to tell Sam that there was no need, he remembered where it was, when Sam caught his eye with a meaningful glance. "Yeah. Okay," muttered Septimus.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the campfire, Sam said quietly, "You'll have to be off at dawn tomorrow. Marissa will go straight back to Morwenna, you can bet on that. And if Morwenna wants Jen for the Coven she'll get her—one way or another."

"No, she won't!" said Beetle vehemently. "Not while me and Sep are here."

"Look, Cockroach," said Sam patiently, "you two don't stand a chance against a Witch Mother, believe me. You need to



be out of here first thing before the witches realize you've gone."

"I suppose we could try to catch the Port barge," said Septimus doubtfully. "But it doesn't usually stop at the Forest."

"What do you want to do that for?" asked Sam, puzzled. "I thought you were taking the Forest Way."

"Yeah. Well, that was the idea. Until Morwenna got nasty and wouldn't show us where it is."

"You don't need that calculating old witch," said Sam. "I'll show you."

"You?" Septimus gasped.

"Shh..."

Sam glanced at the group silhouetted around the campfire. "Don't give that Marissa any ideas we're planning something. I'll come wake you first thing. Okay?"

Septimus nodded. And then said, “Night, Sam. And thanks.”

“’S all right. Got to look after my little brother and sister, haven’t I?” Sam said with a grin.

It was warm and comfortable in Wolf Boy’s bender after Sam had thrown in a pile of thick blankets. Feeling very, very tired, Jenna, Septimus and Beetle burrowed under the blankets and curled up on the bed of leaves.

“G’night,” whispered Beetle.

“G’night, Cockroach.”

“Night, Cockroach,” came the replies.

32

NIGHT CROSSINGS

While Jenna, Septimus and

Beetle slept dreamlessly in Wolf Boy’s bender and the NightUllr listened to the sounds of the Forest, a small ferryboat was making a perilous crossing to the Castle. The ferryman had extracted a high fee for the trip but even so he was beginning to regret it—the tide was running fast against the wind, and as they reached the middle of the river, water was splashing into his boat with every wave it hit.

His passengers were beginning to regret it too.

“We should have waited till morning,” Lucy Gringe moaned as the boat dipped alarmingly and her stomach seemed to go in the opposite direction.

“Don’t worry, Luce,” replied Simon Heap encouragingly. “I’ve known worse.” He hadn’t, but now was not the time for strict accuracy, he thought.

Lucy said nothing more. She thought if she did speak she would probably be sick, and she didn’t want Simon to see that.

A girl had to keep up appearances even in a rotten little rowboat. Lucy closed her eyes tight and sat concentrating on her thoughts. She could not get out of her head the expression of horror on Simon's face as they had walked into the Observatory that afternoon. "Luce," he had whispered in a panic. "Get straight back down those steps and get Thunder.

Now!"

Lucy didn't like Simon telling her what to do—and he didn't usually dare—but this she knew was different. She had fled back down the steep, slippery slate steps, past the horrible old Magog chamber, and by the time Simon had joined her, Thunder was saddled once more and ready to go. She had asked Simon what was the problem, but all he would say was, "I did a See."

They were nearing the other side of the river now and the water was a little calmer. Lucy brightened. If what Simon had said—that they were never going to set foot in that awful Observatory again—was true, then she was very pleased indeed, but she wished they weren't going back to the Castle. She would much rather have been heading for the Port.

Lucy liked the Port; it was much more fun than the Castle and there was no risk of bumping into her mother and father there, either.

However, the most pressing reason that Lucy did not want to go back to the Castle was Simon himself. Simon seemed to have forgotten the events that had led up to him fleeing the place almost a year ago. Lucy did not know exactly what had happened but she had heard all kinds of terrible things—most of which she did not believe but some, she knew, were true. Her brother, Rupert, had told her he had seen Simon throwing a Thunderflash at Septimus, Nicko and Jenna—and Lucy knew that Rupert did not tell fibs. And there were other stories too: that Simon had tried to do some horrible Enchantment

on Marcia by using DomDaniel's bones and had very nearly succeeded, and that Marcia had let it be known that if Simon ever set foot in the Castle again she would put him in the lock-up forever.

Lucy looked at her beautiful ring—most definitely not

from Drago Mills's warehouse clearance sale—and sighed. Why couldn't she and Simon be normal? All she wanted was for them to be like everyone else—planning to get married, looking for somewhere to live—just a room in The Ramblings would do. Why couldn't she take Simon to see her mother and father and have him and Rupert be friends?

Why? It wasn't fair. It just wasn't.

The boat pulled in to the night ferry quay, just below Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House. The ferryman, Micky Mullin, who was one of Sally's many nephews, tied the boat up with a feeling of relief and bid his soaked passengers good night. He watched them walk unsteadily toward the South Gate—which, if you knew where to look, had a small door that was open all night—and wondered what they were up to. Even though Simon had taken care to pull down his hood well over his face, Micky had noticed the distinctive Heap features. Simon, now that he was in his early twenties, looked remarkably like a young version of his father, Silas. Micky decided to go see his aunt the next morning; she liked a bit of gossip—and she made a good barley cake, too.

As they walked along the deserted streets, keeping out of the worst of the wind, Lucy was still unusually silent.

“You okay, Luce?” asked Simon.

“I wish we weren't back here,” Lucy replied. “I'm scared they'll find you and lock you away forever.” Simon drew out a crumpled letter that had been waiting for them on their return. Lucy heaved a sigh. She so wished she had not seen it tucked under a rock beside the path leading up to the Observatory entrance, but the envelope was stamped with the words DELIVERED BY THE PORT PACKET POST COMPANY, and she had thought it sounded exciting. Lucy now knew the contents of the wretched letter by heart, but she listened once again as Simon read out the tiny, spiky handwriting.

The letter was written on official Manuscriptorium notepaper and it said:
Dear Simon,

I expect you have noticed that I have gone.

You may have noticed that something else has gone too. I have Slooth Sluuth Sleuth and it is MINE now. It likes being with me.

If you come to find it I will make sure someone finds you.

As you see from this writing paper, my talants

talents have at last been recognized as I have a very good job here. Much better than the one I had with you.

I am back where I belong now but no one will have you back again. Not in a milloin million years. Ha ha.

Your ex faitful faithfil faithful servant,

Merrin Meredith/Daniel Hunter/Septimus Heap

“I told you, Luce, he’s not getting away with this,” said Simon, shoving the letter back into his pocket. “He’s teamed up with two other wasters—dunno who Daniel Hunter is but I always knew that precious little Septimus was no good—and now he thinks he can scare me into letting him keep Sleuth. He’ll soon find out just how wrong he is.” Lucy shook her head. What was it with boys and their fights? “It’s a long way to come just to get your ball back,” she said.

When Sarah Heap got over her fright and realized that it was Simon tapping on her sitting-room window she did not know whether to laugh or cry. So she did both—at the same time. Lucy stood by feeling awkward, thinking that maybe she should go to see her

mother. And then, as Sarah began to bombard Simon with questions—where had he been living, what was he doing, did he really do all those awful things everyone said he did and why hadn’t he written to her—Lucy thought that it was probably better not to see her mother. Not yet.

Lucy and Simon sat and dried out in Sarah’s sitting room beside the fire, eating the bread, cheese and apples that Sarah had found in the kitchen.

Lucy liked the chaos of the sitting room, and she was fascinated by the stubbly duck with a crocheted waistcoat that Sarah had picked up from beside the fire and placed in her lap. Lucy liked the Heaps; they were so much more interesting than her own family.

“I don’t know what Marcia will do if she finds you here,” said Sarah, beginning to worry. “She’s always in a bad mood nowadays. Very touchy. And not very nice, either. I never see Septimus and she knows that, but whenever she sees me she makes a point of saying that she hopes I am enjoying seeing so much of him. Don’t make that face, Simon. I will not have you fighting with your little brother any longer, is that understood? Well, is it?” Simon shrugged. “It’s not me who’s fighting. He’s stolen Sleuth,” he muttered under his breath.

“Stolen what?”

“Nothing,” growled Simon. “Doesn’t matter.”

Sarah sighed. She was thrilled to see Simon after so long but she wished he were not so angry. “No one must know you are here—no one,” she told him. “You and Lucy will have to lie low in the Palace until we can work something out.” Lucy yawned and swayed sleepily. The yawn was not lost on Sarah. Carefully, she put down the duck and stood up beside the fire. “You must be exhausted,” she said, giving Lucy a concerned smile. “Why don’t we go find you a comfortable bed somewhere?” Lucy nodded gratefully. Simon’s mum was nice, she thought.

Half an hour later, Lucy was fast asleep in a warm bed in a huge Palace guest room overlooking the river. Simon however—one floor up under the eaves of the attic—was moodily staring out the window. It was then he noticed that something was wrong...something was missing. The lights of the Wizard Tower had disappeared. Simon threw open the window and stared into the windswept night. Spread out below were the lights of the Castle. The torches of the Wizard Way flickered and danced in the wind but the great ladder of purple, Magykal lights that always lit up the Castle sky was simply not there.

Simon knew he could not stay in his tiny room wondering what was going on at the Wizard Tower—he had to find out.

Feeling horribly like he was a little boy creeping out on an adventure when his mother had told him to stay in and do his homework, Simon eased open the creaky bedroom door and tiptoed down the darkened corridor. He was so intent on not making a noise that he did not notice Merrin—just returned from another late-night visit to Ma Custard’s—emerge from the top of the stairs. Horror-struck at the sight of Simon, Merrin nearly choked on his last banana-and-bacon chew. He stopped dead in his tracks, then ducked behind one of the huge beams that lined the walls.

As Simon tiptoed past, Merrin stared at his former employer like a rabbit Transfixed. He could not believe his eyes.

How had Simon tracked him down—how did he know? Not daring to even turn his head, Merrin watched Simon as he slunk down the stairs, treading as carefully as Merrin himself had during his first days at the Palace.

Simon snuck out of a side door and headed for the alley beside the Palace. He was soon striding up Wizard Way toward the darkness that he knew contained the Wizard Tower. Despite all the things he had done—which now Simon could hardly believe, what

had he been thinking of?—he retained a proprietary interest in the Wizard Tower. Deep down Simon Heap still wanted to be ExtraOrdinary Wizard. But he no longer wanted to do it the Darke way. That, he thought, was cheating. He wanted to do it properly, fair and square, so that Lucy would be proud of him.

Simon knew this was an impossible dream. But it didn’t stop him from being drawn to the Wizard Tower and it didn’t stop him wanting to know what was happening there.

As he approached the Great Arch at the entrance to the Courtyard, Simon saw a large but subdued crowd congregated outside, talking in low, anxious voices—he was not the only one to have noticed the absence of Magykal lights. Simon pulled the hood of his cloak over his head and, ignoring

mutterings of protest, he pushed his way to the front. There he came face to face with two tall figures, surrounded by a Magykal haze. They were, although he did not know it, two of the seven Questing Guards who had come to escort the Apprentice away on the Queste. At Simon's determined approach the armed Guards crossed their pikestaves in front of him with a loud clack and barred the way through the Arch. "Halt!" they barked. Simon halted.

Mustering his courage, Simon asked, "What's going on?"

"Siege," was the terse reply.

Behind Simon an anxious muttering spread through the crowd.

"Why?" Simon asked.

The Guards'

reply was swift and unexpected. They drew their daggers and brandished them at Simon, one of them catching his cloak.

"Go!" they barked.

The crowd scattered. Shocked, Simon ripped his cloak from the dagger, then walked away as slowly as he dared.

Entertaining fantasies of storming the Wizard Tower, rescuing it from the Siege and being asked by a grateful Marcia Overstrand to be her Apprentice, Simon walked around the outside perimeter of the Courtyard walls, but the Courtyard gates were Barred. All Simon saw was the ghostly outline of the Wizard Tower in the moonlight and all he heard was the screech of an owl and the distant slam of a door as one of the crowd regained the safety of his home.

Simon trailed back to the Palace. This would not, he told himself, have happened if he had been Apprentice. Which was, of course, true.

Back at the Palace, Merrin was angrily packing his backpack. Why, he thought, why did it always go wrong? Why, just when he had found a place

of his own, did Simon stupid Heap have to come and spoil it all? As he left his room, several Ancient ghosts, including a very relieved ghost of a governess, watched him go. Merrin crept down through the sleeping Palace, slipped out and headed for the kitchen garden shed. At least, he thought, there would be no former employers there.

How wrong he was.

But Merrin was toughening up fast. Angrily, he grabbed the sack of DomDaniel's bones, dragged it out of the shed, and



after getting a few rhythmic swings going, he heaved it over the kitchen garden wall. The sack flew over in a perfect arc and thumped down in Billy Pot's ex-vegetable patch, now home to a certain Mr. Spit Fyre, as Billy Pot respectfully called the dragon.

Spit Fyre slept on, unaware that breakfast had landed.

BREAKFAST

The next morning Billy Pot

was up early mixing Spit Fyre's breakfast according to Septimus's strict instructions—but the dragon was not interested.

Spit Fyre lay outside his new Dragon Kennel and regarded Billy drowsily through a half-open eye. As Billy approached with the breakfast bucket, a subterranean rumbling shook the ground and the dragon burped. Billy reeled.

He scratched his head, puzzled. If Billy didn't know better, he'd say that the dragon had already eaten. "I'll leave yer bucket o' breakfast here, Mr. Spit Fyre," he said. "You might like it later." Spit Fyre groaned and closed his half-open eye. Deep in his fire stomach he could feel the old Necromancer's bones lying heavy and Darke. He wished he'd never swallowed that nasty old sack. He didn't ever want to eat again.

As the dragon's fire stomach slowly geared up for the Darke

task of dissolving the bones, the ghost of DomDaniel was reveling in being at the Wizard Tower once more. It had done him good to see old Nastier Underhand get her comeuppance at long last—it amused him to see her hanging around like any other common Wizard, waiting to be told what to do. And now he had cornered his old Apprentice, Alther Mella, who had pushed him off the golden pyramid at the top of the Wizard Tower. That memory was still there, clear as the day it had happened. DomDaniel was enjoying telling Alther in great detail all the Darke plans he intended to put into action now that, at last, he had become a ghost—when he began to feel a little strange. At that moment Alther noticed that DomDaniel's left leg had disappeared.

Alther watched, fascinated, as next DomDaniel's entire right arm faded from view, then his left knee...left forearm...toes...both ankles... Astonished, Alther stared as, piece by piece, his old master disappeared.

DomDaniel did not like the way Alther was watching him—it was, he considered, extremely rude and did not show him the respect he was due. He opened his mouth to tell Alther to stop gaping and his head vanished, leaving a disembodied left hand gesticulating wildly and a large part of his stomach wobbling with indignation.

And then, as DomDaniel’s last few bones dissolved in Spit Fyre’s fire stomach, the old Necromancer disappeared completely—and forever. For there was no Two-Faced Ring with him in Spit Fyre’s stomach to get him out of trouble this

time. It was a moment that Alther would savor for a very long time—along with the memory of the next few minutes when he found Marcia and told her that the Gathering was no more.

Marcia, too, savored the memory of the end of the very last Gathering. She particularly enjoyed remembering Tertius Fume’s reaction when she had triumphantly evicted him from her sofa—he had a nerve, she thought—and told him that not only was the Gathering at an end, but there could be no Gathering ever again and he could get out of her rooms right now. Tertius Fume had refused to believe her until Alther had backed her up. It was true what Marcia had said to Beetle—Tertius Fume had no respect for women.

Tertius Fume had instituted the Siege

to force Septimus to make the Draw. When he had realized that Septimus was missing, he had sworn to continue the Siege—forever if necessary—until Marcia told him the whereabouts of her Apprentice, whom Tertius Fume was convinced was Hidden somewhere in the Wizard Tower. But now, without the power of the Gathering behind him, Tertius Fume had no means of continuing the Siege. The Siege was ended.

Marcia wasted no time. She got Catchpole to escort Tertius Fume ignominiously off the premises and, as the Magyk returned to the Wizard Tower, she stood at the door smiling through gritted teeth.

“Good-bye, good-bye. Thank you so much for coming,” she said as the bewildered Gathering floated out.

Outside the Wizard Tower a wet, cold rat watched the huge doors open—at last. To his amazement a seemingly endless stream of purple ghosts spilled down the steps. He waited impatiently until the last ghost had wandered out, then he bounded inside, calling out, “Message Rat!”

While Stanley scuttled between the feet of an excited group of Ordinary Wizards surrounding the recipient of his message, Tertius Fume was in a huddled conversation in the shadows of the Great Arch with what appeared to be a young sub-Wizard.

“Find him,” said Tertius Fume. “The Queste is begun and must be done.”
The Thing

nodded. It watched Tertius Fume stride angrily back to the Manuscriptorium and began to chew the ends of Hildegarde’s fingers. It was bored with InHabiting

the sub-Wizard. Her ordinariness—and her niceness—was irritating; it had seeped into the Thing and made it feel rather depressed. The Thing fancied InHabiting something a little more unusual, something maybe with a twist of Darke to it.

It leaned back against the cold lapis lazuli walls of the Great Arch and, passing the time by seeing how far it could spit bits of Hildegarde’s nails, it waited for something to turn up.

Some hours earlier that morning, Ephaniah Grebe had woken in a damp tepee feeling very strange. After Jenna, Septimus and Beetle had retreated to their tepee, Ephaniah had accepted a sweet, heavy drink from Morwenna. He knew as soon as he drank it that it was drugged and he had surreptitiously poured most of it away, but as the Witch Mother escorted him to his tepee, Ephaniah felt the ground sway beneath him and a bitter taste in his mouth. He had vainly fought against sleep—but his vivid dreams had woken him a few hours later. Determined not to fall asleep again, he had crept out of his tepee to breathe the fresh night air. There, in the middle of the Summer Circle, he saw Morwenna in a heated conversation with a young witch.

“Where is Marissa, pray?”

The young witch looked terrified.

“Tell me, Bryony. Now.”

“Um. She went to Camp Heap.”

“I did not give her permission. She will regret it. You will take her place.”

“Me? Oh, but I don’t think—”

“You don’t have to think, girl. Just do as you are told. I want a tepee made ready for the Princess and her familiar. We will need it in the morning.”

“Oh. Then she really is going to be—”

“Stop babbling. And be sure to make the tepee Secure.”

Bryony bobbed an awkward curtsy and rushed off. How did you make a tepee Secure? she wondered. How?

Ephaniah felt sick—now he knew

what Morwenna would ask for the next morning. He guessed that the nightcap—as Morwenna had called it—had been designed to keep him quiet and amenable come the morning. Ephaniah cursed himself for being such a gullible fool and for promising what he could not give. Stealthily, he crept over to the other guest tepee, his head spinning. What was he going to tell them?

When Ephaniah found Jenna, Septimus and Beetle’s tepee empty he felt a surge of relief—but it did not last long. All kinds of worries came into his head. Where had they gone? Why didn’t they tell him? Didn’t they trust him? Had he slept through their cries for help? In a daze, Ephaniah limped down the spiral path from the Summer Circle, his white robes shining in the light of the full moon. Bryony saw him go, but she dared not say anything to upset the Witch Mother. She watched Ephaniah disappear into the Forest

where—left alone by the Forest night creatures, which preferred to avoid giant rats—he staggered back to the Castle.

By dawn Ephaniah Grebe found himself standing beside the Moat, watching Gringe lower the drawbridge. He paid his silver penny and hobbled across, oblivious to Gringe’s inquisitive stare.

“You see all sorts in this job,” Gringe mused later as he watched Mrs. Gringe warm up last night’s stew for breakfast.

“Saw a giant rat this morning. With specs on.”

Mrs. Gringe broke a habit of not listening to her husband. She stopped stirring and peered into the brown depths of the saucepan. “I thought those mushrooms looked funny,” she said.

“What mushrooms?” asked Gringe, confused.

“Last night. They were a funny color. Didn’t eat any meself.”

“But you let me eat them?”

Mrs. Gringe shrugged and poured the stew into Gringe’s bowl. “Better pick the mushrooms out,” she said.

“No, thank you,” said Gringe. He got up and stomped back to the drawbridge. By midday Gringe thought the mushrooms were probably wearing off. Apart from being convinced he had seen Lucy peering around the corner—which was most upsetting—there had been no other ill effects.

When Ephaniah had returned to the Manuscriptorium that morning, his feeling of gloom had not been improved by the sight of the new Front Office Clerk sitting with his feet up on the desk chewing a black snake with his mouth open. At the sight of the Conservation Scribe, Merrin had stared and insolently carried on chewing what was, in fact, his breakfast. It wasn’t often that Ephaniah missed the power of speech, but as he watched the tail of the snake get noisily sucked into Merrin’s mouth and looked at his boots messing up the desk that Beetle used to lovingly polish every morning,

Ephaniah had an overwhelming desire to tell the boy, Get your feet off the desk.

And then, suddenly, he was glad he couldn't speak. For, as Ephaniah stared balefully at the offending pair of boots, he saw a small, round piece of paper stuck to the sole of Merrin's right boot. An instinct nurtured by years of putting things back together told Ephaniah that this belonged

to something—and he was pretty sure he knew what. As he advanced upon the offending boots a flicker of fear ran across Merrin's face—what was the rat-man doing? And then, in a flash—like a rat after a rabbit—Ephaniah had the mangled scrap of paper in his hand and Merrin was on his feet, yelling, “Get off me, weirdo!” Leaving the Front Office Clerk coughing up the remains of his snake, Ephaniah had rushed down to his basement, slammed the green baize door and locked it. And now, as he examined his find, he felt exhilarated. This was it—this was the missing piece of the map.

Painstakingly Ephaniah spent the next hour Restoring

the fragile scrap of paper. It went well and before long he had in front of him a small, perfect circle with a finely detailed pencil drawing of an octagonal building encircled by a snake. In the middle was a key. Ephaniah carefully put the precious circle of paper into a secret pocket under his tunic. He pushed his spectacles up onto his forehead and sat back with a sigh. He had done it. The most painstaking—and maybe the most important—piece of Restoring he had ever attempted was finished.

Now came the difficult part—the ReUnite.

“No,” said Stanley, his mouth full of breakfast. “Positively not. A Message Rat does not make deliveries. Mmm, nothing hits the spot like a cold bacon sandwich after a night out in the rain, does it? Care for a bite?”

“No, thank you,” Ephaniah replied disdainfully.

“Suit yourself.”

“It would be to your advantage.”

Stanley laughed bitterly. “Oh, ha. They all say that. But it never is. You end up starving in some lunatic’s cage or shoved under the floorboards and left for dead. You won’t catch me like that.”

“I can get you rats.”

“Rats?”

“All the rats you want. I’ll get them.”

Stanley put down his cold bacon sandwich. “You mean staff?” he asked.

Ephaniah nodded.

Stanley considered the matter. He imagined the East Gate Lookout Tower once more being headquarters of a thriving Message Rat Service—with him in charge. He imagined the paperwork and the wages bills...and Dawnie hearing about his success and deciding to make another go of things.

“No,” he said.

As Ephaniah walked slowly back from the East Gate Lookout Tower he saw something he had not expected to see—the Magykal

lights of the Wizard Tower were back. He blinked in surprise—yes, they were still there. The familiar purple and blue flickering lights were once more playing around the Tower, the deep glow of the golden pyramid at the top of the Tower shone out into the dull gray day and the purple windows shimmered once more with their Magykal haze. All Ephaniah’s worries left him. Everything was fine—he would go to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and ask her to do a Send. All would be well. With a spring in his step—as much as he could manage with the painful bumps on the underside of his sore foot—Ephaniah wrapped his white cloths extra tightly around his face and took the next set of steps down to Wizard Way.

As he walked into the deep blue shadows of the Great Arch, Ephaniah bumped into Hildegarde Pigeon—and remembered nothing more.

FOREST WAYS



“You forgot your panther,” Sam whispered.

Jenna, Septimus and Beetle stood outside Wolf Boy’s bender in the gray-green light of the Forest dawn, blinking the sleep from their eyes. As far as Sam could see, they were minus the panther.

Too sleepy to get any words to work, Jenna took Ullr from under her cloak and showed Sam the little orange cat. Sam looked puzzled for a moment, then he raised his eyebrows and grinned. Trust Jenna to get her hands on one of those Transformers, he thought admiringly. The kid may not have any Magyk in her but she had something—that was for sure.

Queen-stuff, he supposed. Morwenna didn’t know what she would have been taking on. But whatever the Witch Mother did or didn’t know, it was time to get them out of the Forest before the Coven came Looking. It wasn’t a good feeling when the Coven was Looking.

Sam had packed three backpacks. They had belonged to Jo-Jo, Edd and Erik during their foraging days, but now that the young Wendron Witches kept them supplied with most of their food—except for fish—Jo-Jo, Edd and Erik had given up foraging and preferred to hang around the campfire all day, much to Sam’s irritation. Sam was an expert on traveling in the Forest and had made a good job of stocking all the things he thought the travelers could possibly need.

Jenna put Ullr down. From her pocket she took the precious book of Nicko’s papers, carefully placed it in her backpack and then heaved the heavy pack onto her shoulders. “Ullr,” she whispered, “you must follow me.” Ullr meowed. He understood Jenna’s language now as well as he had understood Snorri’s. He was a faithful cat and would follow Jenna anywhere.

Three laden figures and a small orange cat followed Sam out of the Camp Heap clearing. It was a damp, dull morning and moisture dripped from the trees, finding its way into their clothes and sending the Forest chill into their bones. Sam strode out along the broad track that led up the hill from Camp Heap. The long walking pole he grasped in his hand measured out his loping, easy stride and Jenna thought how much he looked like a man of the Forest.

They fell in and walked beside him but Sam’s pace was deceptively fast. They were all glad when, after about a mile, he stopped by a large, round rock. Sam kneeled down and tapped the rock, which gave a hollow, bell-like sound. Satisfied, he nodded, then jumped up and plunged into the close-knit group of tall trees with slim, smooth trunks.

Sam set off, weaving his way through the Forest, following a path that only he could see. Septimus, Beetle, Jenna and Ullr were in single file now, concentrating hard on following Sam and trying not to lose sight of his brownish-blue cloak that blended so well with the dappled bark of the trees. Luckily it was easy-going underfoot—a soft mulch of a thousand seasons’ leaf-fall mixed with tiny green fronds of bracken that were beginning to poke their heads up into the spring light like curious little snakes.

Suddenly Sam stopped. “We’re here—at the Gateway,” he said with a broad grin. “I thought I could find it again.”

“You only thought?” said Septimus.

“Yeah,” said Sam. “But it was a Forest thought. They’re always right. You just have to trust your big brother, little bro.

Okay, now we have to pass through. They’ll let me through, as I smell of the Forest. But you smell of the Castle. They don’t like Castle around here. You’d better put your cloaks on—they’re in the backpacks.” From their backpacks each pulled out a wolverine-skin cloak. Ullr hissed as Jenna threw the cloak across her shoulders.

“Eurgh!” gasped Jenna. “It’s so smelly. And it’s still got legs.”

“Smelly is the whole point, little sis,” said Sam. “You need to smell right. And the legs are good for tying the cloak on.

See?” Sam tied the legs of Jenna’s wolverine cloak together tightly under her chin, just like Sarah Heap used to tie her cloak when she was little.

“You’ve got two wolverines in that cloak,” Sam told her. “You always leave the front legs of the top wolverine and the tail of the bottom wolverine. Forest tradition.” Jenna looked down and saw that, sure enough, her cloak had a mangy-looking wolverine tail dangling from its hem.

“As long as they don’t still have their teeth, I don’t mind,” Septimus muttered. He threw the cloak over his shoulders and was surprised by how warm it was—and how protected it made him feel. Suddenly he was part of the Forest, just another creature going about its Forest business.

Sam surveyed the three new Forest inhabitants with approval. “Good,” he said. “They should accept you as Forest now.”

“Who should accept us?” asked Jenna, glancing around.

“Them.” Sam pointed at a pair of huge trees that reared up in front of them like sentries. The trees were the first in a long avenue of identical pairs of

close-set trees. From each tree a thick branch looped down and barred their path. “Wait here,” said Sam. “Don’t say a word and stay very still. Okay?”

They nodded. Sam walked up to the trees and began to speak. “We are of the Forest as you are of the Forest,” he said, his voice deep and slow. “We seek to go the Forest Way.”

The trees did not react. Sam did not move. He stood, arms folded, feet apart, staring unblinking up into the depths of the trees. Jenna, Beetle and Septimus waited expectantly. Ullr lay down at Jenna’s feet and closed his eyes. The silence of the Forest enveloped them. Sam stood, immobile, waiting. The minutes passed slowly and still Sam stood waiting...and waiting. No one dared move. After about ten minutes, Beetle got a cramp in his leg and did a strange, slow pirouette to try and relieve it. Septimus watched him, his eyes laughing. Beetle caught the laugh and made an odd choking noise.

Jenna flashed them a warning look and they both did their best to look serious once more—until, with a sudden crash, Beetle fell over and lay on the ground shaking with suppressed laughter. And still Sam did not move.

At last, just as Jenna was beginning to wonder if Sam had made the whole thing up, the branches barring their way began to move slowly upward and like a spreading wave, all the other trees along the avenue followed suit. Sam beckoned them forward and silently they followed him along the newly opened path between the trees. As they went the trees lowered their branches behind them once more.

At the end of the avenue they emerged into a small clearing dominated by what appeared to be three large and unruly heaps of wood partly covered with turf, each with a ramshackle door in it.

“They’re old charcoal burner kilns,” said Septimus. “We used to really like those in the Young Army. They were always safe at night—and warm.”

Sam looked at Septimus with new respect. “Sometimes I forget you were in the Young Army,” he said. “You know the Forest too.”

“In a different way,” said Septimus. “It was always us against the Forest. You are with the Forest.” Sam nodded. The more he saw of Septimus the more he liked him. Septimus understood stuff—you didn’t have to explain; he just knew.

“But actually,” said Sam, “these aren’t really charcoal burner kilns. These are the Forest Ways. Each leads to a different forest—so they say.”

Jenna looked at the three heaps of wood with dismay—it hadn’t occurred to her that there would be a choice of forests.

“But how can we tell which one is the forest we want?” she asked.

“Well, I suppose we could open the doors and take a look,” said Sam.

“Really?” asked Jenna. “We don’t have to go in?”

“No, why should you? There are no rules in the Forest, you know.” Beetle wasn’t so sure about that. There seemed to him to be a lot of rules—rules about wearing smelly wolverine skins and rules about keeping quiet, to name but two, but he didn’t say anything. He felt like a new boy at school, trying to keep out of the way of creatures that were bigger than him and understand a strange place all at once. He watched the confident Sam pull open the door to the middle heap. A blast of hot air hit them.

“That one’s desert,” said Sam as a swirl of sand blew out over his feet.

“But I thought they were forests,” said Jenna.

“These are Ancient Ways, and forests change,” said Sam. “What was once a forest may become a desert. What was once a desert may become a sea. All things must change with time.”

“Don’t say that,” said Jenna sharply.

Sam looked at Jenna, surprised—and then realized what he had said.

“Sorry, Jen. Nik will be the same old Nik when you find him, you wait. Let’s see if this is the one you want.” Sam closed the door on the desert and

opened the door of the left heap. A humid heat drifted out and the raucous sound of parrots invaded the Forest peace. “That one?” asked Sam.

“No,” said Jenna.

“You sure?”

“Yep,” said Septimus.

“Okay, must be this one, then.” With a dramatic flourish Sam pulled open the door to the last heap. A flurry of snow blew into their faces. Jenna licked her lips; the metallic taste of a snowflake from another land brought her a little closer to Nicko.

“That’s it,” she said.

“You sure?” asked Sam.

“I know it is. Nicko made a list. Of warm stuff and furs.”

“Right. Okay...if you’re sure.” Suddenly Sam no longer seemed his usual confident self. It was one thing for Sam to guide the occasional lost stranger from a desert caravan or a capsized jungle canoe back to their own forest, but quite another to send his young brother and sister off into the unknown. “Let me come with you,” he said.

Septimus shook his head. This was something he wanted to do without his older brother telling him how to do it. “No, Sam. We’ll be fine.”

“You sure?”

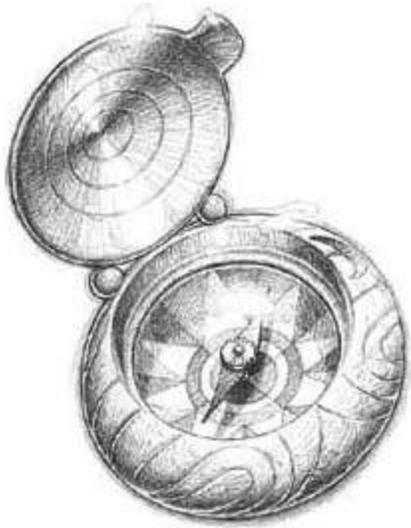
“Really, Sam, we will,” said Jenna. “And we’ll be back soon with Nicko.”

“And Snorri,” added Septimus.

Another flurry of snow blew out. Sam undid the red kerchief he wore around his neck. He tied it to the top of his walking pole and gave it to Septimus. “Put this in the ground to mark where you came in,” he said. “I hear it’s hard to tell once you’re in there.”

“Thanks,” said Septimus.

“’S’okay,” mumbled Sam.



“Oh, Sam,” said Jenna, hugging him tightly. “Thank you, thank you so much.”

“Yeah,” said Sam.

They stepped into the kiln and their feet sank deep into the snow.

Sam waved. “Bye. Bye, Jen, Sep, Cockroach. Take care.” And then he closed the door.

35

SNOW

Jenna, Ullr, Septimus and Beetle stepped out into the middle of a silent, snowy forest.

Septimus pushed Sam’s walking pole into the snow to show where they had come in—Sam was right, there was nothing to mark the spot at all. The red scarf hung down limply. No breath of air disturbed it; all was still. The three looked at one another but said nothing—no one felt like breaking the heavy

silence that covered them like a blanket. All they could see was snow and trees—so densely packed that their black trunks felt like great bars of a cage encircling them.

The snow fell steadily, dropping from the branches high above and landing lightly on their hair and faces. Jenna brushed the snowflakes from her eyelashes and looked up. The trunks of the trees were thin and smooth and did not branch out until the very top, when they spread wide and flat like a snowy parasol.

Jenna realized that they had all expected to find themselves on a path, but there was nothing—just a featureless, flat wilderness of trees radiating in all directions. No footsteps led to where they stood and there was no way of knowing which direction was forward and which was back. It was, she thought, as if they had been dropped into the middle of the forest by a huge bird.

“Let’s look at the map, Jen,” Septimus whispered.

Jenna took off the backpack, pulled out Nicko’s book and extracted the neatly folded map. Septimus held the map for the first time. It crackled with ReStore

fluid, yet it felt flexible and strong. Septimus liked maps; he was used to them from his time in the Young Army when he had been a good map-reader. But as he looked at Snorri’s finely detailed pencil lines, he realized that he had always taken one thing for granted—he had started off knowing where he was.

“Where are we?” asked Beetle, peering over his shoulder.

“Good question,” replied Septimus. “We could be anywhere. There are no landmarks...nothing.” He wiggled his finger through the hole in the middle of the map. “We could even be here.”

“No, we couldn’t,” Jenna said. “That is the House of Foryx.”

“That’s what we think it is,” said Septimus. “But we don’t know for sure what’s on the missing piece, do we?” Jenna did not reply. She refused to even think

that they were not heading for Nicko and the House of Foryx. She rummaged through the two deep silk-lined pockets in her red woolen tunic, hoping that, for once, she might have something useful with her. Jenna tried to remember if she had rescued it from the floor after she had thrown it across her room in a fit of temper when her real father, Milo, had told her he was off once more on his seafaring travels. Her hand closed around a cold metal disc and she grinned. “I’ve got a compass,” she said.

“You’ve got a compass?” said Septimus.

“Yes. No need to sound so surprised.”

“But you never carry anything with you, Jen.”

Jenna shrugged irritably. It was true—she never took anything with her. When her tutor had pointed out approvingly that this was something Princesses and Queens were known for, Jenna had felt embarrassed. She didn’t want to act all Princessy—and the idea of being Queen was still just plain weird. But after the tutor’s comment, Jenna had deliberately tried to keep some things in her pocket—even if they were not obviously useful—just to prove her tutor wrong. And now Milo’s compass, which had been no use whatsoever for paying for a packet of rainbow chewy turtles in Ma Custard’s, came into its own. Jenna held out the small brass compass and they watched the needle spin round...and round...and round, like a watch on fast-forward.

“It shouldn’t do that, should it?” said Jenna.

“No,” said Beetle and Septimus together.

“That is just so typical of Milo,” Jenna said grumpily. “All his stuff is useless—and weird.”

“I’d say it was this forest that’s weird,” said Beetle, glancing around uncomfortably.

“Can I have a look, Jen?” asked Septimus. Jenna handed it to him, wondering if it would start to behave once Septimus held it. It didn’t. Septimus kneeled down and laid the map on the icy crust of the snow, brushing away the soft, fat snowflakes that were drifting onto it. “I don’t know where we are, but I’ll put the compass...um...” Septimus waved his hand over the map as if hoping for some kind of sign. He didn’t get one. “Here,” he said, and placed the compass on the bottom left-hand corner.

“You going to do a Navigate?” asked Beetle.

Septimus nodded.

“But how’re you going to do it without the part we’re going to?” Beetle asked, pointing to the hole in the middle of the map.

“I thought maybe I could get it to take us to the edge of the hole,” said Septimus. “And then, who knows, we might be able to see the House of Foryx from there.”

“Yeah. Well, it’s worth a try—anything to stop that needle whizzing around like crazy. Gives me the creeps.” Septimus took a fine wire cross from his Apprentice belt, straightened out a piece that had become bent and placed it on top of the compass. Jenna and Beetle peered over his shoulder. The compass needle continued to spin.

“It’s not working,” said Jenna anxiously.

“Give us a sec,” muttered Septimus. “I’ve got to remember what the thingy is.”

“Thingy?” asked Jenna.

“Technical term, Jen.”

“Oh, ha-ha.”

Septimus placed his finger on top of the cross, closed his eyes and muttered, “X shall mark the spot.” Then he picked the fine wire cross off the compass and placed it on the edge of the hole in the middle of the map.

“About here?” he inquired. Jenna and Beetle nodded. Keeping his finger on the center of the wire cross, Septimus said,

“Lead us here through dale and dell.

Guide us true and guide us well.”

“It’s stopped!” Jenna gasped. The compass needle was now steady, its only movement being the slight tremble that a compass needle should have.

“You’re amazing,” she said to Septimus.

“No, I’m not,” he replied. “Anyone could do it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Jenna. “I couldn’t do it and neither could Beetle. Could you, Beetle?” Beetle shook his head, but Septimus made a face. “It’s nothing special,” he said.

They set off with Septimus holding the compass, following the direction that the needle was pointing. Jenna carried the map, looking out for landmarks as they went, hoping to spot something. There were plenty on the map to choose from—criss-crossing paths, a winding stream with various bridges, standing stones, a well and a myriad of small huts scattered randomly across the map, neatly drawn with little pointed roofs and chimneys. Snorri had labeled these

“refuge.” Refuge from what? Jenna wondered. But all anyone could actually see in front of them was the wide, flat forest floor covered by a featureless blanket of snow.

They kept up a brisk pace, following the steadily pointing needle and keeping their eyes open for some kind of landmark, stopping briefly for some dried fish and spring water that Septimus had found at the top of his backpack.

After that they kept doggedly on, three small figures in their wolverine cloaks and an orange cat threading their way through the trees, the snow crackling beneath their boots as, with each step, they broke through the delicate ice crust.

Every twenty steps Septimus glanced behind him. This was something he had had to practice for hours on end in the Young Army during long hikes through the Forest and now it came back to him like an old familiar habit—Observe and Preserve

they had called it. Most of his glances revealed nothing except the great mass of trees ranked behind him and Jenna and Beetle struggling through the snow with a small flash of orange fur as Ullr bounded between them. But every now and then Septimus thought he saw something—a movement just on the edge of his vision. But Septimus said nothing. He didn't want to scare the others and he hoped that maybe he was imagining things. The trees made odd shapes at the edge of your vision, he told himself—like one of those optical illusions that Foxy used to draw.

They were walking up a hill where the trees were so densely packed they had to go in single file, when Jenna noticed that the washed-out whiteness of the forest was growing dimmer. She glanced down at the map but found it hard to see Snorri's delicate pencil marks in the dull light. "Hey, Beetle, what's the time?" she asked.

Beetle peered at his timepiece. It was hard to see in the gloom. "It's half past two," he replied.

"So why is it getting dark?" asked Jenna.

Beetle looked around, puzzled. Jenna was right—it was getting dark. It was twilight.

"Maybe your timepiece is wrong," suggested Septimus over his shoulder, increasing his pace. He wanted to get to the top of the hill fast.

"My timepiece isn't what's making it dark, is it?" Beetle puffed grumpily, trying to keep up. "The sun going down is doing that."

“It might be a storm coming,” Septimus called back. “A snowstorm. Feels cold enough.” Jenna stopped, noticing that Ullr was no longer at her side. “It’s not a snowstorm,” she said flatly. “It’s the sun going down. In fact it has just gone

down. Look.” There, coming toward them through the trees, was the NightUllr, blending in with the black tree trunks, his big panther feet stark against the white snow.

“Oh,” said Beetle. “Bother.”

“Come on, Beetle,” said Jenna, grabbing his hand. “Let’s catch up with Sep.”



Beetle smiled. Suddenly nighttime in the forest didn’t seem quite so bad.

At the top of the hill Septimus stopped and waited for Beetle and Jenna to catch up. He could hardly bear to look down.

He murmured a witchy good luck mantra—the kind that Marcia deeply disapproved of—and forced himself to look. In front of him was a broad, gentle slope much more sparsely covered with trees. And in the distance, shining out of the darkness, was a light. He grinned—sometimes witchy stuff worked. As he watched, and as all around grew ever darker, the pinpoint of light seemed to get brighter. By the time Jenna and Beetle joined him on the brow of the hill, it was shining like a beacon.

They set off down the hill, leaping through the snow. The small pack of wolverines—pursued by a panther—rapidly covered the ground and as they neared the valley floor they heard the sound of running water.

“It’s the stream on the map,” Jenna whispered, afraid to speak out loud in the darkness. “Which means that light...it must be a refuge hut—mustn’t it?” Her voice sounded almost pleading.

“It had better be,” said Septimus. His witchy chant was still going around his head and he felt hopeful—more hopeful than he had felt all day. He linked arms with Jenna and Beetle and together they waded through the snow, which was deeper in the valley and came up almost to their knees. Ullr bounded through it, no longer skating over the icy crust, his black fur sprinkled with white, the snow turning the whiskers on his chin to an old man’s beard.

Jenna and Beetle caught Septimus’s good mood. The gurgling of the stream broke the oppressive silence of the forest, and the yellow glow of the lantern illuminated the frosty snow before them. The combination of snow and lanterns made all three feel happy. For Jenna and Septimus, it reminded them of the time they had spent the Big Freeze together at Aunt Zelda’s—a time they both looked back on with happiness. For Beetle, it recalled Snow Days when he didn’t have to go to school—days full of possibilities when he would wake up to find that snow had completely covered the windows and his mother had lit the lantern and was cooking bacon and eggs over the fire.

As they came closer they could see that the light did indeed come from a small wooden hut with a stovepipe chimney, just like the ones that Snorri had drawn. It shone from a lantern placed in the tiny window above the door, which cast long shadows from the few trees that still stood between them and the hut.

A few moments later they were pushing open the door to the hut. And as they stepped inside a strange, unearthly howl ululated in the distance.

Beetle slammed the door shut and Jenna shut the bolts—all three of them.

“Big bolts,” said Septimus. “I wonder why.”

“Don’t,” said Beetle. “Just don’t.”

THE HUT

The inside of the hut

was just as Aunt Ells had once described to Nicko and Snorri. It was bare and basic but after the chill of the snow and the bleakness of the forest it felt warm and welcoming. On either side of the hut were three sleeping platforms one above the other, with two neatly folded blankets placed on each platform. Between these was an old table and an iron stove with a good supply of logs piled up on either side. At the back of the hut was a door. Jenna opened it and peered in.

Inside was a tiny room containing a jug, a frozen bowl of water and a scary-looking pit half covered with planks with a bucket of earth beside it. It didn't smell so great. Jenna quickly closed the door.

Septimus and Beetle set to lighting the stove and soon the logs were ablaze. They left the door of the stove open and all three crowded round the fire, warming their hands while the snow dripped from their wolverine skins and puddles collected on the earthen floor. Once their hands were thawed, they undid the buckles of the backpacks to find them stuffed full of packages that were neatly wrapped in leaves and tied with thin strands of vine. Eagerly, they tipped them out onto the table.

Ullr growled in a hopeful fashion—he could smell fish. Even in panther form Ullr kept a cat's taste for fish.

“Sam must have been up all night making these,” said Jenna, surveying the pile of treasure heaped on the table. She felt as excited as if it were her birthday.

Septimus could tell that Jenna wanted to open all the packages at once. “We should only unwrap a few at a time,” he said. “I think the leaves preserve things and...well, we don't know how long we're going to be here, do we? It could be months.”

“You are an old misery-bucket sometimes, Sep,” said Jenna. “So which ones do we open?” They decided to open two packages each, which resulted in four fish, a bag of dried leaves that Septimus thought was witches’ brew and a flat, ash-covered loaf of bread that had obviously been cooked in the Heap campfire.

“We could open another one each,” said Jenna, surveying the large pile of unopened packages that still remained.

“All right. Just one more,” said Septimus grudgingly.

There was another fish and another loaf, but it was Beetle who drew the prize—a fat slab of toffee. The boat delivering Ma Custard’s stock had run aground on the riverbank where Sam was fishing, and the skipper had been extremely grateful for Sam’s help in pushing him free on a falling tide.

Beetle unwrapped the thick wax paper surrounding the sticky slab, and they all breathed in the warm, sweet smell of toffee.

“You know,” said Septimus, “I really like Sam.”

An hour later they were lying on the sleeping platforms, warm from the heat of the stove, full of toffee, fish and witches’

brew. The hut was filled with an orange, drowsy glow from the stove and outside the snow glistened in the light of the virtually full moon. But it still felt like the middle of the afternoon—much too early to go to sleep.

“What does your timepiece say now, Beetle?” Jenna asked.

“Four o’clock,” said Beetle, holding it up so that it caught the light of the fire.

“That’s four in the afternoon and it’s been dark for what—two hours?” said Jenna.

“Yerr,” Beetle replied, trying to scrape off the remains of a lump of toffee from his back teeth.

“So that means...”

“Everything’s weird,” said Septimus.

“No, Sep. It means we are either much farther north or much farther east—or both.”

“Which is

pretty weird,” said Beetle, “seeing as all we did was walk into a heap of charcoal. Not what you expect from a heap of charcoal, even though my old art teacher used to say, ‘Charcoal can take you into a whole new world, Beetle.’”

“I wonder which it is?” said Septimus. “North or east?”

“We can work that out tomorrow,” said Jenna. “We can see how long the days are. I reckon it’s east and we’ve just lost a few hours. I don’t think it would be getting this dark so early farther north. It’s getting toward the summer now and the days should be really long.”

Both boys were silent for a moment. Then Septimus said, “How do you know all that stuff, Jen?” Jenna took a while to reply. “Milo,” she said. “He told me all about his travels. He had a timepiece, too, and before I was born he said he always kept it on what he called ‘home time’ so that he would know what, um...my mother...was doing.

And he said that when he traveled east he found that according to the timepiece the sun was setting earlier and earlier—even though it didn’t feel like that to him. And it was Snorri who told me that in the Lands of the Long Nights in the summer the days are so long that the sun hardly sets.”

Septimus thought about this. “So if we are

farther east,” he said, “that’s a good thing. That’s where the House of Foryx is, isn’t it?”

“I’ll see what Nicko says.” Jenna picked up Ephaniah’s beautifully bound book of Nicko’s notes, which she had put safely on her bunk. She leafed

through the notes, some of which were tiny scraps that Ephaniah had fused onto bigger pieces of paper, others were bigger and carefully folded, their edges reinforced. All of them felt smooth, almost resinous to the touch. Nicko's writing had a tendency to wander around like a lost ant, but Ephaniah had made it appear crisper and clearer and for once Jenna was able to make sense of most of it. "House of Foryx...House of Foryx," Jenna muttered, leafing through the pages. "Here's something. There's a note stuck to it from Snorri to Nicko—'Nicko, this is for you. For the parts you missed when Aunt Ells spoke in our language. Snorri x.' I think it's what Aunt Ells told them."

"Go on, then, Jen. Read it to us," said Septimus. Like a couple of children waiting to be read their bedtime story, Beetle and Septimus looked expectantly at Jenna.

She laughed. "Okay. But I'm not doing an Aunt Ells voice."

A chorus of disappointed protests filled the hut.

"Well, I'm not, so there. Here goes: 'I was nine years old. I was playing with my sister in my grandmother's house and we had a fight. I pushed her, she pushed me and I fell through the Glass. I know that now, but then I did not know what had happened. All I knew was that suddenly I was no longer in my grandmother's little house beside the sea, but in an octagonal room full of dark, heavy furniture. I was terrified.

"When at last I dared to venture out of the room I found myself at the top of a long winding staircase. I went down and came to the strangest place you could ever imagine. A great hall full of candle smoke, filled with many people with different ways of speech and strange dress. I felt as though I had walked into a never-ending fancy dress party. People wandered through the corridors talking aimlessly, or sat around the great log fires that burned constantly without ever seeming to consume the logs. No one took any particular notice of me as I roamed the house. I ate my fill in the great kitchens, I found a soft bed in a beautiful room where a fire always burned and the little tub of sweet biscuits was always full—but I was alone and I longed to go home.

“There was a great door that opened into the house, but a visitor was a rare event. Some came to stay and Bide their Time but most came searching for lost loved ones, although I do not recall them finding any. I was surprised that so few already there wanted to leave the House of Foryx. I do recall one young woman wearing a beautiful white fur cloak. She wanted to go, but she took pity on me and gave up her place on the dragon chair in the checkerboard lobby by the door.

She said that I was but a child and should leave as soon as I could, that no matter what Time I went into I was young enough to adapt. And she was right—I will be forever grateful to her. So I took her place on the chair sitting between the carved dragonheads, my feet resting upon the tail. I waited for many long weeks while she brought me food and kept me company. She told me stories of ice palaces and snow-swept plains, sleighs and roads of ice until even in the heat of the candles that burned day and night my knees knocked with the cold and I shivered inside my woolen cloak.

“At last my chance came one morning when there was a loud knock on the door. To my surprise a little man jumped out of the pillar beside where I was sitting and ran to the door. Waiting outside were a man and a woman. The DoorKeeper would not let them come in and as the door began to close I took my chance and ran out, much to their surprise.

“I was, I realize now, amazingly lucky. I do not know why my new mother and father went to the House of Foryx; they would never say. The next thing I remember was traveling across a great pit on a narrow bridge that swayed in the wind.

My new papa led the horse while I rode, sitting in front of my new mama. Later Mama told me she had closed her eyes in terror as we crossed, but I was wide-eyed with excitement. There was a full moon rising through the mists below us and we were so high that I felt as if we were flying among the stars. They brought me here to the Castle and were kindness itself. I grew to love them as much as I had loved my mother and father, but always at the back of my mind was the question, What happened to me?

“I did not realize that I was in another Time for many years, until a traveling storyteller told a tale about the House of Foryx and I knew she was telling no story but the truth. I found her and told her my own tale. She told me that the House of Foryx is a place where All Times Do Meet. You can only leave when someone arrives and then you must enter their own Time. So when I ran from the House of Foryx I ran into my new parents’ Time.

“I believe the only chance you have of returning to your own Time is to find the House of Foryx and pray that someone from your own Time comes to it. When I was a child I longed to return to my own Time, but when I finally understood what had happened I had already met my dear husband, my adoptive parents were old and frail and I did not wish to return. This is a good Time to live in—you could do much worse. But you are both young and I can see you are brave enough to try. May Odin and Skadi be your guides.’ And then Nik has written...I think this is what he says...‘House of Foryx—here we come.’”

“Sounds like Nik,” said Septimus.

“I wonder if they are still there?” said Jenna.

“Only one way to find out,” said Septimus.

No one found it easy to get to sleep that night.

The stove kept them warm and Septimus did a SafeShield

Spell for the hut, but it was hard to ignore the noises outside—and there was a fine assortment to choose from. It was strange, Septimus thought, that a forest so silent by day should be so noisy at night. As the moon rose higher, the wind rose too; it funneled down the valley and did not take kindly to finding the refuge hut in the way. It moaned and howled; it rattled the shutters and shook the door; it ganged up with the trees so that their branches banged and scraped on the little hut’s roof and its flimsy walls. There were other noises in the distance, sharp whooping cries and ululating howls that made Ullr’s fur stand on end. Beetle put his fingers in his ears and wished that he was back in his cozy bed in The Ramblings.

Beetle and Septimus fell asleep first. Jenna sat up on her bunk wrapped in her wolverine skin, listening to the wind howl. She watched the snow pile up against the windows, the fire in the stove die down and the hut gradually become cold and dark. Suddenly she heard scritch...scratch...scritch... something was scratching at the door. Ullr, who was lying across the door, got to his feet and growled. Her heart racing, Jenna climbed down to Septimus, who was asleep on the bunk below, and shook him awake. "Sep...listen!"

Septimus sprang awake, thinking for one awful moment that he was back in the Young Army. "Wheerrr—wassat?"

"Something's trying to get in," whispered Jenna.

"Oh. Oh, crumbs." Ullr growled again. A gust of wind shook the hut and outside Septimus heard scritch...scratch...scritch... like long fingernails being dragged down the thin wooden door.

Wide awake now, Septimus sprang out of his bunk. He put both hands on the door, and muttered his SafeShield Spell once again. The scritch... scratch...scritch continued. Why wasn't it working? Flustered, Septimus tried an Anti-Darke incantation. At that, the scratching stopped.

Jenna and Septimus listened, hardly daring to breathe. Outside, the trees tapped their branches like long, impatient fingers drumming on the roof of the hut, but there was no more scratching at the door. Beetle stirred and mumbled in his sleep something that sounded like "Wotcha, Foxy," then with much creaking of his bunk he turned over and was quiet again. Ullr lay down once more and positioned himself across the doorway.

"It's gone," whispered Septimus.

"Thanks, Sep," whispered Jenna. She burrowed down beneath the rough hut blankets and her wolverine skin and soon fell asleep.

But Septimus lay awake. It wasn't the howl of the wind that kept him from sleeping, or the tapping of the branches on



the roof of the hut, or even wondering what Darke

creature had been outside. What kept Septimus from sleeping was the lapis lazuli stone with a golden Q inscribed into it.

Every time he tried to get comfortable, the wretched thing somehow managed to stick into him. Irritably, he delved deep into his tunic pocket and pulled out the Stone. It lay warm and heavy on his palm. It was odd, he thought, how the light from the lantern made the Stone

look so green—it didn't do that to anything else. And then a horrible feeling of dread shot through him like a dagger. It wasn't a trick of the light—it was the Stone itself. The Questing Stone had turned green.

Like a Transfixed rabbit Septimus stared at the Stone,

Alther's hurried whispered words at the Gathering spinning around his head like a dreadful nursery rhyme: Blue to get ready,

Green to go.

Yellow to guide you

Through the snow.

Orange to warn you

That over you'll go.

Then Red will be the final glow.

Now seek the Black; there's no going back.

Green to go—that's what it was. Green to go on the Queste. Septimus lay down and gazed, unfocused, at the rough planks only a few inches from his face, panicky thoughts whirling around his head.

The first thought was bad enough: he was on the Queste—he was on the Queste .

The second thought was even worse: If he was on the Queste, how were they going to find Nicko?

But the third was the worst of all: How was he going to tell Jenna?

37

AN INVITATION

Marcia was enjoying being back in charge of the Wizard Tower.

As soon as the last of the Gathering

had meandered off, somewhat confused at the sudden ending of their outing, Marcia had inspected the Wizard Tower from top to bottom, checking for any stragglers. She had had enough of ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghosts to last her quite a while and she had no wish to bump into one snoozing in a dark forgotten corner in a few days' time. She found one asleep in an Ordinary Wizard's larder and another wandering around the fifteenth floor corridor looking for her teeth. It was, Marcia reflected, as she checked the very last cupboard in the Hall, and flushed out a sleeping Catchpole, not unlike fumigating mice.

Having reestablished her authority in the Tower to her satisfaction—and having checked on the more elderly Ordinary Wizards—Marcia had decided to turn her attention to Finding Septimus. She assumed he had either gone into the Forest to be with his brothers or had made his way to Aunt Zelda's on the Marram Marshes. Either way, she knew a Find Spell would do the trick and take her to him.

Marcia did not know that—at the very moment she had closed the purple door to her rooms and breathed a sigh of relief—Jenna, Septimus and Beetle were walking through an ancient Forest Way into a silent, frozen forest. With a huge sense of relief, she had climbed the narrow stone stairs up to the library, which was housed in the great golden pyramid on the top of the Tower, and sat down at her desk. Marcia breathed in the smell of old leather, decayed spells and paper dust (paper beetles were rampant in the library) and relaxed. All was well with the world once more.

Ten minutes later Marcia was not entirely sure that all was well with the world after all. Her Find would not work.

Aware that no Magyk is 100 percent reliable—although Marcia expected 99.9 percent recurring—she did the Find once more. Still it did not work.

Half an hour and three more attempts at the Find later, Marcia was worried. Septimus had apparently disappeared.

“Fume!” said Marcia, leaping to her feet and thumping her desk with her fist. “Blasted Fume. He’s behind this. I just know it.” Two minutes later, having put the spiral stairs on Emergency FastForward, Marcia staggered into the Hall of the Wizard Tower feeling very giddy and more than a little nauseous.

Outside, the cool air revived her and she strode across the Courtyard, the heels of her purple pythons clattering on the cobbles.

Underneath the Great Arch someone had, much to Marcia’s disgust, left a pile of dirty washing. There was no excuse, she thought, for Wizards to go dumping their dirty old robes at the entrance of the Wizard Tower courtyard. What would people think? With an expression of distaste, Marcia picked up a corner of the robes, looking for the name tag. All Wizards had to sew name tags in their robes so that the Tower laundry could return them to the correct Wizard. It didn’t always help. Once, a certain Ordinary Wizard by the name of Marcus Overland had received Marcia’s robes from the Laundry and had promenaded around the Castle in them for three whole days, acting outrageously, before Marcia had cornered him. Marcus had left shortly afterward.

But as Marcia lifted the grubby blue cloth she suddenly realized that there was a body inside the robes. “Hildegarde!” she gasped. Quickly, Marcia pulled back the hood, which was covering the sub-Wizard’s face. Hildegarde was ashen but still breathing. Marcia Breathed a small Revive over her and some color returned to Hildegarde’s cheeks. She groaned.

“Hildegarde...what happened?” asked Marcia.

Hildegarde struggled to sit up. “Eurgh...I...Sep...timus...”

“Septimus?”

“Gone. Queste.”

“You’re delirious, Hildegarde,” said Marcia sternly. “He most certainly has not gone on the Queste. Now, you wait there and I will go and get someone to—”

“No!” Hildegarde struggled to sit up. Her eyes fixed firmly on Marcia and she said, very deliberately, “I was InHabited by a Thing. I...it gave Septimus the Questing Stone. He accepted it. Said...thank you.” Hildegarde smiled wanly.

“So...polite...Septimus.” And then, exhausted by the effort, she slumped down and fell into a deep, snoring sleep.

Marcia helped carry Hildegarde to the Wizard Tower sick bay—a large airy room on the first floor—then put the stairs on slow and rotated sedately down to the Hall, thinking about what Hildegarde had said. If it had not been for the failed Find, Marcia would have assumed it to be the delirious ramblings of a sudden fever, but now she was not so sure. What if it were true—what if Septimus was on the Queste? That did not bear thinking about. Deep in thought, Marcia wandered through the Courtyard and found her footsteps taking her along Wizard Way.

Distractedly, she answered concerned inquiries about the Wizard Tower from the braver passersby, while all the time her feet took her steadily toward the far end of the Way. Marcia’s feet may have known where they

were going—but Marcia herself did not realize it until she had turned the corner into Snake Slipway.

Outside the tall, narrow house on Snake Slipway, Marcia took a deep breath and politely rang the bell. She waited, nervously, rehearsing her speech.

Some minutes later, after two more rings, Marcia heard hesitant footsteps shuffling toward the door. Then the bolts were drawn, a key was turned and the door opened a few inches.

“Yes?” said a hesitant voice.

“Is that Mr. Pye?” Marcia asked.

“I am he.”

“It’s Marcia here. Marcia Overstrand.”

“Oh?”

“May I come in?”

“You want to come in?”

“Yes. Please. It’s—well, it’s about Septimus.”

“He’s not here.”

“I know. Mr. Pye, I really need to talk to you.”

The door opened a little wider and Marcellus peered out anxiously. His housekeeper was off for the day and she had told him it was about time he learned to answer the door. He had ignored Marcia’s first two rings, telling himself that if the bell rang a third time he would answer it. Wondering what he had gotten himself into Marcellus opened the door wide and said, “Please come in, Madam Marcia.”

“Thank you, Mr. Pye. Just Marcia will do,” Marcia said as she stepped into the dark, narrow hall.

“And Marcellus will be perfectly adequate,” Marcellus replied with a small bow. “What can I do for you?” Marcia glanced around, suddenly afraid of being overheard. She knew that the house was connected to the Manuscriptorium via the Ice Tunnels and that the hatch was possibly UnSealed. Anyone could be listening—and that anyone included Tertius Fume. She needed somewhere secure.

“Perhaps you would like to come to tea,” she said. “At the Wizard Tower. In half an hour?”

“Tea?” asked Marcellus, blinking with surprise.

“In my rooms. I will instruct the doors to expect you. I look forward to it, Mr. Pye—um, Marcellus. Half an hour.”

“Oh. Yes. I too shall...look forward to it. In half an hour, then. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Marcellus.”

Marcellus Pye bowed and Marcia was gone. He exhaled loudly, closed the door and leaned against it for support. What was going on? And where had he put his best shoes?

“So you see,” said Marcia, pouring Marcellus his fifth cup of tea and watching, amazed, as the Alchemist added three large spoons of sugar to it, “I am so afraid that what Hildegarde said may be true. And if it is...” Her voice trailed off.

She sighed. “If it is true, then I must know all I can about the Queste. And you, Marcellus, are the only person alive who has had any experience of the Queste. Oh, there are plenty of ghosts, of course, but quite frankly I have had enough of ghosts at the moment.”

Marcellus smiled. “And their concerns are not always those of the Living,” he said, remembering what poor company the ghosts of his old friends had been as he had grown progressively more ancient.

“True. How very true,” replied Marcia, remembering the horrors of the Gathering. She looked Marcellus in the eye as if checking whether she could trust him. Marcellus steadily returned her gaze. “I believe there were three Questes during your lifetime,” she said—and then remembered that Marcellus’s lifetime had lasted five hundred years or more. “Or, um, even more...”

“Many more,” said Marcellus Pye. “But during my natural lifetime—as it were—you are correct. Indeed, my dear friend Julius Pike lost both his Apprentices to the Queste.”

“Both!” gasped Marcia.

Marcellus nodded. “The first was a terrible shock. Syrah Syara was her name—I remember her well. I was at the Draw.

In those days, you know, the Castle alchemist worked closely with the Wizard Tower. We were invited to all the important occasions.”

With some difficulty, Marcia restrained a disapproving tut.

Marcellus continued. “I still remember the awful gasp from the Wizards as she Drew the Stone. Julius refused to let her go—Syrah was an orphan and he regarded her as his daughter. Poor Julius had a big fight with Tertius Fume. Then Syrah punched Fume in the nose—forgetting that he was a ghost—and got a huge cheer. Fume got angry and put the Tower under Siege for twenty-four hours and by then Syrah was gone. Had to be dragged on to the Questing Boat by all seven guards apparently—and landed a few punches on them too, we were told.” Marcellus Pye shook his head. “It was a terrible thing.

“Julius didn’t take another Apprentice for some years. He was an old man when it was time for the Draw once more, and no one could believe it when this Apprentice also drew the Stone. It finished Julius off. He died a few months later. And of course the Apprentice—a nice young man, very quiet—never came back. I always thought Fume did it to spite Julius.

To show him who was really in charge.”

“You mean Tertius Fume controls who gets the Stone?” asked Marcia.

Marcellus drained the last of his tea. “I believe so. Somehow he has taken control of the Queste. After Syrah had gone, Julius tried to find out as much as he could about the Queste, but all the ancient texts and protocols had disappeared. It was rumored that Fume had destroyed them because they tell a very different story. I have even heard that the Queste was set up to be an honor—a reward for talented Apprentices.” Marcellus sighed. “But, alas, that has never been the case—quite the opposite in fact. All those who went have never returned.” Marcia was silent. This was not what she had wanted to hear. “But Septimus did not actually Draw the Stone,” she said.

“So surely he is not on the Queste?”

Marcellus shook his head. “The Draw is no more than a formality,” he said. “It is, if you ask me, a way of ritualizing the unacceptable. The key moment is when the Apprentice accepts the Stone. By Drawing it, the Apprentice accepts it. And by taking it from an InHabited

Wizard and saying “thank you,” I fear that Septimus, too, has accepted it. And now he is on the Queste, which is why you cannot Find him. As the saying goes, ‘Once you Accept the Stone, Your Will is not your Own.’” Agitated, Marcia arose and began pacing the room. Marcellus leaped to his feet, for in his Time it was very rude to stay seated when the ExtraOrdinary Wizard was standing.

“This is terrible,” said Marcia, tramping up and down her carpet. “Septimus is only twelve. How is he going to manage?”

And what is even worse, it seems that Jenna’s gone with him too.”

“That does not surprise me,” said Marcellus. “She was a very determined girl. She reminded me of my dear sister—although less inclined to scream.”

“Your sister? Oh. Yes, of course. I forget that you are the son of a Queen.”

“Not a good Queen, unfortunately. I think Princess Jenna will be a better one. When the Time Is Right.”

“Well,” said Marcia, “it won’t ever be Right if we don’t get them back, will it?” Without thinking, Marcellus placed his hand on Marcia’s arm. Marcia looked surprised. “Marcia,” he said, very seriously, “you have to understand. No one can get an Apprentice back from the Queste.”



“Rubbish,” said Marcia.

38

TRACKED DOWN

Merrin Meredith was biting the head off a licorice snake when Simon burst through the door.

“You stupid little worm,” hissed Simon.

Merrin leaped to his feet in terror.

“Give me Sleuth before I bite your head off. You thief.”

“Baaaaah...” Merrin was paralyzed.

“Give me Sleuth. Now.”

Desperately, Merrin fumbled through the pockets of his new Manuscriptorium tunic. He had so many pockets—which one had he put Sleuth in? Simon Heap stared at Merrin, a fierce, greenish glint shining from his narrowed eyes.

“Give...me...Sleuth,” he intoned.

With relief, Merrin’s trembling fingers closed around the tracker ball. He pulled it from his pocket, hurled it at Simon and shot off into the depths of the Manuscriptorium. Simon lunged to catch the ball but Merrin’s terrified throw was wide and fast. It hurtled past Simon and, as the Manuscriptorium door opened with a sharp ping, Sleuth was deftly caught by the twenty-sixth visitor to the Manuscriptorium that day—Marcia Overstrand.

“Well caught,” said Marcellus, the twenty-seventh visitor.

Simon Heap stood gasping. He opened his mouth and a bleating noise—surprisingly like the one Merrin had made a minute before—trickled out.

“Well, well,” said Marcia. “Mr. Heap. Now remind me, Mr. Heap, about when we last met. Was it up in my rooms perhaps, after a little trouble with a particularly nasty Placement?”

“I—I, yes. It was.” Simon Heap blushed. “That was kind of a mistake. I—I’m very sorry.”

“Well, that makes it all right, then.”

“Does it?” Simon said, brightening. Suddenly the possibility of being accepted back at the Castle lifted the burden he had carried ever since the night of Septimus’s Apprentice supper, when he had been stupid enough to canoe off into the Marram Marshes and look for DomDaniel’s bones.

But Marcia was scornful. “Of course

it doesn’t. How dare you show your face back here after all the trouble you have caused. How dare you!” Simon stood staring at Marcia, who had

Sleuth clasped firmly in her hand. Things were not going quite according to plan.

“You have five minutes to leave the Castle before I alert the lock-up. Five minutes.” Marcia’s eyes flashed angrily.

Simon seemed unable to move. “Um,” he said.

“Yes?”

“Um. Can I have my ball back, please?”

“No. Now go!”

Simon hesitated and then, thinking of how upset Lucy would be if he ended up in the lock-up—not to mention his mother—he fled.

With Marcellus in tow, Marcia strode into the Manuscriptorium. All the scribes studiously carried on working, but Partridge looked up, glad of a break from his calculations, which he was laboriously quadruple-checking. “Can I help you, Madam Marcia?” he asked, jumping down from his desk.

“Thank you, Mr. Partridge,” said Marcia. “You can escort me to the Vaults.” The other scribes glanced at one another with raised eyebrows. Two visits to the Vaults within the week by the ExtraOrdinary Wizard—what was going on?

A loud rustle of silk drew the scribes’ attention back to their work. Jillie Djinn bustled out of the passageway that led to the Hermetic Chamber. “Yes?” she said peremptorily.

Marcia looked at Jillie Djinn crossly. The woman’s social graces—never good—were rapidly disappearing, she thought.

“We wish to be escorted to the Vaults,” Marcia repeated.

“It is not convenient at present,” replied Miss Djinn, eyeing Marcellus Pye suspiciously. “All my scribes are occupied.”

“I’ll go!” said Partridge.

Jillie Djinn glared at him. “You will not. You will finish your calculations.” Partridge sighed heavily and picked up his pen.

“If you would care to ask my new Front Office Clerk for an appointment, I will probably be able to fit you in sometime next week,” said Jillie Djinn.

“New Front Office Clerk?” asked Marcia. “Where’s Beetle?”

“He is no longer in our employment.”

“What? Why?”

“His conduct was not satisfactory,” replied Miss Djinn. “Allow me to show you out.” Speechless and spluttering with rage, Marcia and Marcellus were ushered out. If the Chief Hermetic Scribe chose to refuse access to the Vaults, there was nothing Marcia could do. Within her own small territory, Jillie Djinn wielded as much power as the ExtraOrdinary Wizard did in the Wizard Tower. And Jillie Djinn knew it.

Jillie Djinn closed the door firmly behind them and turned to her new protégé. “If she thinks I am allowing someone wearing the robes of an Alchemist down to the Vaults, she has another think coming,” she told him.

Merrin nodded sagely, as though he understood exactly what Jillie Djinn meant and would have done the same himself.

Then he put his feet up on the desk, tilted his head back and tried to fit a whole licorice snake in his mouth at once.

Marcellus had had as much excitement—and as much Marcia Overstrand—as he could stand for the day. After offering any help he possibly could with finding Septimus, he bade her a polite good-bye. Marcia let him go; she could see he was unused to company and quite exhausted by it. She watched as the Alchemist wandered off down Wizard Way, his footwear attracting amused glances from passersby. Marcellus may have done all he

could, but Marcia was not about to give up on Finding Septimus. She had another idea up her sleeve—literally.

Marcia didn't like doing Magyk

in public. She felt it was showy and she didn't like the way people would stop and stare. But sometimes it had to be done. And so those who had only just recovered from the sight of Marcellus Pye and his shoes were now treated to the astonishing spectacle of their ExtraOrdinary Wizard doing a Find right in the middle of Wizard Way. They stopped and gaped as Marcia—who was standing very still, chanting under her breath—became enveloped by a soft purple Magykal haze and very slowly began to disappear. One brave child ran up to poke Marcia to see if she was real, but by the time the little girl had reached her, all that was left of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard was a purple shimmering shadow. The child burst into tears, and her mother stomped off to the Wizard Tower to lodge a complaint.

Simon Heap was waiting for the ferry with Lucy when a shimmering purple haze appeared beside him. Lucy screamed.

When Simon realized who it was, he felt a little like screaming too. "I—I'm just going, really I am," he stammered. "I had to say good-bye to Mum and find Lucy and then we just missed the ferry and—"

"Please don't put him in the lock-up. Please," begged Lucy. "I'll do anything. I'll take him away and make sure he doesn't come back ever. Ooooh, please, please...Ooooooh!"

"Lucy, I am not going to put him in the lock-up," said Marcia quickly. She could see that Lucy was working up to a scream.

Lucy subsided.

"Well, not unless—no, Lucy, it's all right—not unless he deliberately withholds information. Which I am sure he won't.

Will you, Simon?"

Simon shook his head.

In the manner of a practiced conjurer, Marcia produced Sleuth from up her sleeve.

“Oh,” said Simon, gazing mournfully at his much-loved Tracker Ball. Something told him that Marcia was not going to give it back.

“I presume this is a Tracker Ball?” Marcia said.

“Yes. Yes, it is. Its name is Sleuth. I trained it myself.”

“Did you? Very good. Very good indeed.”

Simon smiled. He thought it had been pretty good too.

“I want to find Septimus. I need you to Instruct it.”

Simon’s face fell. It was always about Septimus, wasn’t it? Never about him.

Marcia ignored Simon’s sullen expression and carried on. “Simon, I know for a fact that this Tracker Ball has a Tag on Jenna. Jenna is with Septimus, and I want you to Instruct it to follow the Tag.”

“I can’t,” Simon said sulkily.

“Can’t or won’t?” asked Marcia icily.

“Si,” said Lucy, “don’t be awkward. Please. Just do it. What does it matter to you?”

“Luce, I can’t do it—or rather Sleuth can’t.” Simon turned to Marcia. “I’m sorry, Madam Marcia, but Sleuth hasn’t got a Tag on Jenna anymore, so it can’t do it.”

“I’m warning you, Simon, don’t lie to me,” snapped Marcia.

“Si—mon!” wailed Lucy.

“Shh, Luce. Marcia, I—I’m not lying. I promise. Yes, Sleuth did have a Tag on Jenna, but that’s all gone—every trace.

I’ve reprogrammed Sleuth because...well, a few months ago something horrible happened. Something Darke came after me. I don’t want anything more to do with Darke

stuff—it just uses you up and throws you away. It’s awful. And there was a lot of Darke in Sleuth, so I did a complete WipeOut. I’d left Sleuth ReCharging when that little tick took it. I’m sorry. I would have helped if I could have. I really would have.” Simon was almost pleading.

Marcia sighed. She could see that Simon was telling the truth. It was just her luck, she thought, that just when she needed the help of a practitioner of Darke Magyk, he had decided to reform.

Marcia let Simon and Lucy go. As she watched the ferry take them across to the far side of the river she could not help but wonder what was in store for them. And, more to the point, what was in store for Septimus.

The next morning, many thousands of miles away in a small hut, Jenna woke to find Ullr in his daytime guise, sitting on top of the stove. A dull gray light filled the hut and the air felt cold. She pulled the rough blanket around her and whispered, “Ullr, komme, Ullr.” The cat’s tail twitched. He looked at Jenna, considering whether to leave his warm place and decided not to bother. Jenna—who did not like being disobeyed, even by a cat—scrambled down from her bunk, grabbed hold of Ullr and took him back to bed with her.

“Blerrgh,” mumbled Septimus from the bunk below. “I’m gettin’ up, Marcia. Really yam.”

“It’s all right, Sep.” Jenna laughed. “I’m not Marcia.”

Septimus opened his eyes and found himself staring at the rough wood of Jenna’s sleeping platform just a few inches away. He remembered where he was and sat up too quickly. He banged his head on the platform above. “Ouch.”

“The fire’s gone out,” said Jenna. “Can you light it, Sep? It’s freezing in here.” Septimus groaned and struggled out of his warm cocoon. “You may not actually be Marcia, Jen, but you’re doing a very good impression.” He put some more logs into the stove and, too sleepy to use his tinderbox, he cheated and did a FireLighter Spell. Flames leaped up from the logs and a few minutes later the hut began to feel warm once more.

They ate the last of the dried fish for breakfast and Jenna handed out tin mugs of boiled witches’ brew. To each one she had added a square of toffee that floated stickily on the surface of the cloudy green liquid. Septimus looked quizzically at the contents of his mug. “That’s weird, Jen. Even Aunt Zelda could learn a thing or two from you.”

“Well, I’ll have it if you don’t want it,” Jenna replied.

“No, no. I love

Aunt Zelda’s stuff,” said Septimus, draining the witches’ brew in one gulp and chewing the toffee gratefully, as it took the bitterness away.

While Ullr finished off the bones and fish heads, they packed their backpacks and looked at the map.

“I figure we’re here,” said Septimus, pointing to a drawing of a hut beside a wiggly line that Snorri had helpfully labeled STREAM.

“We’re getting near the edge, then,” said Beetle, running his finger along the margins of the hole in the middle of the map.

Septimus nodded. “I hope when we get out into the light we’ll be able to see something. Maybe even the House of Foryx—whatever that looks like.”

It was hard to leave the warmth and safety of the hut behind and open the door into an unfamiliar world. In fact it was a lot harder than they had expected, as the door would not budge. Septimus and Beetle leaned all their weight against it but it would not shift. “It’s the snow,” said Beetle. “Look how much it’s piled up against the windows. We’re snowed in.” He gave

the door another hefty shove. “Oof! It’s no good. It won’t open. We’re stuck.”

“Let me try,” said Jenna.

“Okay, come help us, Jen, but I don’t think it will make any difference,” said Septimus.

“I’ll try it on my own thanks, Sep.”

“On your own?” said Septimus and Beetle.

“Yes, on my own. Okay?”

“Okay.” Septimus and Beetle shrugged and, clearly humoring Jenna, they stepped aside.

Jenna took hold of the latch and pulled the door. It opened with a rush and a pile of snow tumbled in. She grinned. “It opens inward,” she said.

Beetle was right about one thing: it had snowed so much during the night that the hut was very nearly completely covered with snow. It lay where the wind had blown it, piled up against the sides of the hut, a great heap of the stuff barring their way out. Beetle fetched the shovel from the smelly little outhouse and began digging the snow away very energetically, as if to make up for the embarrassing door episode. After a few fast shovelfuls had been thrown to the side, Beetle suddenly stopped.

“Need a break?” asked Septimus.

“No! I mean, no thanks, I’m fine. Only just got started. But there’s something under the snow...something soft.” Carefully now, Beetle prodded at the snow with the shovel and began to gently scrape it away.

“Look!” Jenna gasped. “Oh no, look.”

Soaked and heavy with snow, a scarcely visible white woolen cloth lay exposed by Beetle’s digging. “Someone’s under here,” muttered Beetle. He

dropped to his hands and knees, and along with Jenna and Septimus, quickly scraped away the snow.

“Ephaniah!” Jenna exclaimed. “Oh no, it’s Ephaniah. Ephaniah, wake up!”

39

UNDER THE SNOW



It took the combined strength

of all three to haul the soaked and frozen figure into the hut. He lay on the floor taking up the entire space between the bunks, a great bulky mass of sodden white robes clinging to his strange rat-man shape. Ullr arched up, hissing, the fur on his tail sticking out like a bottlebrush and shot out of the hut. Jenna did not even notice.

“Oh, this is awful,” she said tearfully, dropping to her knees beside the rat-man. “That scratching last night was Ephaniah. We ignored him. And he couldn’t even shout to tell us he was there—freezing to death. Oh, Sep, we’ve probably killed him.”

Septimus thought Jenna might be right. Marcia had taught him to Listen for the Sound of Human Heartbeat and he could hear only Jenna's and Beetle's—both beating fast. But, thought Septimus, as he threw some logs into the stove and got the fire going once more, he didn't know if the Listening

worked for the sound of rat-human heartbeat as well. It wasn't something he had thought to ask at the time.

Jenna looked at Ephaniah in dismay. He had lost his glasses and his eyes were closed, the long dark lashes stuck together with flecks of ice. His small amount of visible human skin was bluish-white and his sparse, short brown hair was caked with snow and plastered to his skull, which was surprisingly human in shape. Jenna knew she ought to unwind the cloth from his rat mouth and listen for sounds of breathing—or at the very least put her hand on him to check for the rise and fall of his chest—but she found herself very reluctant to touch the rat-man. She thought that maybe it was the nearness of his bulk, which was suddenly overwhelming in all its ratlike strangeness. When Ephaniah was conscious his humanity shone through, and Jenna hardly noticed the rat in the man—but now she found it hard to see the man in the rat. She glanced up at Beetle; he was standing in the doorway staring at Ephaniah. “Do you think he's still alive?” she half whispered.

Beetle nodded slowly. “Yeah...” he said, moving his timepiece from hand to hand—a nervous habit he had when he was worried. He thought he saw the rat-man's eyes flicker open for a moment, but he said nothing.

The fire in the stove was blazing now. Steam was rising from the white woolen robes and a musty, unpleasant smell began to fill the hut.

“He must have followed us,” said Septimus, staring down at Ephaniah. “That must have been what I saw...”

“You saw him?” asked Jenna. “Why didn't you say?”

“Well...I wasn't sure.”

“Poor Ephaniah,” said Jenna. “He’d be camouflaged—like the Snow Foxes in the Lands of the Long Nights.”

“Yeah. Well, it wasn’t just that. I didn’t want to say because it felt...Darke.”

“Ephaniah felt Darke?”

Septimus shrugged. “Well, I—”

Beetle had been staring at Ephaniah intently. Now he spoke. “Sep.” There was something in Beetle’s voice that sent a chill down Septimus’s spine. “What?” he whispered.

Silently, Beetle pointed to his own left little finger and crossed the first and second fingers of his left hand—the sign scribes used for the Darke. Now Septimus understood—but Jenna did not. Frightened, she glanced at Septimus. “Get out,” he mouthed.

“Why?” asked Jenna, her voice sounding horribly loud in the silence.

No one replied. The next moment Septimus was beside her and before she knew it she was on her feet being propelled out of the doorway and over the pile of snow.

“But—” Jenna protested to no avail.

“Shh!” hissed Septimus. “You’ll wake it.”

“Wake what?”

Silent and fast, Beetle closed the hut door. Jenna watched as Septimus placed both hands on the door, just as he had done the night before, and muttered something under his breath. Then he gave a thumbs-up sign and scrambled over the snow. The next moment Jenna found herself grabbed by Septimus and Beetle and running from the hut as though it were on fire with Ullr bounding behind.

They headed down the valley, leaping over the snow and dodging through the trees like a trio of terrified deer. To their right a steep cliff reared up

through the treetops and when they reached the base of the cliff, they stopped to catch their breath. They looked back up the valley, searching out the hut, which—if it had not been for the lazily rising wood smoke that was drifting up through the trees—would have been almost impossible to see.

“It’s okay,” said Beetle. “I can’t see it. Of course it might be hiding behind the trees, but I don’t think so.”

“It?” asked Jenna. “What do you mean—the hut’s following us? Are you crazy?”

“I mean Ephaniah,” said Beetle. “Except it’s not.”

“Not what?” asked Jenna.

“It’s not Ephaniah,” said Beetle. “It’s a Thing.”

“A Thing?”

“Yep. The one from the Manuscriptorium. The one that came with the kid who got me fired and took my job.”

“No. No, I don’t believe it. It’s Ephaniah.”

Septimus glanced back up the valley anxiously. “Come on, let’s get some distance between us.” They set off again, following the steady downward slope of the valley, keeping into the shadows of the cliff face. Every step that took them away from the hut made Jenna feel as if she were betraying Ephaniah. At last she could stand it no more. “Stop,” she said in a deliberately Princessy voice. “I’m not going any farther. We’ve got to go back.” Septimus and Beetle stopped. “But, Jen,” they both protested.

Jenna pulled her wolverine cloak around her as if it were a royal mantle and stubbornly stuck out her chin—just as her mother had done on the rare occasions her advisers had dared to disagree with her. “Either you two tell me exactly what’s going on or I am going straight back to the hut. Now,” she told them.

Septimus took a deep breath. He was going to have to make this good, he could tell. “Jen, last night the scrabbling at the door stopped after I did an Anti-Darke Incantation. And that only affects Darke stuff. It wouldn’t have stopped the real Ephaniah.”

“Maybe that was coincidence. Maybe he was getting exhausted or his hands were too frozen...” Jenna stamped her feet through the snow in frustration. How could Septimus be so sure?

“No, Jen,” said Septimus very definitely. “Beetle, tell Jen what you saw.” Beetle sat down on a snow-covered log—his legs ached after the unaccustomed exercise of the last few days. “I saw a ring. A Darke ring.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jenna.

“It was when I went back to get your pin.”

“What was?”

“The kid shrunk one of his precious licorice snakes and gave it to the Thing as part of a Contract.”

“A Contract? Beetle, what are you talking about?”

Beetle found it hard to explain things to Jenna—the way she looked at him stopped him from thinking straight. But he had to try. He took a deep breath and began.

“That precious scribe of Jillie Djinn’s who was in the Vaults—you remember?” Jenna nodded.

“Well, it seems he had a Darke Thing

with him. Because when I went back to find your pin I heard him transfer it to Tertius Fume. The kid had to give the Thing a release token and he didn’t have anything except a licorice snake. So he Shrank that and gave it to the Thing.

And that’s what I saw on Ephaniah’s left little finger.”

“No—but how?”

“The only possible explanation is that the Thing has InHabited Ephaniah. Because whatever form a Thing takes, a Darke ring will stay the same.”

“I didn’t see a ring,” Jenna said stubbornly.

“You weren’t looking, Jen,” said Septimus.

Jenna shook her head in disbelief. She could not rid herself of the thought of Ephaniah lying abandoned in the hut. “I—I don’t believe it. Poor Ephaniah. He must have followed us through that horrible forest. And with his limp he’d never have been able to catch us. And he couldn’t shout, could he? So what did we do in return? We left him outside all night even though he was begging to come in, and now we’ve left him behind to freeze to death. Well, you might think that’s okay, but I don’t.”

“But, Jen—” Septimus’s protests fell on thin air. Jenna was already running back up the valley retracing their footsteps, followed by the faithful Ullr.

“Jen! Stop!” yelled Septimus.

“I wouldn’t shout,” said Beetle. “You don’t know what’s listening. Come on, Sep, we gotta get to her before the Thing does.”

But Jenna, who could always run fast, had already put a good distance between them.

Beetle surprised himself by reaching the hut before Septimus. “Jenna…” he puffed. “Jenna?” There was no reply. Heart beating fast, Beetle followed Jenna’s scrambling footsteps through the snowdrift outside the door. He found Jenna alone, standing on the wet patch where the body of Ephaniah had lain.

“He’s gone,” said Jenna.

“Good,” said Beetle.

“But...how? He was unconscious.”

Beetle shook his head. “I saw his eyes open—just for a moment. He looked at me. Can’t do that if you’re unconscious.”

“But how could he go so fast? Ephaniah can’t even walk very well.”

“Doesn’t make any difference who they InHabit,” said Beetle. “They can still shift it.” Jenna looked Beetle in the eye. “You really do think that Ephaniah has been—what do you call it?—InHabited, don’t you?”

Beetle nodded solemnly.

“And you honestly, truly saw the snake ring on his finger?”

“Yep. Little pinky, left hand. Where they always wear them.”

“Okay,” said Jenna reluctantly. “I believe it now.”

Beetle grinned with relief and pleasure—Jenna had listened to him. It was a good feeling.

Septimus appeared, out of breath. “I saw it at the top of the hill,” he said. “It’s heading off.”

“Good,” said Beetle.

Jenna had something she wanted to say. “Beetle, I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

“’S okay.” Beetle shrugged.

“I know I should have.”

“I don’t see why—it’s weird stuff. Why should you believe it?”

“Because I know who that boy is. The one you call Daniel Hunter.”

“You do?”

“He was DomDaniel’s Apprentice. You remember, Sep? I know he’s changed a lot—he’s taller and his skin has gotten bad and his hair is long and horrible—but it is him, isn’t it?”

Septimus wasn’t too good with faces. But now that Jenna had said it, he knew she was right. “So that’s why he said he was me—because for ten years he was. Well, he thought he was. Poor kid.” Beetle looked puzzled. “Tell you later, Beetle,” said Septimus. “But we ought to get going.” He held out the compass.

The needle was still pointing steadily—but not in the direction he had hoped. “Darn. It’s pointing the way the Thing has gone.”

“We’ll have to follow it,” said Jenna.

“No, Jen. That’s just plain dangerous,” Septimus protested.

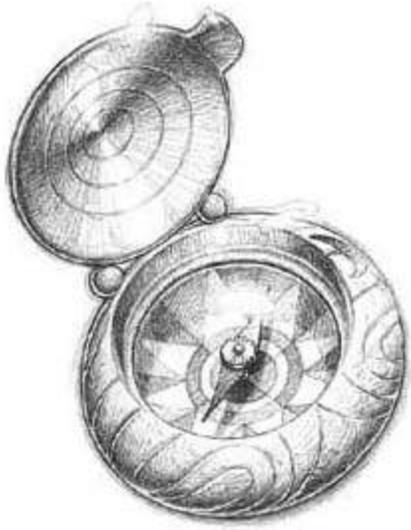
Jenna stuck out her bottom lip stubbornly. “I don’t care, Sep. If that’s the way to the House of Foryx, then that’s the way we go.”

Septimus appealed to Beetle. “It’s crazy to follow that Thing. You agree, don’t you, Beetle?”

“Well...” Beetle hesitated.

“Beetle,” Septimus protested.

“If it’s going in the right direction we could do worse than to follow it. That way we keep an eye on it. Much better to have something like that in front of you than behind you where you can’t see what it’s doing.”



“Yes,” said Jenna briskly. “Just what I was thinking.”

“You know, Jen,” said Septimus as they set off following the Thing’s tracks, “sometimes you really do remind me of Marcia.”

40

THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

They followed the long, scuffling

tracks away from the hut. The tracks led over a small stone bridge that Snorri had marked on the map, then up a steep slope and down into another valley beyond. As they walked through the tall trees at the head of the broad valley, all around was silence and snow; not a breath of wind stirred the branches. Once or twice they caught a glimpse of the Thing

far below, speeding down the slope with its odd, lurching gait, but the white of its robes made it hard to spot against the snow and it drew ever farther ahead until they lost sight of it.

Still following the tracks, the compass needle led them down to a frozen marsh on the valley floor. It was noticeably colder here. The mix of ice and marsh mud crackled beneath their feet and the tall, black spikes of reed that stuck up through the snow snagged on their wolverine-skin cloaks. As they

continued on a downward slope, the marsh gave way to a wide frozen stream, along which the Thing

had traveled in long, sliding strides. Jenna picked up Ullr and placed him on top of her backpack. The cat perched precariously and surveyed the scene in a disapproving manner. Slipping and sliding, they set off along the ice, leaning forward to balance their backpacks. Soon they got into a steady skating rhythm and picked up speed along the smooth ice of the stream.

The stream widened and led them into the lower reaches of the valley. Septimus, who was in the lead, suddenly saw a huge bank of thick white fog rising in front of them. He skidded to a halt and Beetle cannoned into him, closely followed by Jenna and Ullr, who toppled onto the ice with a loud meow.

“Ouch,” said Beetle, dusting himself off and struggling to his feet. “You might have warned us you were putting on the brakes.”

“Didn’t have time,” said Septimus. “Look.” He pointed to the fog.

Beetle whistled between his teeth. “Where did that come from?”

“I saw it,” said Jenna, “but I thought it was snow.”

It was true—the fog was exactly the same color as snow. It stretched from left to right as far as the eye could see and blended seamlessly into the gray-white snow-filled sky. Jenna did not like fog; it reminded her of the time when she had sat marooned inside a Magykal

fog near the Marram Marshes, listening to the click of a pistol no more than a few feet away, aimed at her heart. “Do you think the Thing is in there, waiting for us?” she whispered.

“No,” said Beetle. “Look—the Thing

saw it before we did. There are the tracks.” The lopsided tracks had left the frozen stream, doubled back on themselves and disappeared up the hill and into the trees.

As they scanned the tracks, a long low rumble began to shake the ground. Deep within the fog, something was coming.

“Can you hear that?” asked Jenna, wide-eyed and pale.

Septimus and Beetle nodded.

“Run?” said Beetle as the ground vibrated through the soles of his boots. “Now?”

“Where to?” asked Jenna, glancing around. Nowhere looked safe to her.

Septimus shook his head. “No...no. It’s going away now. Listen. It’s passed by. Whatever it was.”

“Whatever it was,” muttered Beetle, “I would not have liked to have been in the way.” Not so very far away, at the top of the hill, the Thing

stopped and looked down on the three figures standing uncertainly on the edge of the fog bank. It grimaced, contorting Ephaniah’s rat mouth into a vicious snarl. Just a few more careless steps, it thought, and the job would have been done.

But no matter—let them take their chance with the Foryx on the precipice path. And if they miss the Foryx then it will do exactly as its new Master had instructed. The Thing

respected its new Master. Slowly and clumsily, it turned away and, increasingly tired of the unwieldy body it had saddled itself with, lumbered off through the snow.

Back at the frozen stream Septimus was looking at the compass, shaking it in irritation. “Bother, bother, bother. Stop it.” The needle, however, took no notice of being spoken to and carried on spinning wildly. “Jen,” he said, “we’d better look at the map. I think we’ve reached the edge of the hole.”

“Literally,” Beetle said with a gulp. “Look.” The fog was a mixture of eddies and swirls that drifted up in the air. It was constantly shifting, in some places dense, in others almost clear—and it was in one of these clear

patches that Beetle had seen that no more than a few steps away the frozen stream had become a waterfall of ice, plunging over the edge of an abyss.

“Oh...” Septimus swayed and closed his eyes. A horrible feeling of vertigo shot up from the soles of his feet and made his head spin.

Beetle and Jenna crept forward and warily peered over. The fog rose, swirling in long tendrils that wrapped themselves around their feet and chilled them to the bone. Beetle crept even closer to the edge; he picked up a rock from the pile of stones beside the waterfall and hurled it into the chasm. They counted the seconds, waiting for the sound of the rock hitting the bottom, but after one whole minute they had still heard nothing. A sudden gust of wind caught Beetle’s cloak and sent it noisily flapping.

“Beetle!” Jenna gasped, grabbing hold of his sleeve. “You’re too close. Come back.” This was exactly the kind of thing that Beetle’s mother would have done. If it had been his mother, Beetle would have become extremely petulant and deliberately stood even closer to the edge—but not with Jenna. A decidedly unpetulant Beetle allowed himself to be pulled away.

Septimus, meanwhile, had no intention of going anywhere near the edge. He had found a nice, solid tree a safe distance away and was leaning against it, his head still spinning. He hadn’t felt vertigo like this in a long time—certainly not since he had had the Flyte Charm. How he wished he had the Flyte Charm now. Trust Marcia, he thought, to take away the one thing that would have made this whole expedition actually easy. He took a deep breath. Not more than a few feet away was the deepest chasm he had ever come across. Septimus didn’t need to look over the edge to know that—he could feel it all the way up from his feet, and he knew.

He remembered the Young Army saying: On the brink, stop and think. Now that he was a little older, the rhymes he had learned parrot-fashion seemed to make sense in a way they hadn’t at the time. And so, leaning against the tree—as close to the brink as he was willing to get—Septimus began to think. He thought about the Queste. He thought he really should tell Jenna and Beetle about the Questing Stone. He should tell them to go on without him and leave him to do the Queste—wherever that would take him. But

then he thought of walking away from Jenna and Beetle, of leaving them alone to find Nicko, and he knew he couldn't—he just couldn't.

Jenna's voice broke into his thoughts. "Look, Sep," she said, laying the map on the snow beneath the tree. Then, "No, Ullr, go sit somewhere else," she said, gently pushing the cat off the paper. Ullr looked unimpressed. He sat down in the snow and began to lick his paws. Jenna kneeled down and ran her finger around the edge of the hole where the missing piece should have been. "It's funny," she said, "that the edge of the hole in the map is at the edge of a chasm. It's almost as if it were a real

hole, if you see what I mean. I figure the House of Foryx is over there." She pointed into the fog. "It all makes sense now. That must be what Aunt Ells called the great pit."

Suddenly Beetle said, "Look! There's the bridge." He whistled. "That is some bridge." Far away to the left they could just make out the spindly outline of a structure leaping high into the air and disappearing into the fog. It looked beautiful—a delicate tracery of fine lines like a spider web suspended in space. And then the fog closed over it once more and it was gone.

"That's it!" said Jenna, excited. "All we have to do is cross that bridge and we're there. Isn't that great?"

"Great," said Septimus with a sinking feeling that started in his stomach and went all the way down to his feet. "Really great."

They set off toward the bridge, following the edge of the chasm but keeping—on Septimus's insistence—a safe distance away. After a while it became apparent that they were, for the very first time in this strange place, actually following a path. The snow looked trampled by animals rather than humans and Septimus could not help but wonder what kind of animals. Whatever they were, they had the kind of droppings that Septimus preferred not to step in.

As the morning wore on, the sun rose above the fog and the heavy snow clouds in the sky began to clear. But the fog remained, moving and shifting

like a great brooding creature beside them. Sometimes Septimus thought he heard distant voices far below, somewhere deep within the fog. Once, Jenna stopped, convinced she had heard someone cry out.

The thought that soon they would have to step onto a bridge and walk into this shifting, brooding bank of fog preoccupied all three—and Septimus in particular. He dropped back and let Jenna and Beetle move ahead. As he trudged behind the two wolverine-cloaked figures with their Forest backpacks—and a small orange cat with its fur puffed out—something else began to preoccupy Septimus. Very reluctantly, but unable to resist, he put his hand into his tunic pocket and drew out the Questing Stone. Hardly daring to look, he closed his eyes and then—remembering how near they were to the edge of the precipice—he opened them again fast. The Stone was yellow. Yellow to guide you through the snow, thought Septimus with a sinking feeling.

Jenna turned around suddenly. “Hey, Sep. You okay?”

Septimus quickly shoved his hand back in his pocket. “Yeah,” he said, heavily. “Fine.” All along their journey beside the chasm, the path had steadily been curving to the right as it led them around in a great circle, but the fog had always obscured the bridge. But now, as they approached a thick-set, snow-covered tree standing close to the path, two tall, iron pillars appeared out of the fog. Tall, thin and strangely beautiful, the pair of pillars leaned slightly backward, glistening with damp from the mist, their tops tapering and disappearing into the swirls of fog that drifted up from the chasm below. With a feeling of dread, Septimus knew they had arrived.

“Wow...” breathed Beetle. “Look at that.”

Septimus thought he would rather not.

The bridge itself was a precarious structure of wooden planks laid across two thick cables that rose in a curve and disappeared into the fog. How long did it go on for? he wondered. Was it just a few more yards or was it for miles?

Septimus had a horrible feeling that the latter was more likely. There was something about the curve that made it look



like a wide span. It was an odd structure; from the top of the pillars, four cables swooped down. Two stretched far behind them and were buried in the snow and the other two followed the curve of the bridge and vanished into the fog.

Septimus searched for something that might reasonably be called “sides” or possibly “handrails,” but all he could see was what seemed to him to be a couple of pieces of string. He’d had nightmares about bridges like this—but none of them had been this bad.

Septimus glanced at Jenna and Beetle, strangely relieved to see that they did not look exactly overjoyed at the prospect of the bridge either. He was about to suggest they have some of Sam’s fish—anything to delay the awful

moment when he would have to step onto what looked like no more than a piece of beginner's knitting—when he heard a movement in the tree behind them.

“That'll cost you,” said a harsh voice from above.

They leaped into the air at the sound of the first new voice they had heard since Sam had said good-bye.

“I said, it'll cost you,” the voice repeated.

Septimus looked up. “Where are you?” he asked.

“Up the tree. And I'm coming down.”

41

THE TOLL-MAN

A small, wiry man clad

head to toe in an assortment of furs clambered down the trunk of the oak tree and jumped lightly onto the snow. His deep-set eyes, like two little black beads, quickly took in Jenna and Beetle and then fixed on Septimus as he came toward them. The man's brown, wrinkled face put Jenna in mind of an organ grinder's monkey she had once seen at a fair—she hadn't liked the look of the monkey then, and she didn't like the look of the man now.

The man waited until Septimus had joined them and then he spoke. “In case you was a'wondering, I be the Toll-Man,” he said. “No one crosses the bridge without paying a price. Some pay more than others. It depends.”

“On what?” asked Jenna sharply. She didn't like the way the man was looking at her.

“On whether I like 'em. And on how much gold they have.” He smiled unpleasantly. The smile showed, to their surprise, two rows of gold teeth in bizarrely mismatched shapes and sizes. “Don't worry, Missy,” he said, “I can tell you young 'uns still got your own teeth and they're no good to me.

I'm a fair man. Don't ask folks for what they can't give." He shook his head as though amused. "But I is always surprised by what folks can give when they have to." He ran a long pale tongue over his uneven teeth and grinned.

"So, how much does it cost to cross the bridge?" Jenna asked.

"How much do you want to cross?" asked the Toll-Man.

No one answered because no one actually wanted to cross at all. All they wanted was to be on the other side.

"So are you crossing or just looking?" asked the Toll-Man irritably. "I charge for looking, too. Can't have folks cluttering up the place all day just looking."

"We're crossing," said Jenna decisively. "How much do you want?" The Toll-Man looked Jenna up and down. "Well, Missy. That's a nice circlet of gold you have upon that pretty head of yours. I'll take that."

Jenna's hands flew up to her gold circlet—the one that her mother, the Queen, had worn as a girl. "You can't have that!" she gasped.

The Toll-Man shrugged. "Then you can't cross."

With a heavy heart, Jenna reached up to take the circlet off. It was only an object, she told herself. Nicko was worth more than gold. Much

more. But the Toll-Man did not notice; he was already eyeing Beetle. "You, boy—I'll have your timepiece," he said.

Beetle looked shocked. "How do you know I've got a timepiece?" he asked.

The man paused, briefly wrong-footed. "I can hear it ticking," he said. "Got an ear for ticking, I 'ave." Beetle frowned. He shot a questioning glance at Septimus, who returned it with a slight nod of his head. "And you, boy," the Toll-Man said, turning to Septimus, "you've got a nice silver belt there with a few bits of gold on it. That'll do me well enough. I'll have the little trinkets inside, too." The man regarded them all with his bright yellow smile. "You see—I'm a fair man. I don't ask for what you haven't got."

From his pocket he drew out a large velvet bag that hung from a collapsible wooden ring. With a practiced flick of the wrist he snapped the ring open and the bag hung down like an empty sock. Like the organ grinder's monkey, the Toll-Man pushed the bag toward Septimus. "You first, boy. Put your belt in there."

Very slowly, Septimus unbuckled his Apprentice belt, closely observed by the eager eye of the Toll-Man, who licked his teeth once again in anticipation. "Urry up, boy. You won't get across in daylight at this rate." Septimus was fumbling with the last part of the buckle, partly because his cold fingers were clumsy and slow, but mainly because he needed time to think. Another Young Army saying was going around in his head: To win the fight, time it right. Time it right, he thought, gritting his teeth, time it... right!

With a click, the buckle finally snapped open and the Toll-Man leaned forward with his collecting bag. At that moment, to Jenna's shock, Septimus sprang at the Toll-Man and knocked him to the ground. The man fell back into a thick patch of snow. Before he had time to push Septimus off, Beetle had piled on top of them and Jenna watched in horror as, like a giant snowball, the struggling trio rolled toward the edge of the precipice.

The Toll-Man was not big, but he was strong, and without Beetle's weight—and willingness to land some good punches—Septimus would not have stood a chance. To Jenna's relief, the snowball stopped just short of the edge with Septimus and Beetle on top of the Toll-Man. "Shove him over, Sep—now!" yelled Beetle.

"No!" yelled Jenna, horrified at the thought of pushing someone to his death. "No. You can't do that. You can't!" It seemed that Jenna was right. As if buoyed by her shout—and the boys' temporary loss of concentration—the Toll-Man found some extra strength. With an angry shove he threw Beetle off and sent him sprawling into the icy bank of the footpath. There was a sharp crack

as Beetle's head met the wall of ice. He slumped down, a trickle of red running from behind his ear and staining the ice with a pinkish tinge.

Jenna glanced at Beetle. At least he was safe, and well away from the edge—Septimus was not. Septimus’s head was in fact hanging over the edge of the precipice, and the Toll-Man was about to make sure that the rest of him followed.

Septimus stared into the abyss, trying not to imagine how far the ground was below the fog. While he struggled against the relentless pushing from the Toll-Man—whose sharp intakes of breath he could feel on the back of his neck—Septimus wished more than ever that he had the Flyte Charm. He could see it so clearly, he could almost feel it in his hand. The little white wings of his own Charm that Marcia had given him, which had become part of the Flyte Charm, were fluttering...

Then suddenly, Septimus was

over the edge. As he began—incredibly slowly, so it seemed to him—to fall, he grabbed on to one of the bridge stanchions and there he hung, swinging above the abyss.

Uncaring now about whether the Toll-Man fell to his death or not, Jenna swung her fist at him and caught him by surprise. There was a thud as the man fell forward into the snow and knocked one of his gold teeth out. Blearily, he scabbled in the snow to retrieve it.

Jenna’s face appeared over the edge of the precipice, white and scared, afraid of what she would see. “Take my hand, Sep. Quick.”

“No, Jen. I’ll pull you over too.”

Jenna looked fierce. “Just do it, Septimus!” she yelled.

Septimus did it. He grabbed Jenna’s hand and to their surprise he came up so easily that they both went staggering back into the snow.

The Toll-Man meanwhile had found his tooth, but when he picked up the bloodstained chunk of gold an expression of exasperation crossed his features and he threw the tooth away in disgust. This was not what he had

come here for—what was he doing? But before he had time to answer his own question, two relentless forces met him and toppled him over the edge.

Jenna looked shocked at what they had done. “He’s gone,” she said.

Septimus was not so sure. Warily he leaned over the precipice to check. Suddenly a gloved hand shot up from the mist and grabbed Septimus’s cloak. Septimus lurched back and wrenched the hand away—the Toll-Man was hanging from the very same stanchion that Septimus had been. His angry eyes glared at Septimus. “There’s no escape, Apprentice,” he growled. “The Darkening is done.”

“Who...what are you?” asked Septimus.

The Toll-Man laughed. He pulled his left hand from his glove, which had frozen to the metal stanchion, and made another grab for him. Septimus caught the Toll-Man’s wrist in midair. On the Toll-Man’s little finger was exactly what he had expected to find: a small, black licorice snake.

“I’ll take that,” said Septimus. He pulled the band from the Toll-Man’s finger, whereupon the Toll-Man began a loud rant in what Septimus knew was Darke Tongue. It was foul. The Darke imprecations flew into his ears, wormed their way into his brain and tried to unsettle his mind, but Septimus remembered his Anti-Darke chants and muttered them over and over again while he fought to pry the remaining hand off the stanchion.

But still the Darke

shouts flowed and Septimus felt himself weakening. “Help me, Jen!” he yelled. The next moment Jenna was beside him, and together she and Septimus twisted the Toll-Man’s hand out of his glove. And then, suddenly it was done. All that remained of the Toll-Man was a pair of brown woolen gloves stuck to the stanchion—and a rapidly disappearing scream in the mist.

Jenna slumped down onto the ice and put her head in her hands. “I can’t believe we did that,” she said. She looked at Septimus, a horrified expression in her eyes. “Sep, we’ve just killed someone.”

“Yes,” said Septimus simply.

“But that’s awful,” said Jenna. “I...I never thought I would...”

Septimus looked at Jenna, his green eyes serious. “It’s a luxury, Jen,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

Septimus stared at the scraped and bloody snow at his feet. It took him some moments to reply. “I mean...” he began slowly. “I mean that if you go through life and never face a situation where, in order for you to survive, someone else has to die, then you’re lucky. That’s what I mean.”

“That’s terrible, Sep.”

Septimus shrugged. “Sometimes that is how it is. I learned that in the Young Army. It’s either the chief cadet in the wolverine pit, or you.”

Jenna shook her head very slowly, still not able to believe what she had done.

“Jen—look. Does this make you feel better?” asked Septimus quietly. He held out a small black licorice snake ring.

“Oh.”

“It was on his left little finger. It was the Thing, Jen. It was him or us. And it had to be us—you know it did.”

“It was the Toll-Man too,” said Jenna.

“Yes. I know.”

Slowly, Septimus got to his feet and gingerly approached the precipice. He stood as near as he dared then, and murmuring an Anti-Darke chant, he crushed the licorice ring between his fingers and sprinkled it into the void.

A low moan came from behind him. Jenna leaped to her feet. “Beetle!”

“Eurgh...wherrmi?” came the answering groan.

It took a lot of persuasion to get Beetle up to the Toll-Man’s tree house, even with the help of the steplike notches they found cut into the bark of the tree. Septimus pushed and Jenna pulled and somehow they all made it up to the ramshackle collection of planks and skins on a platform wedged between the two main branches. Covering the entrance to the tree house was the hide of a large, reddish animal with huge curved claws that clattered when Jenna gingerly lifted the door flap. The inside of the tree house smelled musty—and strangely familiar. She peered in but the interior was pitch-black; all she could tell was that the floor, too, was covered with fur.

With a last heave and a push, Jenna and Septimus got the dopey—and very heavy—Beetle into the tree house, and then crawled in themselves.

There was someone already in there.

42

REUNITED



A half-rat, half-human

face was eerily illuminated in the yellow glow of Septimus’s Dragon Ring. Jenna suppressed a scream.

The body of Ephaniah Grebe was propped up in the far corner of the tree house, exactly where the Thing had left him for the more agile frame of the Toll-Man. Ephaniah’s head lolled forward like a broken doll’s, and his

white robes looked like a pile of dirty sheets waiting to be washed. As soon as Jenna saw him, she knew he was UnInHabited—the difference between Ephaniah now and the last time she had seen him was obvious. This was Ephaniah—she felt no revulsion, no sense of overwhelming rat-ness and none of the feeling of pity and hopelessness that the InHabited Ephaniah had filled her with. And, she saw, his left little finger was ring-free. She rushed over to the rat-man and touched his hand. It felt cold.

“Oh, Sep, can you Hear...anything?” she whispered.

Septimus knew what Jenna was asking. He Listened for the Sound of Human Heartbeat. “I don’t think so,” he said, then he saw Jenna’s expression and added hurriedly, “but I think that’s because there’s so much rat there. All I can Hear is Beetle’s, which is slow and steady, and yours, which is really loud.”

“Oh,” said Jenna, surprised. “Sorry. What about yours?”

“You can never Hear your own,” said Septimus. He thought for a moment. “We’ll do it the old way,” he said.

Septimus kneeled beside Ephaniah and took his emergency Physik tin from his pocket. The tin was crammed full of things that Jenna had no idea why he could possibly want. From it he selected a small, round mirror and held it close to Ephaniah’s slightly open mouth from which two long, narrow teeth protruded. A light misting appeared on the glass.

“Well, he’s still breathing,” said Septimus.

“Oh, Sep, that’s wonderful.” Gently, Jenna stroked the rat-man’s soft nose, intrigued at the way the human features merged so well with the rat fur. As she stroked the fur, Ephaniah’s eyes fluttered open for a brief moment. “He saw me,” whispered Jenna. “His eyes smiled. He’s okay. I know he is.”

“It’ll take a while to be sure about that,” said Septimus, who knew enough Physik to know that nothing is certain. “But at least he’s got a chance.”

The tree house was surprisingly comfortable, if a little strange. It was completely lined with a coarse reddish fur, and once the door flap was closed no light entered at all. In the opposite corner from where Ephaniah lay, his head resting on a pillow that Jenna had made from the Toll-Man's blankets, there was a small stove set on a thick piece of slate. After several attempts to light it with Beetle's tinderbox, Jenna finally coaxed a large yellow flame from the big round burner.

Septimus took the battered old pan that hung from a hook above the stove, climbed down the tree and scooped up some snow. With his pan piled high with snow, poised to climb back to safety, he stopped for a moment and listened. A bloodchilling ululating howl—the same one that they had heard the night before—pierced the air and Septimus felt the ground tremble beneath his feet.

Startled, he looked up and saw a long, dark shape moving along the path around the chasm. It was coming toward him—fast. With a sudden certainty Septimus knew what it was—and what had gone past them earlier hidden in the fog.

He did not waste a moment; he dropped the pan and shot back up the rope ladder. As he threw himself into the tree house, the whole tree began to shake.

“Earthquake!” cried Jenna.

Septimus shook his head. “No,” he said. “Foryx!”

Terrified and fascinated at the same time, Jenna peered out of the door flap. A phalanx of Foryx was hurtling through the snow, so fast that Jenna's only impression was a long, red streak of galloping fur and tusks as the Foryx thundered past on the path below the tree house.

“They're real!” said Jenna.

“A bit too real,” said Septimus.

A few minutes later, pointing to the walls of the tree house, Jenna said, “You know what fur this is, don’t you?”

“Foryx,” said Septimus with a grimace.

Jenna smiled. “Which means, if you think about it, that we are already in a House of Foryx.”

“Well, I wish Nik were here,” said Septimus glumly.

“I know. So do I.”

Jenna made Septimus go back for some snow. “We’ll hear them if they’re coming back,” she said when Septimus had objected. “And make sure you get the snow from a clean patch. We don’t want Foryx dribble for supper.” Septimus broke the record time for snow collection. While Jenna boiled up some witches’ brew, Septimus sat next to Beetle and looked through his Physik tin with a feeling of anticipation. At last he was getting a chance to try out the Physik he had learned on a real patient. Beside him his unwitting patient dozed peacefully on the floor of the tree house, pale but breathing steadily. The thick yellow flame of the stove filled the tree house with a comforting glow and the warmth began to bring out the pungent smell of the Foryx skins. Septimus decided it was time Beetle woke up and drank some witches’ brew. He took out a small phial labeled Sal Volatile and was about to waft it under his new patient’s nose when Beetle suddenly opened his eyes. Foryx skin reek was as effective as any phial of Sal Volatile.

Beetle had a nasty gash behind his right ear and now that he was warming up it was beginning to throb painfully.

“Ouch!” he protested as Septimus cleaned up the dried blood with some sphagnum moss dipped in antiseptic.

Jenna looked up as she was dropping three squares of toffee into the boiling water. “You’re turning him purple, Sep.” She laughed.

“Purple?” said Beetle. “Wotcha doing, Sep?”

“It’s Gentian Violet,” Septimus explained. “It will stop the cut from getting infected. But we need to keep the edges together. Wait, I’ve got something here.” Septimus picked up a large needle.

“What’s that for?” asked Beetle suspiciously.

“Oh, that? Well, when I was learning about Physik, Marcellus took me to watch a surgeon at work,” said Septimus.

“Someone came in with a deep cut and he sewed the edges together.”

“He did what?” Jenna asked, wide-eyed.

“You’re joking,” said Beetle.

Septimus shook his head.

“Eurgh, Sep, that’s disgusting,” said Jenna. “You can’t sew people up like... like bags of flour.”

“Why not? It works.”

“Well, you’re not doing it to me,” Beetle told him. “So you can put that needle away right now.” Septimus smiled, pleased that Beetle sounded like his old self. “I wasn’t going to sew you up, Beetle,” he said. “Your cut’s not big enough and it’s in an awkward place for stitches anyway. I was just looking for a bandage. Ah, here it is.” Beetle allowed Septimus to put a clean piece of moss over his cut and wrap a bandage around his head. He obediently drank all of the witches’ brew that Jenna had made and was soon asleep on the Foryx skin floor.

“Marcellus would say that we ought to wake him every few hours to check that he’s sleeping and not unconscious,” said Septimus.

“But he won’t be sleeping if we wake him, will he?” Jenna objected. “He’ll just be grumpy and tired tomorrow.”

“I know,” said Septimus. “Anyway, I think he’s fine. His breathing is good.” Jenna smiled. “You know,” she said, “even though it was horrible,

you being trapped in Marcellus's Time, you've come back really different—in a good way. You know stuff. Stuff that no one else does. Not even Marcia.”

“Yeah,” said Septimus glumly. He was silent for a while and stirred his witches' brew, watching the toffee whiz around faster and faster. Then he said, “I'd be a better Physician than a Wizard.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” said Jenna. “You'll be a great Wizard. One of the best. You know you will.”

“Marcia doesn't think so.”

“She didn't say that.”

“No. But I can tell she thinks it. She says I just mess around with stuff. It's true, really. I...I don't think I want to be a Wizard really, Jen.”

Jenna nodded. “Sometimes I think I don't want to be Queen,” she said. “It's horrible to feel you have to be something.

At least you can decide not to be a Wizard if you don't want to be.”
Septimus did not reply. He put his hand in his pocket and felt the Questing Stone. He didn't think there was going to be much chance of deciding anything anyway. “Jen,” he said.

“What is it, Sep?” Jenna looked concerned.

“Oh...nothing.” He couldn't say it.

Later, when night had fallen and Jenna and Beetle were sleeping, the NightUllr was lying across the doorway, and even Ephaniah was breathing peacefully, Septimus took out the Questing Stone. Jenna stirred and he quickly shoved it back into his pocket—but not before he saw that the yellow had deepened to a dull orange: “Orange to warn you that over you'll go.” And now Septimus knew exactly what that meant.

Septimus woke the next morning feeling groggy from the musty fumes of the Foryx skin. It was still dark inside the tree house and the only way that

Septimus could tell it was morning was by the presence of a small orange cat mewling impatiently to be let out. He lifted a corner of the Foryx skin door and, tail up, Ullr stalked out into the morning air. A moment later the cat landed with a soft thud in the snow below the tree and set about hunting for a more interesting breakfast than dried fish.

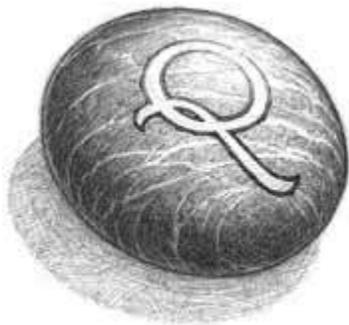
Unskilled in the art of hunting tree voles, the occupants of the tree house had to make other arrangements for breakfast.

They set to heating some water and wondered if dried fish could be made more interesting by boiling it up with toffee.

Jenna thought not, although Septimus liked the idea. Beetle woke with a headache and a stiff neck and grumpily refused both fish and toffee, either separately or together.

Septimus put an end to the fish-or-toffee discussion by using the pan of boiling water for an infusion of strips of willow bark from his Physik tin. He made Beetle drink it. It was bitter and made Beetle gag, but half an hour later his headache and stiff neck were better and he was helping Jenna open three more of Sam's packages. They discovered some tiny sticky raisin cakes that Melissa had made for Jo-Jo, and a long strip of dried bacon. Suddenly breakfast seemed a lot more interesting.

Septimus decided to take Ephaniah's pulse; he wondered if it would be in the usual place. It was, even though his wrist was covered with soft rat fur. The pulse was weak but regular and Septimus was sure that Ephaniah was now in a deep sleep and not unconscious, but he could think of nothing in his Physik tin that would be of any help to the rat-man. It



was, he thought, a question of time and, later on, something to stop the recurring nightmares that always afflicted those who had been InHabited.

About midmorning—according to Beetle’s silent, tick-free timepiece—they had finished breakfast and decided that the only thing they could do was leave Ephaniah in the tree house to recover, and call for him on the way back. “Nik’s really strong,” said Jenna. “It will be so much easier with him to help get Ephaniah back to the Forest.” Septimus said nothing. He didn’t think they’d be coming back at all, let alone coming back with Nicko, but Ephaniah was as safe in the tree house as anywhere—safer, in fact, than they were going to be.

Jenna kneeled beside the rat-man, covering him with their wolverine cloaks and making him comfortable. “Good-bye, Ephaniah,” she said. “We’ve got to go, but we’ll be back soon.” Ephaniah’s whiskers twitched and Jenna stroked his forehead. “You’ll be fine,” she said. Ephaniah half opened one eye. “He’s waking up!” Jenna gasped.

Ephaniah seemed to be trying to focus on Jenna. He groaned and lifted his hand restlessly. Jenna took his hand and laid it gently back on his chest, but Ephaniah resisted. Jenna let go and watched his long, bony fingers scrabble inside the folds of his robes around his neck. “What is it?” she asked. “Does your neck hurt?” In answer, Ephaniah drew out something from a hidden pocket and pressed it into Jenna’s hand. Then, with a long sigh, he closed his eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

Jenna stared at her hand. On it lay a slightly shiny circle of paper covered in a mass of finely detailed pencil lines. For a moment Jenna wondered what it could possibly be, but only for a moment. And then she knew—it was the missing piece of the map. It was the House of Foryx.

43

THE BRIDGE

They spread the map out

on the snow below the tree. As they unfolded it the stiffened paper crackled and looked yellow against the frosty whiteness.

“No, Ullr,” said Jenna. “You are not

sitting here.” She held up the missing piece. “Do I have to do anything special?” she asked. “Like say the ReUnite or something?”

“No,” said Beetle. He grinned. “It’s ready to go.”

Jenna let go of the circular piece of paper and slowly it fluttered down. Ullr went to bat at it with his paw but Jenna grabbed the cat and held him tight. The missing piece hovered for a few seconds above the hole, turning this way and that, deciding which way to go—and then, to the accompaniment of “Yaaay!” it slipped into place. Snorri’s map was complete once more.

“That’s amazing,” said Jenna. “You can’t even see the join.”

Beetle inspected the map with a professional air. “Nice work,” he said.

Septimus took his Enlarging Glass from his Apprentice Belt and held it over the center of the map. As the glass passed across, they watched the minutely annotated details rendered in Snorri’s neat hand spring into focus. They saw an octagonal building shaded a delicate gray. In heavy letters over the gray, Snorri had written HOUSE OF FORYX. In the middle of the octagon Snorri had drawn a key, and wrapped around the outside of the octagon was a huge snake. The House of Foryx was on what seemed to be an island, connected to the surrounding land by a spidery contraption of a bridge. Beside the bridge was a tree and a small figure with an arrow pointing to it. Snorri had written in tiny writing, BEWARE THE TOLL-MAN. She had also written the words BOTTOMLESS PIT across the gap that the bridge spanned, but Septimus did not care. He was so relieved that the Queste had not taken them away from the House of Foryx after all that he felt he could walk over a hundred bottomless pits if he had to—although he would rather not. One was quite enough.

With Ullr securely ensconced in her backpack, Jenna stood for a moment between the two soaring pillars that formed the gateway to the bridge. She

looked up and saw it rise, black and spiderlike into the white air, its thin wire ropes shining with damp. The fog swirled around her feet and a long, low wail came from somewhere far below.

Jenna swallowed hard. This was the way to Nicko, she told herself, and this was the way she would have to go. She stepped between the pillars and onto the icy dusting of unmarked snow that lay on the first precarious plank. Ahead of her the line of planks rose up into a curve and disappeared into the fog. Jenna put out her hands to take the wire handrails. They were taut, cold, and felt frighteningly flimsy. Aware that Septimus was right behind her, Jenna gathered her courage and took another step forward. The bridge gave slightly under her weight. She froze, horribly aware that there was nothing but a thin plank of wood between her and a plunge to oblivion—but she was determined not to show how scared she was. “It’s fine,” she said brightly. “Come on, Sep.” Septimus did not move.

“Go on,” said Beetle. He gave him a gentle shove and Septimus stepped onto the bridge. Jenna moved up a couple of paces. Once again the bridge swayed. In a panic, Septimus grabbed the wire handrails.

“Wait for me,” said Beetle, sounding more confident than he felt. He stepped onto the bridge, which moved once again.

Septimus felt sick. He had been determined to walk across the bridge calmly, as though it was no more than a few feet above the ground—but suddenly he knew he couldn’t.

Jenna glanced back and saw that Septimus’s green eyes were wide with fear. “It’s okay, Sep,” she said. “The trick is to just take one step at a time. One foot in front of the other is all you have to think about. It doesn’t matter how long it goes on for because we know we are going to get to the other side. All we have to do is put one foot in front of the other, okay? It’s easy.”

Septimus nodded. His mouth was too dry to speak.

Like a trio of snails creeping along a washing line, they set off up the bridge with Jenna counting out the steps.

“One...two...three...four...five...that’s it, Sep, you’re doing great. Look how far we’ve gone already—oh no, I didn’t mean that, no don’t look—keep going, keep going, ten...eleven...twelve...thirteen...” Septimus obeyed, putting one foot in front of the other like one of Ephaniah’s automatons. Unblinking, he stared straight ahead into the mist. The scene before him was oddly unchanging—always a few feet of bridge in front of them, rising in a gradual curve and disappearing into the whiteness. Sometimes a gust of wind blew some of the mist away and revealed a little more of the stretch in front but Septimus did not see it, as whenever that happened he closed his eyes until the bridge stopped swaying.

But closing his eyes did not take away the terrible wails and despairing cries that issued from the bottomless pit. As they progressed along the wobbling planks, clinging onto the ice-cold handrails with numb fingers, the cries became louder and ever more desperate. These bothered Beetle more than the bridge and he began to sing his own very special tuneless version of an old Castle favorite, “How Much Is That Weasel in the Window?” For the first time ever, Septimus did not object.

And so, to the accompaniment of Beetle’s drone—which was at times hard to distinguish from the moans far below—they put one foot in front of the other and climbed the ever-ascending curve. They had probably been no longer than a quarter of an hour on the bridge when Jenna said, “It’s flattening out. Can you feel it? We must be nearly at the top.”

At the mention of “top” Septimus had a sudden vision of them suspended in the middle of nowhere. The dizzying absence of earth traveled up from the soles of his feet and made his head spin. He swayed backward—Beetle caught him and the weasel song stopped. “Hey, steady, Sep. Easy does it.”

Septimus could not move. His hands gripped the wires, his knuckles white. Jenna felt his fear seeping into her, too. A long, desolate lament drifted up from the chasm, rising and falling as if telling the lonely tale of the lost souls who inhabited the fog. Septimus listened, entranced. He felt an overwhelming urge to let himself fall into the soft pillow of fog and join the voices below. He loosened his grip on the handrails. At that moment a patch of fog lifted and Jenna saw a large black bird fly across their path. She gasped in surprise.

Septimus woke from his trance. “Jen...what is it?” he croaked.

“Nothing, Sep.” But the flight of the bird had triggered her thoughts. “Sep, the Flyte Charm. Remember?” At Jenna’s words, Septimus felt as if the fog had cleared from his mind. He remembered the feeling of the Charm in his hand, the silver flights on the golden arrow fluttering like the wings of a tiny bird, the Charm buzzing in his hand. And as he remembered, his feet began to feel lighter and less anchored to the rickety planks of the bridge. His legs no longer felt like jelly and the keening voices from below no longer invited him to jump into the fog. To the accompaniment of a renewed burst of the weasel song behind him, Septimus took a step forward.

“Come on,” he said. “We’ll soon be there.”

Septimus didn’t see the end of the bridge—his head was full of the image of the Flyte Charm and nothing else. But as Jenna and Beetle walked down the last few yards of the bridge, the gaunt shape of the House of Foryx slowly materialized out of the fog.

“It’s massive,” whispered Jenna.

Beetle replaced the weasel song with a long, low whistle.

With a huge feeling of relief, Jenna stepped off the bridge. As she kneeled to set Ullr free from the backpack, she found her eyes drawn up to the House of Foryx. It was a daunting sight. It towered above them—more of a fortress than a house—a forbidding mass of granite blocks perched on top of a rocky escarpment. True to Snorri’s drawing, it consisted of a central octagonal column flanked by four octagonal towers that disappeared into the milky white sky, the tops of their crenulated battlements hidden by a low snow cloud. A few small windows broke up the smooth gray surface but a strange swirling sheen—like oil on water—covered them. They reminded Jenna of the eyes of a blind old cat that she and her friend Bo had once adopted.

Spurred on by the resumption of the twenty-first rendition of the weasel song, Septimus had at last reached the end of the bridge. He stepped from

the final wobbly plank and, with a feeling of exhilaration—he had done it—he let go of the image of the Flyte Charm. His feet felt heavy once more and his boots settled firmly back onto the ground. Painfully, Septimus tried to uncurl his fingers, which had been clamped tight to the freezing wire handrails, but they would not move. He shoved his frozen hands into his tunic pockets and the Questing Stone slipped into his right hand and nestled into his palm. “It’s hot!” he gasped.

“What are you talking about?” said Jenna. “It’s freezing.”

Septimus did not reply.

Gently, Jenna took Septimus by the arm and led him away from the edge of the chasm. “Come on, Sep,” she said, “let’s get going.”

But Septimus had something to say and he didn’t know where to begin. So he took his clenched hand from his pocket and opened it—in his palm lay the Questing Stone. It was glowing a brilliant orangy-red now, and it shone out in the white, muted surroundings like a beacon.

“What’s that?” asked Beetle suspiciously.

“Huh,” said Jenna. “It’s a Magykal hand-warmer. You might have told us, Sep, we could have all used that.”

“It’s not a hand-warmer,” muttered Septimus.

“No, it’s not, is it?” said Beetle, peering down at the Stone. “You kept this quiet, Sep.”

“Kept what quiet?” asked Jenna.

“The Questing Stone,” said Beetle. “He’s got the Questing Stone. Sep—why didn’t you say?”

“Because we were looking for Nik and Snorri, that was the important thing. And, well, at first I didn’t think it mattered.”

“You took the Questing Stone and you didn’t think it mattered?” Beetle was aghast.

“Give me a break, Beetle. I didn’t know it was the Stone when I took it, did I? I wouldn’t have taken it if I had.

Hildegarde gave it to me just before we escaped from the Wizard Tower. She said it was her SafeCharm.”

“Well, it’s obviously not her SafeCharm,” said Beetle snappily.

“And she wasn’t Hildegarde,” said Septimus.

“What’s going on?” asked Jenna crossly. “Who wasn’t Hildegarde? Tell me.”

“Hildegarde wasn’t Hildegarde,” replied Beetle, a trifle unhelpfully.

“Beetle,” protested Jenna, fixing Beetle with a Princessy stare.

“Beetle’s right, Jen,” said Septimus, coming to Beetle’s rescue. “I’ve been going over and over it—the moment when I took the Stone. I know Marcia says never accept Charms from strangers, but I didn’t think Hildegarde was a stranger.

But she had been standing next to the Questing Pot, hadn’t she? And I Saw the Thing in the Pot. So when Tertius Fume started putting the Tower into Siege, I reckon the Thing must have got out of the Pot and InHabited Hildegarde. It was so dark and crazy anything could have happened.”

Jenna looked at Septimus, puzzled. “But why didn’t you tell us?” she asked.

“Well...when I first found out I had it, I really thought that if I got away from the Castle and the Questing Guards like Marcia told me, then it would be okay. And we could all go and find Nik and Snorri and forget about the Queste. And then when it turned green—”

“When what turned green?” asked Jenna.

“The Stone. It started off blue but then, when we were in the hut, I saw it had turned green, just like Alther said it would.

And then I realized I was on the Queste.”

“So why didn’t you tell us?”

Septimus took a while to answer. “I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. I’m sorry. We were following Snorri’s map and everything seemed okay so I thought...” Septimus ran out of words. He felt terrible, as if he had betrayed his closest friends.

“But Sep, it is okay. We’re still rescuing Nik, aren’t we?” said Jenna.

“No,” snapped Beetle suddenly. “This has nothing to do with Nicko now. We are with Sep, and Sep is on the Queste. He has no choice. Once you Accept the Stone, Your Will is Not Your Own. Isn’t that right, Sep?” Septimus nodded miserably.

Jenna shook her head in disbelief. “No! No way. We are on our quest—for Nik. And, look, we’ve done it.” She pointed up to the great octagonal towers looming out of the mists. “Because there is the House of Foryx.” Beetle was adamant. “We don’t know that,” he said. “We don’t know anything anymore. Like I said, all we know for certain is that we are with Sep, and Sep is on the Queste. Oh yes—and one more little detail...”

“What?” asked Jenna quietly, surprised at Beetle’s angry torrent of words.

“That no one has ever come back from the Queste.”

There was silence as this sunk in.

Septimus felt awful. “I...I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I’m really sorry.” A few stray snowflakes drifted down from the sky. Fiercely, Jenna brushed them from her eyes. She looked up at the great granite fortress looming out of the mist far above them, hoping somehow to find a clue that Nicko was indeed there. As she stared at the blind windows, a flight of ravens flew out of one

of the towers, cawing. Jenna shivered and pulled her cloak tighter. Ullr mewed miserably and rubbed against her leg, his hackles raised.

At last Jenna spoke. “Well, if we’re on some stupid Queste, then that’s okay. We’ll do it and we’ll come back—with Nik. That will show them.” With that, Jenna marched off up the steep zigzag path, with Ullr at her heels.

Beetle and Septimus followed in her wake.

“I’m sorry,” said Septimus after a few minutes. “I should have told you about the Stone.”

“Yes,” said Beetle. “You should have.” A few minutes later he said, “Wouldn’t have made any difference. I would have still come.”

“Thanks, Beetle.”

“Jenna would have too,” said Beetle.

“Yeah,” said Septimus. “I don’t think I could have stopped her.”

“I don’t think you could stop Jenna from doing anything,” said Beetle with a grin. “Not once she’s made up her mind.” Halfway up the path Jenna stopped and waited for Septimus and Beetle to catch up. Snow was falling steadily now and it seemed as if the only color in the whole world was the fiery orange of the Questing Stone that shone in Septimus’s hand as he and Beetle emerged from the mist.

“You know,” said Jenna, “this place reminds me of a story Dad used to tell us about the weary travelers who climbed up to a huge tower in the mist. They got to a door with weird creatures carved all around it and pulled the bellpull. Ages later it was opened by a little hunchback figure who stared at them for hours and then said in a really creepy voice,

‘Yeeeeeeeeees?’ You remember that, Sep?”

“Nope,” said Septimus. “I was in the Young Army at the time—probably at the bottom of a wolverine pit while you were listening to bedtime stories.”

“Oh sorry, Sep. Sometimes it feels as though you were with us all the time.”

“Wish I had been,” said Septimus quietly. Sometimes he tried to imagine what he had missed but it wasn’t a good thing to do. It gave him a feeling of heaviness that was hard to shake off.

They set off once more walking together, but soon the path narrowed and they were forced to go on in single file. The path became steeper, winding in and out of rocky outcrops, and as they climbed the air grew colder. Beetle had a feeling that they were near the top. He braced himself for the sight of the snake that Snorri had drawn wrapped around the tower.

It must, he thought, be enormous. He wondered what it ate—and then he decided to stop wondering. It wasn’t making him feel good.

Now the path widened and began to level off. With their boots crunching on fine gravel, they approached the smooth white marble of the wide terrace that surrounded the House of Foryx. On the terrace they stopped to catch their breath.

In front of them a bank of mist rose, rolling and swirling with the snow, and behind that they could just make out the gray granite of the House of Foryx. They glanced at one another. Where was the snake?

Stealthily, they crept across the terrace, their feet slipping on the damp smoothness of the marble. Septimus held out the Questing Stone and like a beacon it guided them through the whiteness to the foot of a flight of wide, shallow steps.

“Wait there,” Septimus whispered. “I’ll go check out the snake.”

“No,” said Jenna. “We’ll all go. Won’t we, Beetle?”



Beetle nodded reluctantly. He hated snakes. “Okay,” he said.

Cautiously, they crept up the steps, Septimus holding the Questing Stone before him to guide the way. “There’s no snake,” said Septimus from the mist. “Just a big old door with lots of strange carvings around it.”

“No snake?” asked Beetle just to make sure.

“No snake,” came Septimus’s voice, “not even a tiny licorice one.” **44**

THE DOORKEEPER

The huge door to the

House of Foryx was almost as tall as the Wizard Tower doors. It was made out of great planks of ebony, fixed together with blackened iron bars and long lines of rivets. Around the door was a heavy frame carved with monsters and bizarre creatures that stared down at Jenna, Septimus and Beetle. They stood with the snow settling onto their wolverine cloaks, plucking up the courage to ring the long bellpull that emerged from the mouth of an iron dragon poking through the granite beside the door.

“Now, you remember what we decided?” Septimus asked Beetle.

“Yep. You and Jen go in and I’ll wait outside. I’ll give you three hours on the timepiece and then ring the bell. If you don’t come out, I’ll ring every hour until you do. Okay?”

“Great.” Septimus gave Beetle a thumbs-up sign.

Jenna reached up and yanked hard on the bellpull. Deep within the House of Foryx a bell jangled. Silently they stood in the steadily falling snow and waited...and waited.

After what felt like hours, the door creaked slowly open. A small, bent figure peered out. “Yeeeeeeeeees?” it said.

Jenna stared at the DoorKeeper. She remembered Silas hunched over the storybook, putting on his funny, squeaky voice in which he pronounced the “R” as a “W,” and making silly faces at her and her brothers. An attack of giggles overcame her.

The DoorKeeper looked somewhat affronted at Jenna’s laughter. Usually no one laughed when they arrived at the House of Foryx. He reminded Jenna of a brown bat. He was small, with tiny hooded eyes, a close-fitting brown moleskin cap and a long brown cape made of some kind of closely cropped fur. Like a roosting bat, he clung to the doorknob as if he were afraid of being blown away.

“Um, may we come in, please?” asked Jenna.

“Doooooooooooo

you have an appointment?” asked the DoorKeeper, standing in the gap made by the open door, barring their way in.

“An appointment?” replied Jenna. “No, but—”

“Noooooooooooo

one enters the House without an appointment.” The DoorKeeper said in his swooping, bat-squeak of a voice. He stared at Jenna reproachfully, his eyes like little black beads.

“In that case I would like to make an appointment, please,” Jenna told him.

“Veeeeeeeeewy well. You may enter when you have made it. Good-bye.”

“But how do we make—” The DoorKeeper began to close the door. “No—wait!” Jenna yelled.

Beetle leaped forward and put his foot against the door. The DoorKeeper pushed hard against Beetle’s boot. A battle developed between Beetle’s boot and the door, but inch by inch the DoorKeeper pushed Beetle’s boot back. Beetle added his shoulder to the pressure of his boot and leaned against the door, but the strength of the DoorKeeper was out of proportion to his small size. Jenna began to panic. They had to get inside—they had to. It was unthinkable to be so close to Nicko and to have the door slammed in their faces. She threw herself at the door, adding her weight to Beetle’s, but still the door kept closing.

“Stop!” yelled Septimus. “We don’t need an appointment.” He thrust the Questing Stone under the nose of the DoorKeeper. “We’ve got this.”

The DoorKeeper stopped pushing and looked at the Stone. He peered up at Septimus and said suspiciously, “What, are all of you on the Queste?”

“Yes,” said Septimus defiantly.

“Typical. You wait thousands of years for one Appwentice and then thwee come along at once.” Jenna stared at the DoorKeeper in amazement. He spoke exactly as Silas had done—he couldn’t pronounce his Rs. Did Silas know about the House of Foryx, she wondered? Had he been here once?

The DoorKeeper scrutinized them more closely, taking in the fact that only Septimus wore a green tunic. “You can come in,” he said to Septimus, “but the other two can’t.”

Jenna panicked at the thought of Septimus going into the House of Foryx on his own. If he did, she was sure they would never see him again. She imagined herself and Beetle waiting outside for days, for weeks—months even, and then going home without him. That

was unbearable. In desperation—remembering the next part of Silas’s bedtime story—she said, “We demand the Right of the Riddle.”

The DoorKeeper looked at her in amazement. “You what?” he asked.

Aware that Septimus and Beetle were staring at her as though she had gone crazy, Jenna repeated, “We demand the Right of the Riddle.”

“The Wight of the Widdle?”

“Yes,” said Jenna very firmly, determined to keep a straight face—despite a suppressed splutter from Beetle.

“Vewy well,” the DoorKeeper replied grumpily.

“Go on, then,” prompted Jenna.

The DoorKeeper sighed and began to chant in his high-pitched voice,

“I spit like bacon,

I am made with an egg,

I have plenty of backbone, but lack a good leg,

I peel layers like onions, but still wemain whole,

I am long like a flagpole, yet fit in a hole,

What am I?”

Now Jenna understood Snorri’s drawing. “A snake,” she replied with a grin.

The DoorKeeper looked surprised and not particularly pleased. “Vewy well. You have two more. I think you will not be smiling then.” Once more he began his chant:

“What force and stwength cannot get thwough,

I with a gentle touch can do.

And many in the street would stand,

Were I not a friend at hand.

What am I?"

Jenna knew at once. "A key," she said.

Now the DoorKeeper was irritated. "Coward," he said very reluctantly. "But you will not find this one so easy." He began once again, this time chanting much faster and in a whisper. They leaned forward to catch his words.

"I am only one color, but not one size.

Though I'm chained to the earth, I can easily fly.

I am present in sun, but not in vain,

I do no harm, I feel no pain.

What am I?"

This time Jenna was stumped. What else was on the map? There was nothing she could remember.

"I'm waiting," said the DoorKeeper in a singsong sneer. "You have one minute to answer and then I shall let the Questor in. Alone. You two can go home—if you pay the Toll-Man enough." He gave a horrible chuckle.

In a panic, Jenna unfolded the map.

"No cheating. I said no cheating!" The DoorKeeper screamed excitedly. He snatched the map and began tearing it into shreds.

"No!" yelled Jenna, lunging forward to grab the map. "Give it back!"

“Jen, Jen, we don’t need it anymore,” said Septimus, pulling Jenna back.
“We’ve got to keep calm and think.”



“Twenty seconds,” came the DoorKeeper’s taunting squeak. “Fifteen seconds...ten, nine, eight, seven—” Septimus summoned up Snorri’s drawing in his mind—the snake, the key, the shaded House of Foryx.

“Four, thwee, two...”

And then he got it.

“One—”

“Shadow!”

The DoorKeeper glared at them. He said nothing, though the door spoke for him as he heaved it open with a chorus of groans and Septimus stepped

over the threshold. But as Jenna went to follow the DoorKeeper began to push the door closed.

“No!” yelled Beetle. “You let Jenna in.” He leaped forward and threw himself at the door. The DoorKeeper staggered back, the door flew open and Jenna, Beetle and Septimus fell into the House of Foryx.

The door slammed behind them with a bang.

“Oh no!” Beetle gasped, suddenly realizing his mistake. “Let me out, let me out!” It was too late. Time was suspended.

45

THE HOUSE OF FORYX

O h, pigs,” said Beetle. “Pigs pigs pigs.”

“Oh...Beetle,” whispered Jenna, feeling sick.

“I don’t believe I could be so stupid. How are we going to get back into our Time now?” The DoorKeeper looked up at Beetle. “Time?” he said with a lopsided grin. “What is Time now that you are here?”

Welcome to the House of Fowyx.”

They were in the checkerboard lobby that Aunt Ells had described—but the tall dragon chair that Aunt Ells had so resolutely sat on was empty. Jenna felt overwhelmed by disappointment. She had expected Nicko to be sitting on the chair waiting for them just as Aunt Ells had done, and he wasn’t there.

“Leave your bags here,” said the DoorKeeper, pointing to a large cupboard.

Jenna took out Ullr from her backpack and tucked him firmly under her arm—much to the DoorKeeper’s surprise. The DoorKeeper threw the bags into the cupboard, and then turned to watch the new arrivals.

In front of them was a pair of silver doors—a smaller version of those in the Wizard Tower, although much more ornate, as they were covered with hieroglyphs. The DoorKeeper pushed them open and ushered Jenna, Septimus and Beetle into the House of Foryx. They stood stock still, three small figures dwarfed between two huge marble pillars, the snow on their boots melting in the warmth and making puddles on the white marble floor. Before them was a great space lit with thousands of candles and yet still shadowy and dim.

Jenna felt dizzy, as though she were standing on the edge of a whirling carousel in a foggy, silent fairground, waiting for her turn—and she did not want her turn to come. Septimus was reminded of the Wizard Tower. There was a certain sense of things not being quite what they appeared to be, a feeling of things shifting slightly whenever you tried to focus on them, giving the sensation that the more you looked, the less you saw. Beetle was reminded of something too—the inside of the Dangerous Bin in the yard at the Manuscriptorium. On a dare he had once taken off the lid and seen a deep, foggy whirlpool inside that had made him want to dive in and swim around and around forever—until Foxy had grabbed his collar and pulled him away.

The DoorKeeper regarded their expressions with amusement. He generally made a point of being unamused by everything, but he made an exception for the expressions on the faces of newcomers as they tried to make sense of the Eddies of Time. After some minutes, having had his fill of fun for the day—indeed for the next few months—the DoorKeeper scuttled off through a tiny gilded door in the pillar next to Jenna and slammed it shut.

The slamming of the door brought them back to reality. “Come on,” whispered Septimus. “Let’s go in.” They linked arms and together they stepped into the slow, muggy vortex of candle smoke and Time.

They walked hesitantly forward, feeling as though they were wading through treacle, forcing themselves through an invisible barrier. Septimus held out the Questing Stone, which sat, hot, in his hand, glowing a brilliant fiery red. It shone like a beacon, clearing a path through the haze. As they pushed their way deeper into the House of Foryx, shadowy shapes that they had at first taken for drifts of candle smoke and disturbances in the air

became clearer. Figures began to emerge from the miasma and circle around them.

“There are ghosts in here,” Beetle whispered. “Tons of ’em.”

“They’re not ghosts,” said Septimus. “They’re real. I mean...alive. I can hear them. I can Hear the Sounds of Human Heartbeats. Hundreds of them.”

“What are they doing?” Jenna whispered.

“The same as us, I expect,” said Septimus. “Trying to get back to their own Time.”

“But we’re not doing that.”

“We will be.”

Jenna said nothing. Beetle felt awful.

The figures around them became increasingly solid; their robes took on colors and shapes and their faces became clear.

There were farmers, hunters, women in fine clothes, serving men and women in rough tunics, knights in all kinds of armor and finery, a large family of exotic-looking people festooned with gold with an interesting line in pointy headgear.

Ullr was restless. He struggled in Jenna’s arms, trying to jump down. But Jenna clutched the cat even more tightly. The last thing she needed right now was to lose Ullr.

Jenna and Septimus were scanning the crowd, hoping to see the familiar sight of Nicko’s fair curls and Snorri’s white-blond hair. They began to realize that they, too, had become visible, and that they—and the Questing Stone in particular—were the center of attention.

Suddenly the crowd parted and a young woman in a threadbare green cloak and tunic made her way to the front, heading straight for Septimus. She fixed Septimus with her surprisingly brilliant green eyes and pointed a long,

delicate finger at the Stone. “You have the Questing Stone,” she said in amazement.

Septimus nodded.

“And what are you called?”

“Um. Septimus. Septimus Heap.”

The girl looked at Septimus with a puzzled expression. “Well, Septimus Heap, you are very...short,” she said as if searching for the right words.

“Short?” asked Septimus indignantly.

“I mean...young. You are very young. Surely you have not finished your Apprenticeship?”

“No...I haven’t,” he replied, puzzled.

“So what, pray, are you doing on the Queste?” demanded the girl, sounding a little like Marcia.

“I—I’m not really on the Queste,” stammered Septimus. “Or rather...I didn’t mean to go on the Queste. Someone gave me the Stone and I took it by mistake.”

“By mistake?” The girl now sounded completely like Marcia. “How very foolish. Still, we can’t be choosy. My Master will just have to make do with you. We were expecting great things but now...” The girl looked Septimus up and down with an expression that said she had no expectations of any kind—let alone great ones—when it came to Septimus.

Jenna had been impatiently waiting for her chance to ask the girl if she had seen Nicko, but as she opened her mouth to speak, a tall, important-looking woman swept up to them. She was wearing a dark blue fur-edged robe and her long face reminded Beetle of a horse he used to feed apples to on the way to school. She pushed aside the grumpy girl in green.

“Welcome to Eternity,” said the woman.

“Eternity?” Beetle gasped. “Are we dead?”

“You are alive in all Times, and yet dead in all Times,” she replied. “Welcome.” Beetle thought it was not the best welcome he had ever had. He glanced at Jenna and Septimus. They did not look too thrilled either.

“I am the Guardian of this House,” the horse-faced woman continued. “This House is a Place of Waiting. Here you will want for nothing, for here you will want nothing. Many arrive but few wish to leave.” A dark-haired young woman wearing a long white fur cloak and a large amount of gold jewelery pushed forward. “Some of us wish to leave,” she interrupted the Guardian. The young woman looked at Jenna, Septimus and Beetle. “I can smell the snow on you,” she said longingly. “I come from the Palaces of the Eastern SnowPlains. All I wish is to go home to my family. But you have Come In and told no one your Time. No one has had the chance to go.” The girl in green who, Septimus now realized, was wearing a very ancient Apprentice tunic—one of the full-length ones with the old hieroglyphs—was getting impatient. “Madam Guardian,” she said. “I have come to take the Apprentice boy to our Master.”

“My friends must come too,” said Septimus.

The girl looked at Beetle and Jenna in surprise. “You have brought friends with you—on the Queste?” she said, and then she noticed Jenna’s red robes and gold circlet. In a flurry of embarrassment she made a low bow. “I beg a thousand pardons, Princess. I did not realize.” She turned to Septimus, even more disapprovingly. “Why did you bring the Princess, Apprentice? It is most foolhardy. Who will protect the Castle now?”

“I didn’t bring her,” said Septimus, feeling exasperated. “It was her idea. We are looking for our brother; we think he is here.”

The ancient Apprentice looked shocked. “You are a Prince. Forgive me.” She bowed once again.

“No—no, I’m not a Prince,” said Septimus quickly.

The Apprentice stopped in midbow. “Follow me,” she said curtly. She set off through the crowd, like a mother duck with three wayward ducklings. The crowd parted to allow them through, staring at them as they went.

They followed the mother duck up a broad flight of stairs that took them higher and higher until they were surrounded by the waxy haze of candle smoke that hung over the hall far below. At last, coughing and spluttering in the smoke, they came to a wide balustraded landing lined with marble benches along the walls and a hundred tiny alcoves containing yet more candles. Now that they were away from the crowd, the ancient Apprentice relaxed a little. She stopped and turned to them in the manner of a tour guide. Pointing through the haze, she said, “Here you see four stairways. Each of these leads to a tower. In each tower is an ancient Glass.”

Septimus glanced at Jenna—now they were getting somewhere. “What kind of Glass?” he asked.

“I will not explain. You are too young to comprehend,” she replied, lapsing into Marcia-speak once more. “Follow me.” The girl pushed open a concealed door in the soot-stained white marble walls. “Take a candle,” she instructed, pointing to a collection of lit candles in brass candleholders lined up in an alcove by the door. She took one herself and stepped through the door.

They took their candles and followed the girl into a narrow passage, which was cut into the marble walls so that the sloping sides met at a point not far above their heads. It wound steeply upward and as they followed the girl’s practiced steps, they slipped and slid on the smooth marble underfoot.

“Where are we going?” asked Septimus.

The girl did not reply.

Breathless from the climb, some minutes later they arrived at the end of the passageway. The candles flared and cast distorted shadows across the smoke-blackened marble. For a moment, Septimus thought he was seeing things: in front of them, barring their way, was the big purple door that led to Marcia’s rooms.

“That’s Marcia’s door!” Septimus gasped. He looked around at Jenna and Beetle. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Looks like it,” said Beetle. “Can’t be though, can it? Must be a copy.”

“No. It’s identical. Look, there’s where Marcia caught Catchpole scratching his initials when he was on door duty.” Septimus pointed to a B and an unfinished C. “And that’s where Spit Fyre chewed the edge, and that’s where the Assassin kicked it. It’s the same.”

At Septimus’s approach it did what Marcia’s door always did—unlatched itself and began to swing open.

“Weird,” said Beetle, trying to peer inside. “Do you suppose we’ll find Marcia in there too?”

“You

will find no one in there,” the girl said to Beetle, stepping in front of him. She grabbed hold of the door handle.

“Because you are not coming in.”

“Yes, he is,” said Jenna. “Where Sep goes we all go.”

“Your Majesty,” the girl began.

“Don’t call me that,” blazed Jenna.

“I am sorry. I did not wish to offend. Princess, I will give you a few minutes to say farewell to the Questor and then you and your servant must leave. I realize this is a sad occasion but I wish you Good Speed in returning to the Castle and Good Fortune in finding a Time that is Right. You are lucky, you have the key to this House. May your freedom to roam take you where you wish. Farewell.” The girl bowed; then—taking everyone by surprise—she pushed Septimus inside,



ran in after him and slammed the door in Jenna and Beetle's face.

Shocked, Jenna and Beetle looked at each other as they heard the unmistakable sound of the door Barring.

"Oh, pigs," said Beetle. "Pigs pigs pigs."

46

ULLR'S QUEST

Jenna banged on the purple door. "Sep!" she yelled. "Sep!"

Seizing his chance, Ullr wriggled out from under her arm, but Beetle grabbed his tail as he shot past. Furious, Ullr screeched. Ignoring the cat's sharp claws, Beetle picked him up and stuffed the struggling animal under his arm.

"Jenna—we're going to get Septimus out. Whatever it takes," Beetle told her. "Ouch. Stop it, Ullr." Jenna slumped against the Barred door in despair. "But how?" she wailed. "How?"

"I shall find an ax and break down the door," said Beetle quietly, looking Jenna in the eye.

Jenna returned his gaze. She knew Beetle meant what he said. “Okay,” she said.

They set off down the marble passage. As a parting shot, Beetle yelled, “We’ll be back!” The door stared back at them, impervious.

Waiting on a bench on the candle-filled landing was the horse-faced Guardian. As Jenna emerged through the concealed door, the Guardian got to her feet. “Princess,” she said, planting herself in front of Jenna and barring her way.

“Yes?” Jenna snapped.

The Guardian smiled smoothly. She had an expression bordering on smug that irritated Jenna. “Whither do you go?”

“To find an ax,” Jenna replied sharply—and then wished she hadn’t.

However, the Guardian did not react. “I have some business with you,” she said. “You can send your servant for what you need.”

“My servant?”

The Guardian waved her arm at Beetle, who was stuck in the passageway behind Jenna, occupied with Ullr.

Jenna was indignant. “He’s not my servant,” she said.

“What is he, then?”

“He is not a what; he is a who. And it is none of your business. Would you let me pass, please? We have things to do.” Jenna tried to sidestep the Guardian but once again her way was barred.

“Whatever it is you wish to do,” the Guardian told her, “there is no need for haste. You have Eternity in which to do it.

You are no longer on the donkey cart of Time, forever trundling onward.”

“Thank you,” said Jenna icily. “But I quite like the donkey cart. At least it gets you somewhere. Now excuse me.”

“You are young, so I will excuse you. Now give me the key.”

“What?”

“The key.” The Guardian indicated the key to the Queen’s Room—a beautiful gold key set with an emerald—that hung from Jenna’s belt.

“No!”

“Yes!” The Guardian grabbed Jenna, digging her nails into her arm. “You must,” she hissed. “It belongs to the House.

You have stolen it.”

“I have not!” Jenna was furious. “Let go of me!”

The Guardian shook her head. “Not until you give me the key.” She smiled, her horse teeth glinting in the candlelight. “I am patient. Time is nothing to me, although it still has meaning to you, it seems. I will wait. We can stand here as long as you like.” The nails sunk deeper into Jenna’s arm.

“Let go of her.” There was an edge of menace in Beetle’s voice that Jenna had not heard before.

“Your servant is very loyal,” the Guardian said with a sneer.

Suddenly, a long, rumbling growl began somewhere by the Guardian’s knees. She looked down and the NightUllr, ready to pounce, stared back with angry eyes. “Let go of the Princess,” said Beetle quietly, “or she will set her panther on you.”

The Guardian let go. A panther was a panther, whatever Time it was.

Beetle grabbed Jenna’s hand. “Come on,” he said, “we’ve got an ax to find.” Too afraid to move, the Guardian watched them walk swiftly across

the landing and then—as the panther suddenly veered off and raced up one of the turret stairs—saw them break into a run.

“Ullr!” yelled Jenna, racing off in pursuit. “Come back! Ullr!”

Unused to such excitement, the Guardian resumed her place on the bench and waited—knowing that all things in the House of Foryx come to those who wait.

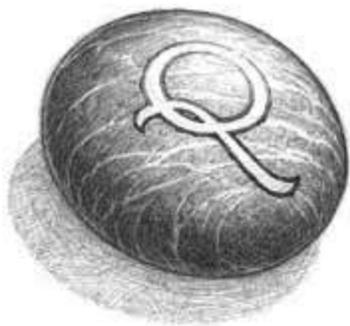
The turret stairs were steep, narrow and seemingly endless. Jenna and Beetle pounded up after Ullr and came to a halt at a small stone archway. The stairs carried on upward but through the archway Jenna could see a long, dark corridor lit by a few sparse candles. She stopped and tried to catch her breath. Which way had Ullr gone?

Beetle caught up with her. “Can you see him?” she puffed.

Too breathless to speak, Beetle shook his head. Then, in the light of the very last candle at the end of the corridor he caught a glimpse of the orange tip of Ullr’s tail. “There!”

With a new burst of energy, Jenna lifted up her long tunic and hurtled down the corridor, with Beetle close behind. The corridor followed the shape of the octagonal turret, each 135-degree bend turning just enough to obscure their view of the next. The turret was rougher than the marble opulence of the main part of the House of Foryx and their feet echoed on bare stone flags as they ran. So intent were Jenna and Beetle on catching up with Ullr that they paid no attention to the little rooms that led off from the corridor. Each one was lit by a single candle and occupied by shadowy figures slowly performing their familiar everyday routines, as some of them had been doing for thousands of years.

As Jenna and Beetle rounded each corner, they caught a brief glimpse of Ullr’s tail disappearing around the next—then the next and the next. A few of the inhabitants of the turret glanced up, first at the panther and then at the hurried



footsteps of Jenna and Beetle, but none paid them much heed.

As they rounded yet another corner Jenna realized there was no sight of Ullr's tail. She stopped to catch her breath.

"Can't see...him," she puffed as a few seconds later Beetle caught up with her. "Gone." Beetle leaned against the wall, gasping. He had led a sedentary life up until the previous few days and the last few minutes had just about finished him off. "Haaaah..." was all he could manage in reply.

Suddenly, from somewhere down the corridor, there was a scream and then a yell of joy. "Ullr! Ullr, Ullr, Ullr!" Jenna looked at Beetle, half excited, half afraid. "It's Snorri," she whispered.

"Is it?"

"Yes. It is. Oh, Beetle—Snorri is here. So Nicko...Nicko must be too." Then an awful thought struck Jenna. What if Nicko wasn't there—what if something had happened to him and it was just Snorri? Jenna looked at Beetle. "I'm scared," she whispered. "Scared we've come all this way and he won't be here." Beetle put his arm around Jenna. "There's only one way to find out," he said. "Come on, let's go see." It felt like the longest walk Jenna had ever taken. She and Beetle went slowly, looking inside each dimly lit room. In the first room were two beds and a simple table. Two girls were sitting at the table chatting quietly, a bottle of wine between them. The second room was sparse and barracklike; at the end of a narrow bed with folded blankets a man sat polishing a gleaming suit of armor. In the third room a hammock was slung from one wall to another. The only piece of furniture was a large trunk, on which an old man with a full white

beard and a tattered sailor's uniform sat knitting. The fourth room was lined with books; in the shadows Jenna saw the outline of a woman in a long, dark dress hunched over a desk, writing. The fifth room was empty. The sixth contained three members of the pointy hat contingent sitting around a table, playing a board game. The seventh contained Snorri Snorrelssen.

Clutching Beetle's hand, with her heart beating so loudly she was sure Snorri could hear it, Jenna walked softly through the doorway and stood in the shadows. All she could see was the candlelight reflecting off Snorri's white-blond hair and the dark shape of Ullr enclosed in Snorri's arms. There was no sign of Nicko. And then—

“Jen?” A voice came from the shadows beside Jenna. “Jen! Oh, Jen!” She heard the sound of a chair being pushed back from a table and clattering to the ground, felt a whirlwind enveloping her and then she was lifted off her feet and spun around and around—as if she were a little girl once again.

Nicko set Jenna back on her feet, but Jenna would not let go. Beetle saw her head buried in her brother's grubby sailor's tunic, her shoulders shaking with—Beetle was not sure if it was tears or laughter. He was still not sure when Jenna looked up, her eyes bright and her smile the biggest he had ever seen.

“We found him. We found him!” laughed Jenna.

47

SEPTIMUS'S QUESTE

Septimus heard nothing of Jenna's shouts and thumps through the thick purple door. Angrily, he instructed the door to UnBar.

The girl laughed. “You will not succeed, Septimus Heap. Though 'tis true, the door is a Twin, but all identical twins have some differences. You have just discovered one of them.” The Apprentice appraised Septimus with a disappointed air. “I have spent a long time waiting for a Questor

to arrive. I had hoped for someone more...mature to pass some days with. Do you play cards?"

"Cards?"

"I could teach you a few games. I expect you could manage Snap."

"Snap?"

The girl sighed. "Possibly not," she said.

Septimus said nothing. The girl reminded him of Lucy Gringe—although she was much more irritating. He gave up any hope of a reasonable conversation and turned his attention to his new surroundings. He was in a huge octagonal chamber. Above him was a beautiful glass dome through which he could see the darkening sky suffused with the last pinkish rays of the sunset. He was, he guessed, at the very top of the House of Foryx. Watched by the eagle eyes of the ancient Apprentice, Septimus wandered around the chamber. It was a vast place, and the furnishings—the rugs, the lapis chests, the rich tapestries—reminded him of Marcia's rooms. But that, thought Septimus, did not completely explain the oddly familiar feeling. There was something else...something more essential—the smell of Magyk

"What is this place?" Septimus asked the grumpy Apprentice.

"The House of Foryx," came the reply.

"I know that," Septimus replied, trying not to betray his impatience. "But this place. This room—what is it?"

"You will find out soon enough."

Septimus sighed. He tried one last question. "Who are you?"

To his surprise the girl actually answered his question. "I am Talmar," she said.

Talmar. The name was familiar. Septimus tried to remember why—and then it came to him. Suddenly, he felt very odd indeed. “Not...Talmar Ray Bell?” he asked.

A look of amazement appeared on the girl’s face. “How do you know?” she asked.

Septimus grinned, pleased with the effect of his question.

Somewhere in the distance came the silvery sound of a bell. Talmar assumed her air of superiority once more and pronounced, “My Master is ready. Follow me, Septimus Heap.”

With the setting of the sun, the glass dome had darkened. As Septimus followed Talmar through the chamber, candles sprang into flame one by one to light their path. At the far end of the chamber, Talmar drew back some heavy curtains to reveal a figure sitting by a fire on a low, comfortable chair not unlike the one that sat close to the fire in Marcia’s rooms—the one she always insisted was hers.

Talmar beckoned Septimus inside. He stepped through the curtains and the figure—a frail, elderly man with long, wavy white hair held back with an ExtraOrdinary Wizard headband—looked up. The light of the candle flames shone in his brilliant green eyes, making them seem almost on fire.

“This is our Questor, Septimus Heap,” said Talmar.

“Welcome, Questor,” the old man said with a smile. He started to get up and Talmar rushed to his side to help him. As he stood, a little bent and unsteady on his feet, Septimus saw that he was dressed in an archaic set of ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes—from the ancient days when they were embroidered with hieroglyphs in gold thread. Leaning on Talmar’s arm, the old man walked slowly toward Septimus.

“From the Old to the New,” he murmured in an accent Septimus had not heard before. “Greetings.”

“Greetings,” Septimus replied, taking the thin old hand.

The old man looked down at Septimus's right hand. Septimus followed his gaze and saw the Dragon Ring, which was shining brighter than he had ever seen it do before—like a tiny lamp on his right index finger. "You have my ring," murmured the ancient ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

"Your ring?" said Septimus. "But I thought it had only ever belonged to... Oh. Oh, of course."

"Ah. You know who I am?" asked the old man.

Septimus nodded. Now he understood. "You're Hotep-Ra," he said.

As the stars shimmered through the dome and the full moon traveled across the sky, Septimus, Talmar Ray Bell and Hotep-Ra sat picking at a feast of delicacies, which had appeared on the long, low table that Talmar had set in front of the fire. Talmar poured mint tea into three small colored glasses.

Hotep-Ra raised his glass and said, "Let us celebrate the end of your Queste." He downed the tea in one gulp. Septimus and Talmar followed suit.

"There is but one thing left for you to do before your Queste is ended."

"Oh?" Septimus feared the worst.

"You must give me the Questing Stone."

Septimus smiled—there was nothing he would like better. He took the fiery red stone from his pocket.

Relieved to be rid of the Stone, Septimus put it in the outstretched hand. Hotep-Ra placed his other hand over the Stone and Septimus saw the bright light shine through, showing the bones of the hand beneath the skin like dark red shadows.

And then the light began to fade and Hotep-Ra's hands became opaque once more. He uncupped his hands and the Questing Stone was now an inky black. "You have completed the Queste." Hotep-Ra smiled at

Septimus. “Now for the reason I have brought you all this way: come sit beside me and tell me all that has happened at the Castle in my absence.”

“All?” asked Septimus, wondering how he was supposed to know.

“As Apprentice you will know such things. Now, before you begin I shall place my sign on the back of this stone and return it to you as a memento of your journey.”

Septimus was not sure that he actually wanted a memento of the journey but he said nothing. Hotep-Ra turned the stone over and his expression clouded.

“What is it, Master?” asked Talmar.

“I do not understand. I numbered these Stones with a Hidden tally. As each one was Drawn the number would show itself. This is number twenty-one. This is the last Stone,” muttered Hotep-Ra.

“I thought

something was wrong,” said Talmar, glaring at Septimus. “He is far too young. He has not even finished his Apprenticeship.”

“Has he not?” asked the Wizard, puzzled. “But this is an honor reserved for the last day of the Apprenticeship.”

“Exactly. He must have stolen it. He is no more than a common thief.” Septimus had had enough of Talmar’s rudeness. He exploded with indignation. “How dare you call me a thief! Anyway, what would anyone want to steal that for?” he asked. “It has been nothing but trouble. And I can tell you that I am the last Questor—it was the last Stone in the Pot. And I can tell you something else—all the others who went on the Queste never returned. It is not an honor—it is a curse. Every Apprentice dreads their last day because of it. And Tertius Fume is—”

“Tertius Fume?” Hotep-Ra gasped. “Has that lying, underhanded, double-crossing streak of Wurm Slime returned?”

“Well, his ghost has,” said Septimus.

“His ghost? Ha! At least he is no longer Living. But what effrontery—I Banish him and he sneaks back as soon as I am gone. When did this happen?”

“A long time ago. He’s ancient.”

“How ancient?”

“I—I don’t really know. He’s one of the oldest in the Castle.”

“One of the oldest...” Hotep-Ra fell silent for some minutes. Neither Talmar nor Septimus dared speak. Finally the ancient ExtraOrdinary Wizard said very quietly, as if expecting bad news, “Tell me, Apprentice—how many ExtraOrdinary Wizards have there been since Talmar and I left the Castle?”

“Seven hundred and seventy-six,” Septimus said.

“You jest!” exclaimed Hotep-Ra.

“No. I had to learn it when I first became an Apprentice. My ExtraOrdinary Wizard made me write it out and stick it on the wall. Anyway I counted them all last week.”

Hotep-Ra swallowed hard. “I thought it was maybe five or six at the most,” he said quietly. “Things are not as they should be.”

“How—how should they be?” asked Septimus.

Hotep-Ra sighed. “Eat, fellow Dragon Master,” he said. “Tell me about your Queste and I will tell you about mine.” And so Septimus sat under the moonlit dome and told Hotep-Ra how he had come to the House of Foryx. And then, while he hungrily ate from the dishes of fragrant fruits, spicy meats and fish and drank mint tea, he listened to the soft, melodious frail voice of the Castle’s very first ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

“When I was a young man,” said Hotep-Ra, “and I was

a young man once, it was forbidden to dabble with Time. But, like many young men, I did not always obey the rules.

And when I discovered the secret of suspending Time I knew I had to find a place where I could keep my secret and make it work. I traveled far and wide until I came across a beautiful forest in the center of which was an abyss. From the middle of this chasm rose a tall rock and when I saw it I knew I had found the perfect place to build my secret House of Time.

“And so I set to work. First, I Caused a bridge to be made—it is a beautiful bridge is it not?” Septimus nodded. Hotep-Ra spoke the truth: the bridge was beautiful.

Hotep-Ra smiled. “Beautiful but terrifying. Now, among the more Magykal Wizards, there is an unfortunate tendency to be afraid of heights. I have to admit, I wished to keep my fellow Wizards away from my House of Time—I wanted no interference and no scheming. Wizards can be jealous of true talent, Apprentice. They are not above sabotaging projects of the more gifted. Remember that. And so, to make doubly sure of being left in peace, I enticed the Foryx, which many now think are mythical beasts, for they are no longer seen—except here. I Caused them to forever run around the precipice path to guard my House of Time. I soon noticed that those who came began to call this place the House of Foryx and I was pleased, as it gave no clue that this was a place where All Times Do Meet.

“When I became old I left the Castle, the dear Queen and my poor Dragon Boat, and I came to my House of Foryx. I wish now that I had come earlier, when I still had my strength, but I wanted to see my Dragon Boat restored. Never get a boat repaired by the Port men, Apprentice—they are laggards and thieves. As I made my way to the House of Foryx, I comforted myself that although I would miss the Castle terribly, I would still know what was going on, because I had set up the Queste.

“The Queste was to be a great honor. I had toyed with the idea of having only the most talented Apprentices go on my Queste, but then I realized that this would be unfair, so I devised a lottery. I filled a huge urn with hundreds of lapis stones, of which twenty-one were inscribed with a golden Q, and which each Apprentice had a fair chance of drawing. I thought it would be a

wonderful culmination to seven years' hard study to be picked to go on the Queste—to visit the founder of the Wizard Tower, to bring him the news of the Castle and to return with new knowledge and understanding.

In order to make it safe—for I did not want to risk the lives of anyone—I Engendered a boat to take the chosen Apprentice safely across the sea and up the great river right to the edge of what was a beautiful forest. I also Engendered seven Questing Guards

to escort them on their journey, to guide them past the Foryx and across the bridge. Their most important job was, of course, to wait outside my House so that the Questor would Go Out into his or her own Time. I made sure the Stone would also guide them here for safety, should the Guards fail. That was my plan. But that is not, so it seems, how it is?”

“No,” said Septimus sadly.

“There have been twenty Questors before you, you say?” said Hotep-Ra.

Septimus nodded.

“All perished?”

“Well, no one came back. And they would have if they could, wouldn't they?” Hotep-Ra nodded slowly and lapsed into thought. “It is Fume,” he said. “He has Darkened this Queste. All you tell me: the frozen forest, the silence, the foul and moaning fog, the murderous Questing Guards—do not look so shocked, Apprentice, how else could he make sure that no one reached me? It is him. I know it.” Septimus knew it too.

“He was my closest friend,” said Hotep-Ra sadly. “Once I trusted him completely. I loved him like a brother. But one time while I was away on the marshes attending to my dear Dragon Boat, he took over the Tower and sent his guards out to kill me.” Hotep-Ra shook his head in disbelief. “He had been planning that for years—and all the while showing me nothing but friendship. Think how you would feel, Apprentice, if your closest friend did this to you.” Septimus nodded in sympathy. He couldn't even imagine Beetle ever doing anything like that.

“Tertius only had the Tower for seven days, but it took seven years to repair the Darke damage he did. I Banished him, of course.” Hotep-Ra sighed. “And I have to admit that I missed him, even after he had betrayed me. As he left, he said that I might think I would control the Tower forever, but it would not be so. He swore he would return and that I would be sorry. I remember I told him there was nothing he could do that would make me sorrier than I was then, but now I think that is not true, for twenty young lives have been lost, and I never knew. And all those years I have been alone, waiting...” Hotep-Ra’s voice trailed off sadly into the night.

As Talmar busied herself with rugs and blankets for the nighttime chill, Septimus sat quietly, watching his Questing Stone

shimmer a deep iridescent blue in the light of the full moon, which shone through the dome above. He had done it, he told himself in amazement. He had completed the Queste .

But then a feeling of sadness came over him—twenty others had not. Septimus thought about what they had missed. Not only the rest of their lives, but also a Magyk night talking to the first-ever ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Septimus shivered.

He smelled the Magyk

in the air and, for the first time since he had started reading the works of Marcellus Pye, he felt content. This was good.

And Marcia—Marcia would be proud. If he ever saw her again.

Early the next morning, his head spinning, Septimus bade farewell to Hotep-Ra and walked out of the octagonal chamber. The Twin

of Marcia’s door closed gently behind him. With a candle in his hand, provided by a marginally more friendly Talmar Ray Bell, he wandered down the steep narrow marble passage and emerged onto the smoky balustrade landing.

Septimus knew it was morning—he had seen the sun rise through the glass dome—but there was no way of knowing that inside the blind House of Foryx. Warily, he sat on one of the benches—avoiding the horse-faced Guardian, who still sat and waited—and like her, he too waited. All who inhabit the House of Foryx will pass by the landing if you wait long enough, Hotep-Ra had advised. Septimus was prepared to wait for as long as it took for Jenna and Beetle to pass by. But the combination of the warmth of the muggy atmosphere and his restless night soon began to have an effect, and it was not long before Septimus had lain down on his bench and fallen asleep.

He dreamed the strangest dreams: Hotep-Ra and Tertius Fume dancing down Wizard Way, Marcia flying Spit Fyre through a thunderstorm, Talmar playing cards with a crocodile and Nicko shaking him, saying, “Wake up, you lazy lummo!”

The shaking continued past the dream and blearily Septimus opened one eye to find himself face to face with—Nicko.

In a split second Septimus was wide-awake. “Nik!” He threw his arms around his brother. “Hey, you’re real.”

“And so are you.” Nicko laughed.

“Sep—oh, Sep, you’ve escaped!” Jenna cried happily.

“Well, it wasn’t really like that but—”

The tall, horse-faced woman pushed between them and clamped a heavy hand on Jenna’s shoulder.

“When you have finished your touching reunion, I will have the key. Now please.” Beetle sprang forward and pulled the hand away. “Leave her alone,” he said.

But in the absence of a panther, the Guardian was not to be deterred. She grabbed Jenna’s arm. Jenna yelped in pain.

“Give me the key. If I have to take it I shall use it to lock you away. For Eternity.” Nicko loathed the Guardian. She had once called Snorri a witch and Hidden her in another turret for—how long? Nicko did not know. Days, weeks, centuries—he had no idea. Now it was payback time. Using more force than he knew was necessary, Nicko grabbed the Guardian’s wrist and angrily wrenched her arm away. Suddenly there was a loud scream and the Guardian was cradling her wrist, her hand hanging limp.

“Nik!” gasped Jenna. “You’ve broken her arm.”

“Desperate times, desperate measures,” said Nicko, heading for the stairs down the hall. “Let’s get out of here. Who is waiting outside? I bet it’s Sam, isn’t it?”

Jenna ran to keep up with him. “No.”

“Or Dad. Must be Dad. I can’t wait to see him. And Mum.”

Jenna couldn’t bear it. “No! Oh, Nik, I didn’t tell you. There’s no one outside.” Nicko stopped dead. “No one?”

“No.”

Beetle stared at his feet and wished he could disappear forever—until it occurred to him that that was exactly what he was going to do. He felt terrible.

“Then we’re all stuck,” said Nicko angrily. “Just like me and Snorri. We’ll never go home. Ever.”

“Not necessarily,” said Septimus. “I have an idea.”

48

DOOR TO DOOR



Someone,” Marcia told Catchpole, “has defaced my door.”

Catchpole jumped up guiltily, his sparse sandy hair standing up in surprise. Marcia had caught him taking a quick nap in the Old Spells cupboard. “Oh,” he said.

“If this is your idea of a joke I don’t think it is very funny,” said Marcia icily.

Catchpole balanced on one leg like an embarrassed heron. He wasn’t sure what Marcia was talking about but it sounded like trouble—again. “Oh, dear,” he said.

“Well, is it?”

“Is it what?”

“Is it your idea of a joke? I know your penchant for drawing on doors.” The penny dropped. “Oh, no. It wasn’t me, I promise. Absolutely not. Honestly—it wasn’t.” Marcia sighed. She believed him. The bizarre scribbles were far too complicated for Catchpole to have done. “Well, go get a bucket and a scrubbing brush. I want them cleaned off. I’m off to see Sarah Heap and I expect a nice clean door by the time I return. Got that?”

“Got that, Madam Marcia. Will do.” Reprieved, Catchpole shot off to find a bucket and a scrubbing brush.

“No!” Jenna gasped. “It’s disappearing! Stop. Stop!” In front of them the map was vanishing.

“Quick, tell it to stop,” said Nicko.

“Stop!” yelled Jenna.

“No—no, I mean write on it. Quick, Jen, before it all goes.”

Jenna picked up the piece of chalk and scrawled: STOP! DO NOT ERASE.

Catchpole screamed and dropped the bucket of hot soapy water on his foot. Huge, looping letters were writing themselves across the door as he watched. It was worse than when he had started—what would Marcia say? Catchpole picked up the scrubbing brush and got to work with a vengeance, but even as he scrubbed, more words appeared in the very spot he had just cleaned. Suddenly Catchpole understood—this was a test. Marcia had set it so that he could prove himself worthy of being reinstated as a sub-Wizard. Catchpole was determined not to fail. As more and more words came into view telling him STOP! THIS IS AN URGENT MESSAGE! Catchpole sped up, catching each one with his scrubbing brush as soon as it appeared, splashing water everywhere. Soon the landing outside Marcia’s rooms was a large, chalky puddle.

“More chalk!” yelled Jenna. “Quick!”

Snorri handed her a stub of chalk. “It’s the last one,” she said.

Jenna stopped, her hand poised above the door. She could not risk wasting this precious last piece of chalk. They watched MARCIA, WE ARE HERE! disappear from the door, followed by the rest of the precious map until nothing remained of Jenna's messages. "It's not going to work," she said miserably. "The door just gets rid of it." Everyone fell silent, a feeling of despair hanging in the air. Suddenly Septimus said, "It did work. But someone is washing it off."

"Who would do that?" asked Nicko.

"Marcia wouldn't," said Jenna, "or any of the Wizards. They'd know it was important."

"So who would be so stupid?" said Nicko.

Septimus knew exactly who. "Catchpole," he said.

"Catchpole?"

"Yep. It has to be. No one else in the Tower would dream of doing that. Jen, give me the chalk. I know what to write." Jenna handed over the chalk. She hoped Septimus knew what he was doing.

IS THAT YOU, CATCHPOLE? Septimus wrote in very clear letters.

"Is that you" was quickly erased, but the rubbing out stopped at the "C" of "Catchpole."

"I'll wait for him to reply," said Septimus. "There's no point wasting any more chalk until we know he's figured it out." Outside the Twin

of Marcia's door five people watched with bated breath. Seven long minutes passed while Catchpole threw the spiral stairs into fast mode and zoomed down to the Old Spells cupboard to get his pen.

He returned to find an irate Marcia accompanied by an anxious Sarah Heap—who Marcia had bumped into under the Great Arch. Marcia was staring at the door, her robes gathered around her ankles, her purple pythons soaking up the chalky water like a couple of pointy sponges. Catchpole

jumped off the stairs, skidded across the soapy floor and careened into his bucket, sending the rest of the water flying over Marcia. “What do you think you are doing?” she exploded. “I ask you to perform the simple task of removing graffiti from my door and you have the cheek to daub it with your own name. Catchpole, this is the last straw. You are fired!” Sarah Heap looked shocked. No wonder Septimus had run away if Marcia spent so much time yelling like this.

Catchpole was horrified. “No!” he pleaded. “No, it’s not what it looks like.”

“Ha!” said Marcia. “I’ve heard that one before. Believe me, Catchpole, it generally is exactly what it looks like—and then some.”

Catchpole produced his pen and waved it desperately. “But I was just—”



“I have no need to see what you’ve been writing with, thank you,” said Marcia. “I have better things to do. Stand aside, will you?”

“No! No, you don’t understand.” Catchpole threw himself in front of the door to stop Marcia from going inside. “Please, Madam Marcia, please. I didn’t do it. I can prove it. Please.” There was a break in Catchpole’s voice that caught Marcia by surprise.

“Very well,” she said. “Prove it.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“For heaven’s sake, stop groveling. Just get on with it.”

Oblivious to the soapy water, Catchpole kneeled down and wrote on the door, IT IS I, BORIS CATCHPOLE. WHO

ARE YOU?

Marcia tapped her foot impatiently, making little splashing noises. But as the words SEPTIMUS (BOY 412) appeared, the splashing noises stopped. Sarah Heap screamed.

“See?” said Catchpole. “It does it on its own. It’s said lots of things.”

“Like what?” asked Marcia.

“I don’t know,” Catchpole replied. “I was too busy washing them off.”

“You idiot! You washed them off?”

“But you told me to.”

“Oh, for goodness sake, give me your pen.” Marcia snatched the pen from Catchpole’s trembling hand and wrote: SEPTIMUS, IT’S MARCIA HERE. WHERE ARE YOU?

Far away in the House of Foryx a loud cheer went up.

49

IN TIME

As they emerged, jubilant, onto

the balustrade landing, a reception committee was waiting. Two huge bodyguards leaped forward and grabbed Nicko.

Snorri screamed. These were the very same bodyguards—known as Fowler and Brat—who had taken her away after a neighbor had accused her of Ill-Wishing his cactus.

“Let go!” yelled Nicko, struggling furiously. A furor broke out. Snorri aimed a kick at Fowler—a huge man with a gleaming bald head—who had Nicko’s arms pinned behind his back. Septimus and Beetle weighed in, rapidly followed by Jenna. Brat, who was much the smaller of the guards but was surprisingly strong and sported a pair of impressive cauliflower ears, swatted them away like irritating flies.

The Guardian stood in the background, half obscured by the candle smoke, her arm swathed in bandages. “Take him to the fortified room,” she called out. “I do not wish to ever see him again!”

“Don’t worry, Madam Guardian, you won’t.” Fowler laughed. “You can be sure of that. Oof—get off, boy,” he snarled.

This was addressed to Beetle, who had succeeded in getting him in a headlock.

The bodyguards dragged Nicko across the landing, accompanied by Snorri yelling and kicking their shins, and Jenna hanging on to her brother like a limpet. Beetle still had Fowler in a headlock—but to no discernable effect—and Ullr followed the melee, hissing.

But Septimus had stepped back from the fray. From his Apprentice belt he took a small crystal shaped like a shard of ice. Holding it carefully between finger and thumb he pointed the thinnest end at Fowler, who was now trying to drag Nicko and his entourage through a dark archway on the far side of the landing.

“Freeze!” yelled Septimus.

Beetle Froze. Horrified, Septimus realized his mistake. However, having a Frozen Beetle dangling from his neck like a dead weight had put Fowler off his stride, and Nicko seized his chance. He struggled free, grabbed Snorri and in a moment they were running for the stairs. Furious, Fowler shrugged

Beetle off, and Beetle toppled onto the floor like a felled tree. “Beetle!” cried Jenna. “Oh, Beetle!”

Nicko hurtled past Septimus, pulling Snorri behind him. “Come on, Sep!” Nicko yelled. “Let’s get out of this place. I’ve had enough—I don’t care what Time we end up in.”

“No, Nik!” shouted Septimus. “No—don’t.”

But Nicko and Snorri were racing down the wide, sweeping stairs, with Fowler and Brat in hot pursuit.

Septimus ran to Jenna. “You’ve got to stop Nik,” he told her. “He’s flipped. Stop him before he’s gone forever.” Jenna leaped to her feet. “But, Beetle...”

“He’ll be okay. I’ll fix it. Now, go!”

Jenna sped off, pushing her way past the Guardian, who made a half-hearted grab for her, and raced down the stairs.

Septimus left the Frozen

Beetle and leaned over the balustrade. He saw Jenna flying down the stairs, her red cloak streaming out behind. Far below through the candle smoke, he could see the hazy outlines of Nicko and Snorri reach the crowded hall and begin to push their way through, heading for the silver doors. Closing fast were Fowler and Brat.

Mistaking Septimus’s apparent lack of concern, the Guardian joined him. “We will soon have the troublemaker.” She smiled. Septimus did not reply. The Guardian felt suddenly uncomfortable and moved away. She didn’t like the strange unfocused look in Septimus’s eyes and she particularly did not like the peculiar purple mist that was beginning to surround him—she was afraid it might be catching.

Down in the Great Hall of the House of Foryx, Brat had overtaken Fowler and was within an arm’s length of Nicko. He reached out to grab him but at

the last second Nicko eluded him by darting behind a large man in a tall, pointy hat.

Suddenly Fowler stopped, looked puzzled, then yelled, “Idiot—he’s over there!” Brat wheeled around to see his quarry heading back up the stairs—how had the boy managed that?

Leaning over the balustrade, Septimus was concentrating harder than he had ever done before. To Project a living person is one of the hardest Projections to do. Septimus was struggling using Magykal powers he never believed he had but, like all Projections, it was not totally perfect. There were fuzzy edges and momentary gaps. Luckily the candle smoke covered up any imperfections and Septimus was careful to make sure the Projected Nicko was running just far enough ahead of the guards for them not to get too close a look. Exhilarated now by his mastery of Magyk, Septimus took the Projection

up the stairs. As the mirror image of Nicko came closer, he stepped back to give himself some distance—for the nearer a Projection

was, the harder it was to maintain. The Guardian noted approvingly that Septimus watched the young thug rush past but did nothing; she had misjudged the Apprentice, she thought. Her long nose shone with excitement as she watched her faithful Fowler and Brat—sweating profusely and bright red in the face—close in. They would have the boy any moment now.

Septimus sent his Projection racing into Nicko and Snorri’s turret and then relaxed. All he had to do now was Project the sound of running footsteps and let the guards exhaust themselves. He looked down to see if Jenna had managed to stop Nicko from leaving, but the candle smoke obscured his view. Septimus longed to rush down and talk some sense into Nicko, but he knew he had to trust Jenna to do it. He had something else to do—something that could not wait. Beetle needed DeFrosting.

The Guardian watched Septimus lead a shaky Beetle down the long sweeping staircase and as they disappeared into the haze of candle smoke she heard Fowler and Brat thudding back down the turret steps. She smiled

the kind of smile that you might expect from a horse that, determined to unseat its rider, sees a low tree branch come into sight.

Jenna had caught up with Nicko and Snorri in the checkerboard lobby. “No, Nik!” she yelled. “No, don’t go. Please. Not on your own. Please.”

“I’m not staying here,” said Nicko. “I’m not spending the rest of my life—and then some—locked in a filthy hole under the ground. They took Snorri there for ages. It was awful.”

“It was only a few days, Nicko,” said Snorri.

“Who knows how long it was,” Nicko growled. “This place messes with your head. No one knows how long any Time is—it’s crazy. I can’t stand it anymore.” He lunged for the door to the outside Time but Jenna caught his hand in midair.

“Nik! Just promise one thing. Please.”

“What?”

“That you’ll wait for Sep and Beetle.”

“If they turn up. You don’t understand, Jen. It’s weird here. People disappear.”

“They will turn up. They will.” As if in answer, the silver doors to the lobby suddenly flew open and Septimus and Beetle rushed in.

“They’re coming!” gasped Septimus. “My Projection broke down when I DeFrosted Beetle.”

“Okay, that’s it,” said Nicko. “I’m off.”

“Nik—wait!” said Jenna. She unclipped the key to the Queen’s Room that hung from her belt and shoved it into a small keyhole almost hidden in the middle of a hieroglyph on the right-hand silver door. As soon as she turned it they heard the sound of the doors Barring.

“That won’t stop her,” said Nicko. “She’s got a key too.”

“It will if I leave it in the lock,” said Jenna with a smile.

“Good one, Jen,” Septimus said with a grin.

They sat in the checkerboard lobby, poised between two worlds. Like her Aunt Ells before her, Snorri was seated on the tall dragon chair. She rested her feet on the thick, curled tail, and her thin frame almost disappeared into the carved dragon wings that formed the back of the chair. Nicko perched on the broad dragon-head arms. Both he and Snorri looked tense and worn.

Jenna, Septimus and Beetle had retrieved their backpacks and were sitting on the cold marble floor, leaning against them.

Nicko looked at them, shaking his head with amazement. “I still don’t believe it—that you’re really here. I just don’t.

We’ve waited so long, haven’t we, Snorri?”

Snorri nodded.

“I’m just very glad you’re here,” Jenna said quietly. “I was so afraid you wouldn’t be.”

“I very nearly wasn’t,” said Nicko. “There were so many times when I decided to leave. The doors are open and they don’t stop you, you know. But they tell you that you could go out into any Time at all. Even a time before”—Nicko shuddered—“before there were any people around. Before the House of Foryx existed—so you could never get back.

Snorri always said we should wait. She was right—but then she usually is.” Snorri blushed.

“Yes,” said Jenna, thawing a little toward Snorri. “She was right.” A pensive silence fell in the checkerboard lobby, but it did not last long. Suddenly there was a loud rapping on the silver doors, followed by a frantic rattling—someone was trying to put a key into the lock.

“It won’t go!” came the Guardian’s angry voice. “Guards, break down the doors!” At once Nicko was on his feet, his eyes wild. “They won’t get me,” he declared. “I’ll Go Out and take my chance rather than that.”

“I will come with you,” said Snorri. She picked up Ullr. “Ullr, too. He will come.”

“And so will we,” said Jenna solemnly. She looked at Septimus and Beetle. “Won’t we?” Septimus glanced at Beetle. “Count me in,” said Beetle.

“And me,” said Septimus.

“Really?” asked Nicko. “But it’s me they’re after, not you.”

“We’re in it together now, Nik,” said Septimus. “Whatever happens.” Now rhythmic thumping began. Fowler was hurling himself at the doors. Soon the lock, which was the weakest point, began to give.

“I’m Going Out now,” said Nicko, very composed and sure, his hand rested on the heavy iron latch that fastened the great ebony door of the House of Foryx. He looked at Jenna, Septimus and Beetle. “But I want you to stay,” he told them, raising his voice against the rhythmic thudding behind him. “You still have a chance to go home, to see Mum and Dad and tell them what has happened. To tell them I’m sorry...”

Septimus took a deep breath. “No, Nik. We’re coming with you,” he said, glancing around at the others. Four pairs of terrified eyes met his—the enormity of what they were about to do had just hit them.

Thud.

Nicko’s eyes felt blurry. He blinked. “Okay,” he said, “here we go.” Thud. Thud.

Nicko went to lift the latch of the ebony door, which would take them to the outside Time—whatever that might be. And as his hand touched the latch, there came a furious knocking on the door that drowned out the thuds behind them.

Everyone jumped.

Septimus gave a loud whoop. There was only one person he knew who ignored a perfectly serviceable doorbell and attacked a door knocker like that. He threw open the door to the House of Foryx.

“Well,” said Marcia with a broad smile, “aren’t you going to ask me in?”

“No way,” Septimus replied. “We are coming out!”

From the wide sweep of the marble terrace, Sarah Heap watched her two youngest sons and her daughter walk out into the white, misty air and break into whoops of joy. She watched them envelop Marcia Overstrand in an onslaught of hugs and she hardly dared to believe what she was seeing. Sarah leaned against a solid dragon neck for support and Spit Fyre thumped his tail tiredly. It had been a long, cold flight.

The thud of the tail drew Nicko’s attention. “Mum?” he said, ignoring the dragon and seeing only a thin windswept figure wrapped in an old green cloak. “Mum?”

“Oh...Nicko,” was all Sarah could manage.

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS...

ALICE AND ALTHER

The ending of Alice’s life was in fact the beginning of Alther and Alice’s long and happy time together. During both their Living times, Alther in particular—but Alice too—had each been too busy with their own careers to be together.

Now Alther was determined that this would change.

Twenty-four hours after she was shot, Alice’s ghost Appeared on the Palace Landing Stage to find Alther waiting for her. All ghosts must spend the first year and a day of their ghosthood in the very place where they became a ghost. This is known as their Resting Time. It can be a difficult time for a ghost who has met an unexpected end, and Alther was determined that he

would stay with Alice for the whole of her Resting Time and help her through it. He may not have been there for Alice when he should have been while they were Living, but he would be there for her from now on.

It did not matter to Alther and Alice whether they were indoors or out. Weather does not generally matter to a ghost—except blustery winds, when a ghost feels Blown Through. Even though Jenna knew this, she hated the idea of Alther and Alice spending a whole year and a day just drifting around the Palace Landing Stage, so she got Billy Pot to help her set up a large red-and-white-striped tent—or the Pavilion, as she liked to call it—on the very spot where Alice had been shot.

Jenna was glad she had. There were some bad storms that year, but the inside of the Pavilion was always an oasis of calm. Jenna was determined to make Alice—and Alther—feel at home. The planks of the landing stage were strewn with a thick layer of patterned rugs from the Palace and she filled the Pavilion with furniture, cushions, books and various mementos. There was an ornate inlaid wooden chest, whose open lid revealed many of Alice's favorite treasures from her old warehouse aerie—a marble chessboard with ships for chessmen, a hand-knitted scarf from one of her many nieces, some letters from Alther tied up in a red ribbon and her old judge's wig from many years back. There was Alther's favorite chair—a moth-eaten old leather thing that Jenna had taken from Sarah Heap's sitting room and placed in a corner, next to the pink and gold overstuffed sofa that Sarah had insisted Alice would love. Alice didn't, but a tacky sofa no longer mattered to her in the way that it once would have.

Knowing that Alther and Alice would have many visitors, Jenna had set a low table with a jug of fresh juice, a plate of savory biscuits and a bowl of fruit for the Living.

The most regular visitors were Jenna and Silas Heap. Silas could no longer talk to Sarah about Nicko and he needed to talk to someone. Alther, his old tutor, listened for long hours to Silas, and they had endless discussions about Nicko, Time and more recently, forests. Late at night Silas would stagger back across the long lawns to the Palace, feeling as though his head were stuffed full of cotton wool. Alther did not always look forward to the

moment when Silas would stick his head out through the tent flap and say, “Um, Alther. Can you spare a few minutes?” But he never refused.

Jenna loved the Pavilion. Most mornings she would pay a short visit and talk quietly to Alice, who had saved her life.

They would chat about Alice’s Living time and how much she had enjoyed being a judge at the Castle Courts in what everyone now called the Old Days. Alice would tell Jenna about her apartment at the top of the warehouse—which she had loved—and recount the interesting cases she had dealt with as Chief Customs Officer at the Port. But sometimes Alice would suddenly get up and say that she must

get back to work now, and Jenna would have to gently remind Alice that she was no longer Living. Those times were difficult—Alice would grow sad and thoughtful and Jenna would leave her and Alther in peace for a few days.

The night that Alther was Gathered was the first time he had been away from Alice. Being Gathered was a shock to Alther. All ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghosts expect it at the end of an Apprenticeship, but an unexpected Gathering was extremely rare and did not bode well. To Alice’s amazement, Alther was suddenly whisked out of the Pavilion and, although her sense of time was still not good, it felt like a few days before she saw him again.

Alice loved Alther and was touched by his sudden devotion, but in Life she had been a solitary person who had enjoyed her own company. Alther’s absence gave Alice time to think her thoughts once more and to begin to understand what had happened to her that afternoon on the Palace Landing Stage.

When Alther returned from the Siege—frazzled and very apologetic—Alice was, of course, pleased to see him. But that evening she persuaded him to return to his old habit of visiting the Hole in the Wall Tavern. It would be good for them both, she said.

MRS. BEETLE

Pamela Beetle-Gurney was not, to her great sadness, married to Brian Beetle for very long. A year after they were married, Pamela gave birth to a baby boy with a shock of black hair and a mischievous smile. The couple had not even registered the birth when Brian Beetle—who worked at the Castle Dock, loading and unloading the Port barge—was bitten by a snake that had crawled out of a box of exotic fruit. Brian—as Pamela would sadly tell people many years later—blew up like a balloon and turned blue. No one could save him.

A few weeks after Brian Beetle died, the Registrar paid Mrs. Beetle a call to inform her that the time limit for registering the baby's name had expired and she must do so there and then. Mrs. Beetle was in a bad state. The baby cried all night, she cried all day and the last thing on her mind was what to call her baby boy. So when the Registrar got out the Ledger of Names, dipped her pen in the ink and very gently asked Mrs. Beetle for the baby's name, all Mrs. Beetle could do was wail, "Oh, Beetle...Beetle!"—which was what she had called Brian. Beetle was duly registered as O. Beetle Beetle.

Without Brian Beetle's wages coming in, Mrs. Beetle had to move to two small rooms at the end of a dingy corridor in The Ramblings. Her family—and Brian's too—lived at the Port and did not offer any help. Mrs. Beetle considered moving back to the Port, but she liked The Ramblings, and her neighbors helped her more, she thought, than her family ever would. And Mrs. Beetle had ambitions for her son. She wanted him to do better in life than work on the docks, and the Castle schools provided much better opportunities for a good education than the rough schools in the Port.

The young Beetle went to one of the many small, good schools in The Ramblings and Mrs. Beetle worked extra hours as a cleaner to pay for a tutor on Saturday mornings. Beetle was a bright boy, and Mrs. Beetle's ambitions were fulfilled even sooner than she had expected, for he was the youngest person ever to pass the Manuscriptorium entrance examination.

After Brian died Pamela had stopped using Gurney, her maiden name, and soon she stopped even using Pamela.

Everyone knew her simply as Mrs. Beetle—except for Beetle, who still called her Mum and didn't care if the scribes teased him. All the scribes referred to their mothers as Mother—if they referred to them at all. But Beetle would often talk about his mother; he worried about her and wished she could be happy once more.

JANNIT MAARTEN AND NICKO

When Jannit Maarten got back to the boatyard after her visit to Sarah Heap she looked—as Rupert Gringe put it—as though she had had the wind spilled from her sails. And she was wearing a very peculiar hat. Jannit was not known for sitting around or gazing into space, but for the rest of that day Jannit did both. Even when Rupert showed her the perfect brass fittings he had finally discovered for Jannit's pet project that season—the restoration of a rare Port Sloop—Jannit just smiled wanly.

Rupert Gringe knew what the problem was. When he had seen Jannit set off that morning carrying the Indentures, he had guessed what she was doing. Rupert was not a great fan of the Heap family, particularly now that his sister Lucy had run off with Simon blasted Heap—as Rupert always called him—but he, too, was unhappy about Nicko's disappearance.

Rupert was not sure he believed all the stories that were going around the Castle about Nicko being trapped in another Time, but it was plain that something nasty had happened to him and Rupert was very sorry about that.

Although at first he had been extremely dubious about Jannit taking on a Heap, Rupert had grown to like and respect Nicko. He was fun to have around and always willing to sail down to the Port and have a laugh. And since Nicko had gone, Rupert had realized how much work Nicko had done—more than two yard hands' worth put together, he told Jannit. But even though they could never replace Nicko, they needed a new apprentice before the summer season began.

That afternoon, when Jannit had returned from the Palace, Rupert watched her wander slowly over to her ramshackle hut at the entrance to the boatyard. There was a small shed attached to the side of the hut where the

junior apprentice slept, and Rupert saw her gingerly push open the door and go inside. Half an hour later Jannit came and found him.

“Need a hand,” was all she said.

What Jannit needed a hand with was tin trunk with NICKO HEAP painted on the top in spidery writing. Rupert helped her carry it over to the old lock-up.

“Keep it in there until he gets back,” said Jannit.

“Yeah. Until he gets back,” Rupert said. Then he went and sat on the bowsprit of the Port Sloop for half an hour and watched the muddy waters of the Moat drift by.

SIMON AND LUCY

Simon and Lucy made it safely over the river, paid a small fortune to get Thunder out of the Ferry stables and then set off for the Port. It was a subdued journey—being back in the Castle had upset them both.

Simon had been shocked to see the Wizard Tower in a state of Siege. It had made him realize how important the place was to him and how much he cared that it continued unharmed. And with this insight had come the unwelcome realization that through his actions of the last three years he had thrown away any chance he might have had of one day becoming an Ordinary Wizard (which Simon would have gladly settled for now) and actually being able to live and work in such a wonderful, Magykal place. Now he was unlikely to even see the Wizard Tower again.

Lucy sat behind Simon and looked back mournfully. Thunder trotted briskly along the riverbank path and, as the Castle disappeared behind Raven’s Rock, Lucy wished she had been brave enough to say hello to her father when she had gone to the gatehouse the morning after they had arrived. He had looked tired and careworn—and so much smaller than she had remembered. Lucy didn’t really know why she hadn’t dared to tell him she was there. Well, she did know—it was the thought of a full-blown Mrs. Gringe tantrum. But now she really wished she had. How long would it be

before she saw her parents again? Years probably, she thought. And she would never be able to bring Simon to meet them. Not that they would want to, she thought gloomily.

As Thunder trotted along, in high spirits after leaving the damp and dingy stables, Lucy made an effort to brighten the gloom. “At least Marcia didn’t put you in the lock-up,” she said. “She can’t be totally mad.”

“Huh,” was Simon’s response. But then, later, “I hope she looks after Sleuth. That blasted Merrin took it before it was completely ReCharged. I think I’ll send her the instructions.”

“Si, you can’t!”

“Why not?”

“Oh, Simon. You don’t give up, do you?”

“No, Luce. I don’t.”

MERRIN

The beginning of Merrin’s employment at the Manuscriptorium was not the best. After the shock of being confronted by Simon—and the unexpected loss of Sleuth—Merrin ate his entire licorice snake supply. By mid-afternoon he felt sick and very irritable. When Foxy asked him to fetch a copy of the Cameloleopard Conundrum Pamphlet from the Wild Book Store, Merrin—who was terrified of the store after Beetle’s lurid tales—told Foxy to get it himself. Foxy looked shocked. Beetle never

would have done that. Foxy then proceeded, in Merrin’s opinion, to get very unreasonable. Merrin promptly told Foxy what he could do with his precious Camel-thingies and Foxy stomped back to his desk in a huff.

Merrin listened at the door for a while, but like all listeners, he did not hear anything good about himself. He decided to leave them to it and go stock up on snakes. He snuck out, locking the door behind him to make sure that no customers could get in, then he crossed Wizard Way and headed into the

tangle of alleys that would take him—he hoped—to Ma Custard’s All-Day-All-Night Sweet Shop.

But the alleys were not as Merrin remembered them—someone had changed them just to annoy him. By the time Merrin eventually found Ma Custard’s, he was very hungry. Which was probably why he bought three dozen licorice snakes, two bags of spider floss, a box of toffee termites and a whole jar of banana bears. Ma Custard asked Merrin if he was having a party. Merrin wasn’t quite sure what a party was, so he said yes. Ma Custard gave him a tub of crumbly cocoa crumbs “for his little friends.”

Merrin decided it was too late to bother going back to the Manuscriptorium that day. After eating three snakes dipped in cocoa crumbs and ten banana bears, Merrin felt quite brave. He went to the Palace kitchen garden, retrieved his things from the horrible shed and, safe in the knowledge that Simon Heap had been thrown out of the Castle, he reclaimed his room.

The ghost of the governess fled sobbing to the old schoolroom.

At the Manuscriptorium at half past five precisely, the scribes leaped from their desks and rushed to the front door. It was locked. The Manuscriptorium had a One and All

Spell on the outside doors—if one was locked, all were locked. The scribes had to wait until Jillie Djinn emerged from the Hermetic Chamber some two hours later before they could get out. They spent the time discussing in some detail what they intended to do to Merrin when they finally got him.

When Merrin turned up the next day he had some explaining to do, but he had a good line in tall stories and Jillie Djinn (unlike the scribes) believed him. Jillie was not about to admit that she had made a bad choice—and who else but Merrin would be perfectly happy counting the entire stock of Manuscriptorium used pencils and arranging them according to Miss Djinn’s new cataloging system, which depended on the number of teeth marks on each pencil?

STANLEY

The beginning of Stanley's Message Rat Service was not all that he had hoped for. After he had turned down Ephaniah Grebe's offer of staff, Stanley found that word had spread about the reinstated message rat service and soon a steady trickle of customers found their way to the East Gate Lookout Tower.

Stanley was somewhat irritated by the sudden craze for silly birthday messages among the younger Castle inhabitants, and after—for the third time that day—he had flatly refused to sing a birthday greeting, he began to seriously consider packing in the whole enterprise.

The night after he had not only been asked to sing a message but also to perform a dance, Stanley went for a late night scramble along the Outside Path to clear his head. Stanley liked the Outside Path. It ran along the Castle Walls and was at some points—as Septimus had once found out—nothing more than a narrow ridge. Stanley didn't believe the tales about Things walking the path; in fact, he didn't believe in Things at all. But it was a dark night and when, at a particularly narrow and crumbly section, he heard scrabbling and a high-pitched squeaking right in front of him, Stanley suddenly discovered that he did believe in Things

after all. It was not a good moment, and he very nearly jumped into the Moat there and then.

But Stanley hated getting wet and the Moat looked dark and cold. He decided that the Thing would not be interested in a mere rat, and if he kept very still it would probably go away. But the noises did not go away. And the more Stanley listened, the more he realized how much they sounded like rat squeaks—baby rat squeaks.

Dawn was breaking by the time Stanley was back in the East Gate Lookout Tower—and he was no longer alone. With him were four cold, hungry and very small orphan ratlets.

SYRAH SYARA

When Syrah saw the long knives of the Questing Guards, she knew she was in trouble. With no time to say a proper farewell to Julius Pike, whom she

loved like a father, Syrah was bundled onto the Questing Boat. As soon as she set foot upon the deck, Syrah felt her Magykal powers drain away.

Seen off by a triumphant Tertius Fume, the Questing Boat set off fast. A Magykal wind filled its sails, and soon they were sailing past the Port and out to sea. Syrah refused to go below. She sat, shivering in the wind and the rain as the Questing Boat

cut through the waves. Syrah stayed awake all through the first night and the following day, eyes wide—hardly daring to even blink—keeping a close eye on the Questing Guards and their sharp knives.

Syrah knew that as soon as she fell asleep, she was as good as dead. And as the second night on the deck of the Questing Boat

drew on, Syrah felt her eyelids droop and the lure of sleep become irresistible. As she gazed out across the calm sea, watching the distant loom of a lighthouse, the rhythmic movement of the boat lulled her into a brief sleep. She woke with a start to find three Guards advancing on her with their knives drawn.

Syrah had no choice. She jumped overboard.

The sea was a shock. It was cold and Syrah could not swim. Her heavy robes dragged her down, but as she struggled away from the Questing Boat, Syrah felt her Magyk return. She Called a dolphin, which arrived just as the water was closing over her head for the last time. Lying exhausted on the dolphin's back, Syrah found herself heading toward the lighthouse on the horizon. Dolphin and Apprentice arrived safely as dawn was breaking.

Syrah began a new life far away from the Castle. She never dared return, but she sent a coded message to Julius Pike to tell him she was safe. Unfortunately, Julius thought it was a final demand for some Magykal pots he had ordered. He had already paid the bill, so he threw the message down the garbage chute.

MORWENNA

The moment Morwenna discovered that she had been double-crossed and Jenna and her Transformer had fled marked the beginning of a feud between the Wendron Witch Coven and the Castle. Or, rather, it was the end of the truce that had existed since Silas, as a young Wizard, had rescued Morwenna from a pack of wolverines.

Morwenna considered she had paid her debt to Silas by taking him to his father. The flight of Ephaniah Grebe also angered her. After all she had done for him, he had reneged on his agreement to Promise and, she assumed, had taken Jenna with him.

Camp Heap was placed out of bounds for all the young witches, much to great their consternation, and the Heap boys suddenly found their lives much less comfortable, Jo-Jo especially. Marissa was forced to choose between Morwenna and Jo-Jo. Marissa was a true witch at heart and she chose Morwenna.

THE TOLL-MAN

The Toll-Man was never a pleasant character. It is doubtful that those who had known him before the Thing suddenly appeared in his tree house would have noticed any difference—apart from the licorice ring. The ring would have puzzled them because it was the Toll-Man's considered opinion that men who wore rings should be “shoved off the top of a cliff—that'll show 'em.” Whether this showed the Toll-Man himself, no one will ever know.

But to be InHabited

is not something to be wished upon anyone, however unpleasant. The Toll-Man was up in his tree house, keeping clear of the Foryx as he did regularly twice a day, when the Thing

pushed its way in and made its intentions clear. Then, like Hildegarde and Ephaniah before him, the Toll-Man experienced a moment of pure terror—just as some reluctant toll-payers had when they refused him a gold tooth and suddenly found themselves plunging down through the mists of the abyss.

EPHANIAH GREBE

Ephaniah nearly died in the tree house beside the bridge. Even though Jenna, Septimus and Beetle left him as comfortable as they could beneath their wolverine skins, Ephaniah, like Hildegarde before him, was overtaken by a raging fever and became delirious. If he had not been so weak it is likely he would, in his confusion, have fallen from the tree house and died in the snow—or been eaten by the phalanx of Foryx. But luckily Ephaniah could do no more than lie on the cold wooden floor, shivering as waves of hot and cold ran through him and enduring the most frightening nightmares—even worse than those that followed the early days of his rat Hex.

It was on the midmorning of his second day in the tree house—although for all Ephaniah knew it could have been his second month—that his nightmares took on a frighteningly real turn. Overnight his fever had abated a little and he had regained a little strength. That morning he had rolled over to the door flap and poked his head outside. Luckily he was sensible enough not to tumble to the ground; instead he lay on his back gazing up into the snowy branches, his sensitive rat nose gratefully sniffing the fresh air and his tiny pink tongue licking the occasional snowflake that came his way.

Ephaniah had lain there for some time and was feeling almost content when a terrible thud shook the tree and a great load of snow from the upper branches landed on his face. Shocked, he shook his head, rolled over and found himself face to face with the most realistic hallucination so far. A huge dragon stood below the tree house, its long scaly neck reaching up into the branches, its red-rimmed emerald green eye staring right into Ephaniah's.

A voice from somewhere—a voice that even in his befuddled state Ephaniah thought he recognized but could not quite place—said, “Can you see him, Septimus?”

Another voice replied, “It's all right, Marcia, he's here. He's okay. You are okay, aren't you, Ephaniah?” It was then that, almost hidden in a dip between the dragon's huge shoulders and the rise of his neck, Ephaniah noticed a small figure with a big smile, and a little farther back, sitting uncomfortably between the dragon's spines, a purple-robed woman

squinting up at him with glittering green eyes that almost outshone those of the dragon itself.

“He looks very heavy,” said the purple woman.

“He is very heavy,” replied the boy. “I don’t know how we’re going to do it.”

“I’ll Transport

him down onto the snow. Then Spit Fyre will have to carry him in his talons. Do you think he can do that?” Ephaniah began to realize they were talking about him. It was a horrible nightmare. He wished it would go away.

“Easy. Spit Fyre carried Jen like that once, didn’t you, Spit Fyre?”

“You never told me that,” said the woman sharply.

“Um. No, I think I forgot.”

“A dragon carries the Princess in its talons and you forget?”

The nightmare got worse. In fact it got so bad that Ephaniah lost consciousness once more and when he awoke a week later in the Wizard Tower sick bay he remembered nothing about a dragon at all. But Spit Fyre remembered him and from that day on the dragon never stamped on another rat.

BENJAMIN HEAP

Benjamin Heap had no wish to end up as a ghost floating around the Castle getting confused and retreating to the Hole in the Wall Tavern. He wished to end his days in the Forest, a place he had always loved, and this is what he did.

Benjamin Heap, Shape-Shifter, became Tree. He became one of his favorites, a western red cedar, and stood tall and proud—and slowly growing ever taller.

When Benjamin Heap became Tree, his thoughts became Tree also. But there was always a small part in the core of that western red cedar that was Ben Heap, Ordinary Wizard, or Grandpa Benji as he was known to his numerous grandchildren. Ben Heap had married Jenna Crackle (sister of Betty Crackle, a white witch) one winter's day in the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower. They had seven sons, and all bar two, Alfred and Edmond, had had an assortment of children.

The Forest trees were always listening. People meeting beneath a tree exchanging whispered secrets, travelers talking, voices carried on the wind—the Forest trees heard it all. The rustling of leaves in the Forest was not always because of the breeze—it was often the trees talking.

This is how Benjamin Heap knew about the fortunes of his huge family. It was his youngest son—Silas, his seventh—who he followed the most closely. Silas was born late into the family, and when his last baby boy arrived Benjamin already felt old. He waited to become Tree for as long as he could, but when Silas turned twenty-one he could wait no longer. Benjamin Heap knew he had to go while he still had the strength to Shape-Shift into a healthy tree.

Silas had missed his father terribly. He had spent many long weeks in the Forest looking for him, but he never found him. And when at last, on one of his fruitless searches, he met the young and very pretty Sarah Willow gathering herbs in the Forest, Silas decided he had looked for his father long enough. He and Sarah got married, and Silas settled down to look after his rapidly growing family.

Benjamin Heap listened to the Forest gossip so he knew that Silas had had seven sons. For a long ten years he had also known that the youngest grandson was lost, and was in the Young Army. He had longed to tell Silas where Septimus was, but Silas never came to see him and there was nothing he could do except make sure that all the Forest trees knew to keep Septimus safe on the notoriously dangerous Young Army exercises. And so, when Morwenna took Silas to see his father, both were overjoyed—although there were serious things to discuss.

Silas told his father the dream about Nicko in a frozen forest. Benjamin told Silas that the frozen forest had once been warm and friendly, teeming with animals and small, happy settlements. But now it was under a Darkenese and it was not a safe place to be. When Silas insisted that he must

go, his father very reluctantly told him how to find the Forest Way.

Early the next afternoon as Silas and Maxie were leaving the Ancient Glades to start their journey, they met a large, shambling figure in white wearing a small licorice ring on the little finger of its left hand—although Silas was too surprised at bumping into someone in the middle of the Forest to notice the ring. When Silas looked at the figure’s bottle-glass spectacles he felt very odd indeed—so odd that he babbled his father’s instructions on how to find the Forest Way without even being asked. Silas was unaware that he had very nearly been InHabited—but Maxie’s long growls and the sight of the hackles going up on the wolfhound’s neck—not to mention his teeth—had persuaded the Thing not to bother.

Silas never did remember what had happened after he had left Morwenna. He put the lost day down to a witchy hex and worried about what he had done to offend the Witch Mother. He forgot that he had ever met his father.

Maxie led Silas back to the Castle. When at last, with tired feet and weary paws, they reached the Palace, Silas could not find Sarah anywhere. Billy Pot told him that Sarah had gone off with Marcia on Spit Fyre, but Silas would not believe him. Why on earth would she want to do that?

Billy Pot had shrugged. He didn’t know either, but one thing he did know: there was no stopping Marcia when she wanted to fly a dragon.

SPIT FYRE

Spit Fyre liked his new field and he liked Billy Pot too. The only thing he missed about the Wizard Tower was his breakfasts. No one made his breakfast quite like Septimus. Naturally Spit Fyre wondered where Septimus was, but now that he was nearly fully grown, the dragon did not feel the need to see so much of his Imprintor.

Neither did Spit Fyre feel the need to see the person who he suspected was his dragon mother in disguise—as some dragon mothers are. But this person, who wore purple and shouted a lot, suddenly seemed to feel the need to see him.

But when Spit Fyre realized that the purple-dragon-mother had brought with her four buckets of sausages and bananas—one of Spit Fyre’s all-time favorites—he changed his mind. And he didn’t even mind when the purple-dragon-mother told him that she was taking the place of his Imprinter and he was to do as he was told. Spit Fyre would do anything for four buckets of sausages and bananas.

And that is how Spit Fyre set off on the longest flight he had ever made.

His new pilot did a good job, although her navigator—a thin woman in green—screamed a lot. Spit Fyre enjoyed the flight; he had needed to stretch his wings, and meeting his Imprinter at the other end was good too. It was nice of the purple-dragon-mother to arrange that for him. But it was a strange place she brought him to—cold, creepy and suffering from a distinct lack of sausages and bananas. And suddenly there seemed to be a lot of people expecting a ride. They wouldn’t all fit on, and there was no point in the purple-dragon-mother shouting either—shouting something didn’t make it any more possible. They would have to figure something else out. And where was his dinner?

About the Authors

ANGIE SAGE

was born in London and grew up in the Thames Valley, London, and Kent. She lives in a fifteenth-century house in the west of England, which is a Magykal place full of history. She is also the author of the Araminta Spookie series. The first three books in the Septimus Heap series are international bestsellers.

MARK ZUG

has loved fantasy novels since he was a teenager. He has illustrated many collectible card games, including Magic: The Gathering and Dune, as well as books and magazines. He lives in Pennsylvania.

Visit www.septimusheap.com or Magykal games and more!

 HarperCollins e-books

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.

ALSO BY ANGIE SAGE

Septimus Heap, Book One: Magyk

Septimus Heap, Book Two: Flyte

Septimus Heap, Book Three: Physik

Araminta Spookie: My Haunted House

Araminta Spookie: The Sword in the Grotto

Araminta Spookie: Frognapped

Araminta Spookie: Vampire Brat

Credits

Jacket art © 2008 by Mark Zug

Jacket design by Joel Tippie

Copyright

SEPTIMUS HEAP, BOOK FOUR: QUESTE. Text copyright © 2008 by Angie Sage. Illustrations Copyright © 2008 by Mark Zug. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive,

non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

Microsoft Reader February 2008 ISBN 978-0-06-167210-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.

25 Ryde Road (PO Box 321)

Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia

<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com.au>

Canada

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900

Toronto, ON, M5R, 3L2, Canada

<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollinsPublishers (New Zealand) Limited

P.O. Box 1

Auckland, New Zealand

<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

77-85 Fulham Palace Road

London, W6 8JB, UK

<http://www.uk.harpercollinsebooks.com>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

10 East 53rd Street

New York, NY 10022

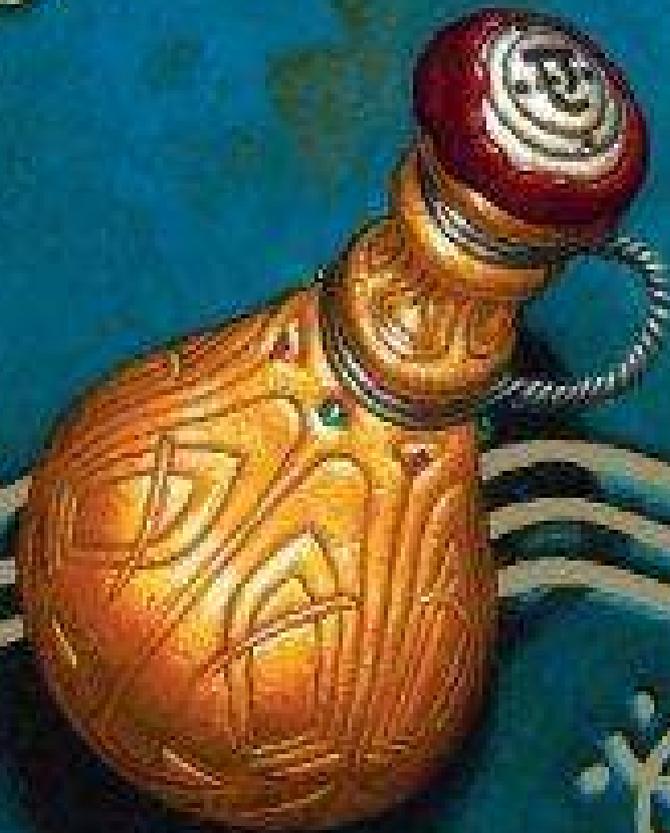
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com>

Copyrighted Material

SEPTIMUS HEAP[®]

≠ BOOK FIVE ≠

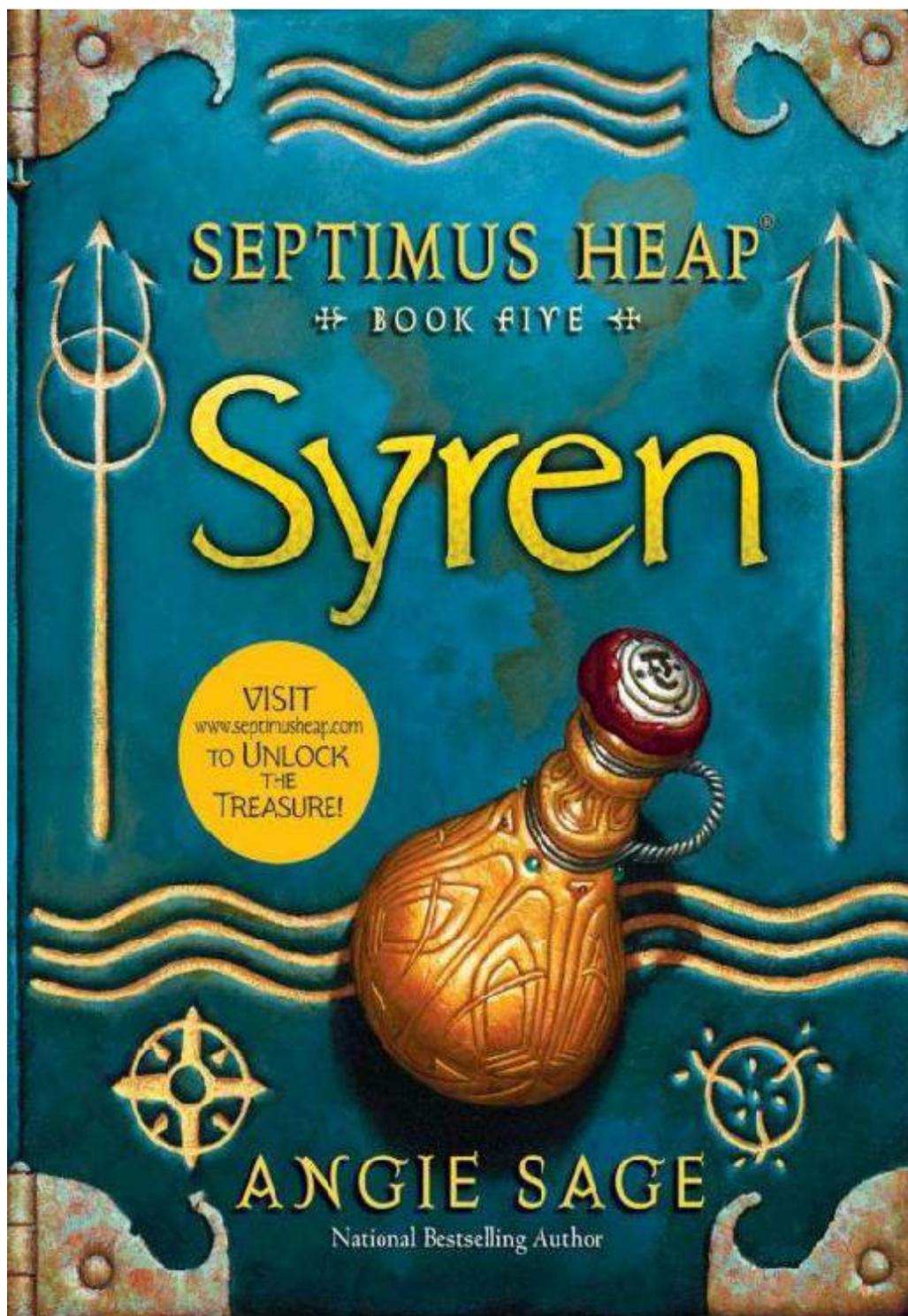
Syren



ANGIE SAGE

National Bestselling Author

Copyrighted Material



 HarperCollins e-books
Septimus Heap

Book Five

Syren

Angie Sage

Illustrations by Mark Zug

For Eunice,

There at the beginning,

and always



Contents

[Map](#)

[Prologue](#): A Crossing of Paths

[1](#) Promotion

[2](#) Keeper's Cottage

[3](#) Barney Pot

[4](#) Intended

[5](#) 412 and 409

[6](#) Jim Knee

[7](#) The Pie Shop

[8](#) The Port Witch Coven

[9](#) The Grim

[10](#) Out of the Stew Pot

[11](#) Harborside

[12](#) Into the Fire

[13](#) Dragon Flight

[14](#) The Trading Post

[15](#) The Cerys

[16](#) The Pigeon Post Office

[17](#) The Chest

[18](#) A Performance

[19](#) Storm

[20](#) Miarr

[21](#) Tailspin

[22](#) The Island

[23](#) Buckets



[24](#) Post

[25](#) Wizard Ways

[26](#) Witchy Ways

[27](#) To the Lighthouse

[28](#) Pincer-Splat

[29](#) UnSeen

[30](#) The Red Tube

[31](#) Syrah Syara

[32](#) MindScreen

[33](#) The Pinnacle

[34](#) The Syren

[35](#) The Deeps

[36](#) Chief Cadet

[37](#) The Book of Syrah Syren

[38](#) Projections

[39](#) Nicko's Watch

[40](#) Aground

[41](#) The Hold

[42](#) Banana Man

[43](#) Breakout

[44](#) Jinn

[45](#) Turtle and Ants

[46 The Silver Snake](#)

[47 To the Castle?](#)

[48 On Tentacles](#)

[49 Returns](#)

[Histories and Happenings](#)

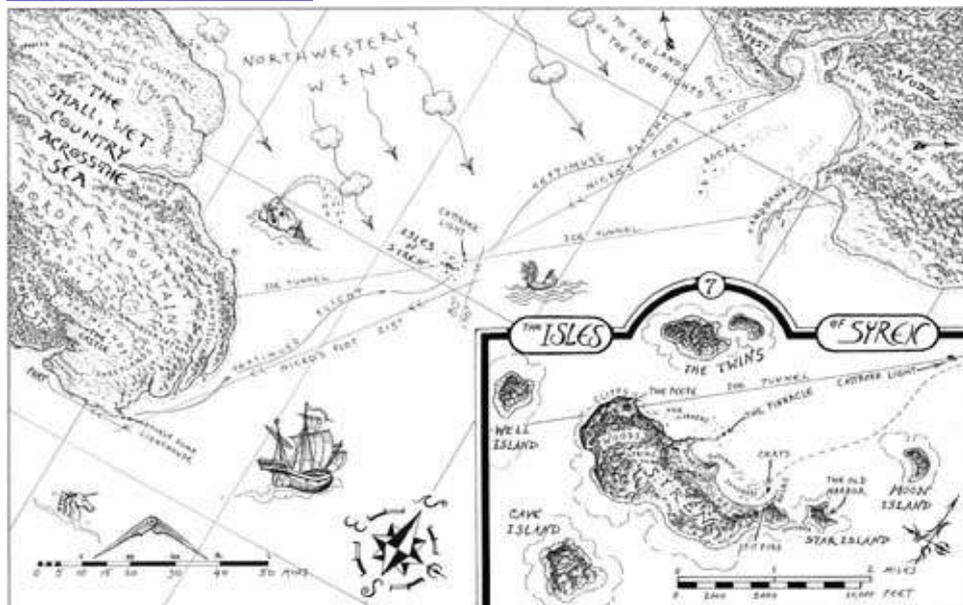
[About the Author and the Illustrator](#)

[Other Books by Angie Sage](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)



[Map](#)



[PROLOGUE:](#)
A CROSSING OF PATHS

I t is Nicko's first night out of the House of Foryx, and Jenna thinks he is going a little crazy.

Some hours previously, on Nicko's insistence, Septimus and Spit Fyre took Jenna,

Nicko, Snorri, Ullr and Beetle to the Trading Post—a long string of harbors on the edge

of the land where the House of Foryx lies hidden. Nicko had been desperate to see the sea

once more, and no one, not even Marcia, felt able to refuse.

Septimus objected a little more than anyone else. He knew his dragon was tired after

the long flight from the Castle to the House of Foryx, and they both faced a long journey

home with the dangerously ill Ephaniah Grebe. But Nicko was adamant. He *had* to go

to—of all places—a ramshackle net loft on Harbor Number Three, which was one of the

smaller harbors on the Trading Post and used mainly by local fishing boats. Nicko told

them that the net loft belonged to the bosun on the ship that he and Snorri had sailed on

all those years in the past, bound from the Port to the Trading Post. In mid-crossing

Nicko had saved the ship from catastrophe by doing an emergency repair of a broken

mast, and in gratitude the bosun, a Mr. Higgs, had given Nicko a key to his net loft and

insisted that anytime Nicko was in the Trading Post he could—indeed *must*—stay there.

When Septimus pointed out that that was five hundred years ago and the offer may

not still stand—let alone the net loft—Nicko had told Septimus that *of course* it still

stood, an offer was an offer. All he wanted, Nicko said, was to be near boats once more,

to hear the sea again, and to smell the salt in the air. Septimus argued no further. How

could he—or any of the others—refuse Nicko that?

And so, with some misgivings, Septimus left them at the end of the dingy alleyway

that Nicko insisted contained Mr. Higgs's net loft. Septimus and Spit

Fyre had returned to

a snowy tree house near the House of Foryx where Ephaniah Grebe, Marcia and Sarah

Heap waited to take them back to the Castle.

However, after Septimus's departure, all had not gone well at the net loft.

Nicko—surprised to find that his key would not fit—had to break in, and no one was

impressed with what met them inside. It stank. It was also dark, damp, cold and,

apparently, used as the local fish garbage dump, judging by the pile of rotting fish heaped

up below the small, unglazed window. There was, as Jenna irritably pointed out, nowhere

to sleep because most of the top two floors were missing, allowing a fine view of a large

hole in the roof, which the local seagull population was apparently using as a toilet. Even

so, Nicko remained undeterred. But when Beetle fell through the rotten floor and was left

dangling by his belt over a cellar full of unidentifiable slime, there was a rebellion.

Which is why we now find Jenna, Nicko, Snorri, Ullr and Beetle standing outside a

seedy café on Harbor Number One—the nearest place to eat. They are looking at scrawls

on a chalkboard offering three varieties of fish, something called Pot Luck Stew and a

steak from an animal that no one has ever heard of.

Jenna says she doesn't care what the animal is as long as it is not Foryx. Nicko says

he doesn't care either—he will have one of everything. He is, he says, hungry for the first

time in five hundred years. No one can argue with that.

And no one in the café argues with them either, quite possibly because of the large,

green-eyed panther that follows the tall blonde girl like a shadow and emits a low,

rumbling growl if anyone comes near. Jenna is very glad of Ullr's company—the café is

a menacing place full of sailors, fishermen and assorted traders, all of whom notice the

group of four teenagers sitting at the table by the door. Ullr keeps people

at bay, but the

panther cannot stop the endless, uncomfortable stares.

All choose the Pot Luck Stew, with which, as Beetle observes, they do not strike

lucky. Nicko proceeds to do as he threatened and eats his way through the entire menu.

They watch Nicko demolish numerous plates of odd-shaped fish garnished with a variety

of seaweed and a thick red steak with white bristles on its rind, which he feeds to Ullr

after one mouthful. Nicko is at last eating his final dish—a long white fish with a lot of

tiny bones and a reproachful stare. Jenna, Beetle and Snorri have just finished a

communal bowl of harbor dessert—baked apples sprinkled with sweet crumble and

covered with chocolate sauce. Jenna is feeling queasy. All she really wants to do is lie

down, and even a pile of damp fishing nets in a smelly net loft will do. She does not

notice that the whole café has fallen quiet and all are looking at an unusually richly clad

merchant who has just walked in. The merchant scans the shadowy interior, not seeing

who he expects to see—but then he does see someone he most definitely does *not* expect

to see—his daughter.

“Jenna!” shouts Milo Banda. “What on earth are you doing *here*?”

Jenna jumps to her feet. “Milo!” she gasps. “But what are *you* doing here...” Her

voice trails off. Jenna is thinking that actually, this is *exactly* the kind of place she would

expect to find her father—one full of odd people, with an air of suspicious deals and

suppressed menace.

Milo pulls up a chair and sits with them. He wants to know everything—why they

are there, how they got there and where they are staying. Jenna refuses to explain. It is

Nicko’s story to tell, not hers, and she does not want the whole café listening in—as they

surely are.

Milo insists on paying the bill and ushers them out onto the busy quayside.

“I cannot imagine why you are here,” he says disapprovingly. “You must not stay

here a moment longer. It is not suitable. These are not the kind of people you should be

mixing with, Jenna.”

Jenna does not answer. She refrains from pointing out that Milo was obviously

happy to mix with them.

Milo continues. “The Trading Post is not a place for babes in arms—”

“We are *not*—” Jenna protests.

“As near as. You will all come to my ship.”

Jenna does not like being told what she must do, even though the thought of a warm

bed for the night is extremely tempting.

“No, thank you, Milo,” she says frostily.

“What do you mean?” says Milo, incredulous. “I refuse to allow you to roam around

this place at night on your own.”

“We are not *roaming*—” Jenna begins but is cut short by Nicko.

“What kind of ship?” he asks.

“A barkentine,” Milo replies.

“We’ll come,” says Nicko.

And so it is decided they will spend the night on Milo’s ship. Jenna is relieved,

though she does not show it. Beetle is relieved and shows it. A big grin spreads across his

face, and even Snorri has a faint smile as she follows in Milo’s wake, Ullr at her heels.

Milo leads them around to the back of the café, through a door in a wall and into a

dark alleyway, which runs along the back of the bustling harbors. It is a shortcut used by

many in the day, but at night most prefer to stay under the bright lights of the

harbors—unless there is secret business to be done. They are no more than a few yards

along the alley when a shadowy figure comes rushing toward them. Milo steps in front of

the figure, blocking his path.

“You are late,” he growls.

“I—I am sorry,” says the man. “I—” He stops to catch his breath.

“Yes?” says Milo impatiently.

“We have it.”

“You *do*? It is intact?”

“Yes, yes it is.”

“No one has discovered you?” Milo sounds worried.

“Er, no, sir. No one. Not—not anyone, sir, and that’s the truth, honestly, sir, it is.”

“All right, all right, I believe you. How long until arrival?”

“Tomorrow, sir.”

Milo nods approval and hands the man a small purse of coins. “For your trouble. The

rest on delivery. Safe and *undetected* delivery.”

“Thank you, sir.” The man bows and is gone, melting into the shadows.

Milo surveys his intrigued audience. “Just a bit of business. Something *rather*

special for my princess.” He smiles fondly at Jenna.

Jenna half smiles back. She kind of likes the way Milo is—and she kind of doesn’t.

It is most confusing.

But by the time they arrive at Milo’s ship, the *Cerys*, Jenna is less confused—the

Cerys is the most wonderful ship she has ever seen, and even Nicko has to admit it is

better than a stinky net loft.



PROMOTION

Septimus Heap, *ExtraOrdinary Apprentice*, was woken up by his House Mouse leaving

a note on his pillow. Blearily he opened his eyes and, with a sense of relief, remembered

where he was—back in his bedroom at the top of the Wizard Tower, *Queste* completed.

And then he remembered that Jenna, Nicko, Snorri and Beetle were still not home.

Septimus sat up, suddenly awake. Today, no matter what Marcia said, he was going to go

and bring them back.

Septimus sat up, picked up the note and brushed a couple of mouse droppings off his

pillow. He carefully unfolded the tiny piece of paper and read:

FROM THE DESK OF MARCIA OVERSTRAND EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD

Septimus, I would very much like to see you at midday in my study. I hope that is

convenient for you.

Marcia

Septimus let out a low whistle. Even though he had been Marcia's Apprentice for nearly

three years, he had never had an appointment with her before. If Marcia wished to speak

to Septimus, she would interrupt whatever he was doing and speak to him. Septimus

would have to stop what he was doing *right away* and *listen*.

But today, his second day back from the Queste, it seemed that something had

changed. As Septimus read the note again, just to make sure, the distant chimes of the

Drapers Yard clock drifted through his window. He counted them—eleven—and

breathed a sigh of relief. It would not be good to be late for his first-ever appointment

with Marcia. Septimus had slept late, but that was on Marcia's instructions; she had also

told him that he did not have to clean the Library that morning. Septimus looked at the

rainbow-colored beam of sunlight filtering through the purple glass in his window and

shook his head with a smile—he could get used to this.

An hour later, dressed in a new set of green Apprentice robes that had been left out

in his room for him, Septimus knocked politely on Marcia's door.

"Come in, Septimus." Marcia's voice drifted through the thick oak door. Septimus

pushed open the creaky door and stepped inside. Marcia's study was a small

wood-paneled room with a large desk set under the window and a fuzz of

Magyk in the

air that set Septimus's skin tingling. It was lined with shelves on which were crammed

moth-eaten leather-bound books, stacks of yellowing papers tied with purple ribbons and

a myriad of brown and black glass pots that contained ancient things even Marcia was not

sure what to do with. Among the pots Septimus saw his brother Simon's pride and joy—a

wooden box with *Sleuth* written on it in Simon's loopy Heap handwriting. Septimus

could not help but glance out of the tall, narrow window. He loved the view from

Marcia's study—a breathtaking vista across the rooftops of the Castle to the river and

beyond that to the green slopes of the Farmlands. Far, far in the distance he could see the

misty blue line of the foothills of the Badlands.

Marcia was sitting behind her desk in her much-worn—but very comfortable—tall

purple chair. She looked fondly at her Apprentice, who was unusually well turned out,

and smiled.

“Good afternoon, Septimus,” she said. “Do sit down.” Marcia indicated the smaller

but equally comfortable green chair on the other side of the desk. “I hope you slept

well?”

Septimus took his seat. “Yes, thank you,” he replied a little warily. Why was Marcia

being so *nice*?

“You've had a difficult week, Septimus,” Marcia began. “Well, we all have. It is

very good to have you back. I have something for you.” She opened a small drawer, took

out two purple silk ribbons and laid them on the desk.

Septimus knew what the ribbons were—the purple stripes of a Senior Apprentice,

which, if his Apprenticeship went well, he would get to wear in his final year. It was nice

of Marcia to let him know that she would make him a Senior Apprentice when the time

came, he thought, but his final year was a long way off, and Septimus knew only too well

that a lot could go wrong before then.

“Do you know what these are?” Marcia asked.

Septimus nodded.

“Good. They are yours. I am making you Senior Apprentice.”

“What, *now*?”

Marcia smiled broadly. “Yes, now.”

“Now? Like, *today*?”

“Yes, Septimus, today. I trust the ends of your sleeves are still clean. You didn’t get

any egg on them at breakfast, did you?”

Septimus inspected his sleeves. “No, they’re fine.”

Marcia stood up and so did Septimus—an Apprentice must never sit when his tutor

is standing. Marcia picked up the ribbons and placed them on the hems of Septimus’s

bright green sleeves. In a puff of Magykal purple mist, the ribbons curled themselves

around the hems of the sleeves and became part of his tunic. Septimus stared at them,

amazed. He didn’t know what to say. But Marcia did.

“Now, Septimus, you need to know a little about the rights and duties of a Senior

Apprentice. You may determine fifty percent of your own projects and also your main

timetable—within reason, of course. You may be asked to deputize for me at the

basic-level Wizard Tower meetings—for which, incidentally, I would be very grateful.

As Senior Apprentice, you may come and go without asking my permission, although it

is considered courteous to inform me where you are going and at what time you intend to

return. But as you are still so young, I would add that I do require you to be back in the

Wizard Tower by nine P.M. on weekdays—midnight at the *latest* on special

occasions—understood?”

Still gazing at the Magykal purple stripes shimmering on the ends of his sleeves,

Septimus nodded. “Understood...I think...but why...?”

“Because,” Marcia said, “you are the only Apprentice *ever* to return from the Queste.

Not only did you return *alive*, but you returned having successfully completed it.

And—even more incredible—you were sent on this...this terrible thing before you had

even gotten halfway through your Apprenticeship—and you *still* did it. You used your

Magykal skills to better effect than many Wizards in this Tower could ever hope to do.

This is why you are now Senior Apprentice. Okay?”

“Okay.” Septimus smiled. “But...”

“But what?”

“I couldn’t have done the Queste without Jenna and Beetle. And they’re still stuck in

that smelly little net loft in the Trading Post. So are Nicko and Snorri. We *promised* to go

right back for them.”

“And we will,” Marcia replied. “I am sure they did not expect us to turn around and

fly back immediately, Septimus. Besides, I haven’t had a moment since we returned. This

morning I was up early getting some ghastly potion from Zelda for Ephaniah and

Hildegarde—both of whom are still very sick. I need to keep an eye on Ephaniah tonight,

but I shall set off on Spit Fyre first thing tomorrow morning to collect them all. They’ll

be back very soon, I promise.”

Septimus looked at his purple ribbons, which had a beautiful Magykal sheen, like oil

on water. He remembered Marcia’s words: “*As Senior Apprentice, you may come and go*

without asking my permission, although it is considered courteous to inform me where

you are going and at what time you intend to return.”

“I shall get them,” he said, swiftly getting into Senior Apprentice mode.

“No, Septimus,” Marcia replied, already forgetting that she was now talking to a

Senior Apprentice. “It is far too risky, and you are tired after the Queste. You need to

rest. *I shall go.*”

“Thank you for your offer, Marcia,” Septimus said, a trifle formally, in the way he thought Senior Apprentices probably should speak. “However, I intend to go myself. I shall be setting off on Spit Fyre in just over an hour’s time. I shall return the day after tomorrow evening by midnight, as this can reasonably be classified, I think, as a special occasion.”

“Oh.” Marcia wished she hadn’t informed Septimus quite so fully on the rights of a Senior Apprentice. She sat down and regarded Septimus with a thoughtful look. Her new Senior Apprentice seemed to have grown up suddenly. His bright green eyes had a newly confident air as they steadily returned her gaze, and—yes, she had known something was different the moment he had walked in—he had *combed his hair*.

“Shall I come and see you off?” Marcia asked quietly.

“Yes, please,” Septimus replied. “That would be very nice. I’ll be down at the dragon field in just under an hour.” At the study door he stopped and turned. “Thank you, Marcia,” he said with a broad grin. “Thank you very much indeed.”

Marcia returned his smile and watched her Senior Apprentice walk out of her study with a new spring in his step.



2 **KEEPER'S COTTAGE**

I t was a bright, blustery spring day in the Marram Marshes. The wind

had blown away

the early-morning mist and was sending small white clouds scudding high across the sky.

The air was chilly; it smelled of sea salt, mud and burned cabbage soup.

In the doorway of a small stone cottage a gangly boy with long, matted hair was

pulling a backpack onto his broad shoulders. Helping him was what appeared to be a

voluminous patchwork quilt.

“Now, you are *sure* you know the way?” the patchwork quilt was asking anxiously.

The boy nodded and pulled the backpack straight. His brown eyes smiled at the large

woman hidden within the folds of the quilt. “I’ve got your map, Aunt Zelda,” he said,

pulling a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket. “In fact, I have *all* your maps.” More

pieces of paper emerged. “See...here’s Snake Ditch to Double Drain. Double Drain to the

Doom Sludge Deeps. Doom Sludge Deeps to the Broad Path. Broad Path to the reed

beds. Reed beds to the Causeway.”

“But from the Causeway to the Port. Do you have that one?” Aunt Zelda’s bright

blue, witchy eyes looked anxious.

“Of course I do. But I don’t need it. I remember *that* all right.”

“Oh, dear,” Aunt Zelda said with a sigh. “Oh, I do hope you’ll be safe, Wolf Boy

dear.”

Wolf Boy looked down at Aunt Zelda, something that had only very recently become

possible—a combination of him growing fast and Aunt Zelda becoming a little more

stooped. He put his arms around her and hugged her hard. “I’ll be fine,” he said. “I’ll be

back tomorrow, like we said. Listen for me about midday.”

Aunt Zelda shook her head. “I don’t Hear so well nowadays,” she said a little

wistfully. “The Boggart will wait for you. Now, where is he?” She scanned the Mott,

which was filling fast with brackish water from the incoming tide. It had a thick, muddy

appearance that reminded Wolf Boy of the brown-beetle-and-turnip soup that Aunt Zelda

had boiled up for supper the previous evening. Beyond the Mott stretched the wide open

flatness of the Marram Marshes, crisscrossed with long, winding ditches and channels,

treacherous oozes, mile-deep mires and containing many strange—and not always

friendly—inhabitants.

“Boggart!” called Aunt Zelda. “*Boggart!*”

“It’s all right,” said Wolf Boy, eager to be off. “I don’t need the Bog—”

“Oh, *there* you are, Boggart!” Aunt Zelda exclaimed as a dark brown, seallike head

emerged from the thick waters of the Mott.

“Yes. I is here,” said the creature. He regarded Aunt Zelda grumpily from his large

brown eyes. “I is here *asleep*. Or so I thought.”

“I am so sorry, Boggart dear,” said Aunt Zelda. “But I would like you to take Wolf

Boy to the Causeway.”

The Boggart blew a disgruntled mud bubble. “It be a long way to the Causeway,

Zelda.”

“I know. And treacherous, even with a map.”

The Boggart sighed. A spurt of mud from his nostrils splattered onto Aunt Zelda’s

patchwork dress and sank into another muddy stain. The Boggart regarded Wolf Boy

with a grumpy stare. “Well, then. No point hangin’ about,” he said. “Follow me.” And he

swam off along the Mott, cutting through the muddy surface of the water.

Aunt Zelda enveloped Wolf Boy in a patchwork hug. Then she pushed him from her,

and her witchy blue eyes gazed at him anxiously. “You have my note?” she said,

suddenly serious.

Wolf Boy nodded.

“You know when you must read it, don’t you? Only then and not before?”

Wolf Boy nodded once more.

“You must trust me,” said Aunt Zelda. “You *do* trust me, don’t you?”

Wolf Boy

nodded more slowly this time. He looked at Aunt Zelda, puzzled. Her eyes looked

suspiciously bright.

“I wouldn’t be sending you if I didn’t think you could do this Task. You do know

that, don’t you?”

Wolf Boy nodded a little warily.

“And...oh, Wolf Boy, you *do* know how much I care for you, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” muttered Wolf Boy, beginning to feel embarrassed—and a little

concerned. Aunt Zelda was looking at him as though she may never see him again, he

thought. He wasn’t sure if he liked that. Suddenly he shook himself free from her grasp.

“Bye, Aunt Zelda,” he said. He ran to catch up with the Boggart, who had already

reached the new plank bridge over the Mott and was waiting impatiently.

Warmly swathed in her padded quilt dress, which she had spent much of the winter

sewing, Aunt Zelda stood beside the Mott and watched Wolf Boy set off across the

marshes. He took what appeared to be a strange, zigzagging route, but Aunt Zelda knew

that he was following the narrow path that ran beside the twists and turns of Snake Ditch.

She watched, shading her old eyes against the light that came from the vast skies above

the Marram Marshes, the light uncomfortably bright even on an overcast day. Every now

and then Aunt Zelda saw Wolf Boy stop in response to a warning from the Boggart, and

once or twice he nimbly jumped the ditch and continued on his way on the opposite side.

Aunt Zelda watched for as long as she could, until the figure of Wolf Boy disappeared

into the bank of mist that hovered over the Doom Sludge Deeps—a bottomless pit of

slime that stretched for miles across the only route to the Port. There was only one way

through the Deeps—on hidden stepping stones—and the Boggart knew

every safe step.

Aunt Zelda walked slowly back up the path. She stepped into Keeper's Cottage,

gently closed the door and leaned wearily against it. It had been a difficult

morning—there had been Marcia's surprise visit and her shocking news about Septimus's

Queste. The morning had not improved after Marcia had left, because Aunt Zelda had

hated sending Wolf Boy off on his Task, even though she knew it had to be done.

Aunt Zelda sighed heavily and looked around her much-loved cottage. The

unaccustomed emptiness felt strange. Wolf Boy had been with her for over a year now,

and she had grown used to the feeling of another life being lived beside her in the cottage.

And now she had sent him away to...Aunt Zelda shook her head. Was she crazy? she

asked herself. No, she told herself sternly in reply, she was *not* crazy—it had to be done.

Some months before, Aunt Zelda had realized that she was beginning to think of Wolf

Boy as her Apprentice—or Intended Keeper, as tradition had it. It was time she took one

on. She was getting toward the end of her Keeping Time, and she must begin to hand

over her secrets, but one thing worried her. There had never been a male Keeper in the

long history of Keepers. But Aunt Zelda didn't see why there shouldn't be. In fact, she

thought, it was about time that there was one—and so, with much trepidation, she had

sent Wolf Boy away to do his Task, the completion of which would qualify him to

become an Intended, providing the Queen agreed.

And now, thought Aunt Zelda, as she perused her rack of cabbage-trimmers, looking

for the crowbar, while he was away she must do her very best to make sure the Queen *did*

agree to Wolf Boy's appointment.

"Aha! *There* you are." Aunt Zelda addressed the lurking crowbar,

reverting to her

old habit of talking to herself when she was on her own. She took the crowbar from the

rack, then walked over to the fire and rolled back the rug in front of the hearth. Huffing

and puffing, she kneeled down, pried up a loose flagstone and then, gingerly rolling up

her sleeve (because the Great Hairy Marram Spider made its nest under the flagstones,

and this was not a good time of year to disturb it), Aunt Zelda cautiously drew out a long

silver tube hidden in the space below.

Holding the tube at arm's length, Aunt Zelda inspected it warily. A sudden stab of

horror ran through her—clinging to the end was a glistening white clutch of Great Hairy

Marram Spider eggs. Aunt Zelda screamed and did a wild dance, shaking the tube

violently, trying to dislodge the eggs. However, the slime had coated the silver tube and it

flew from her grasp, traced a graceful arc across the room and sailed through the open

kitchen door. Aunt Zelda heard the telltale splash of something landing in

brown-beetle-and-turnip soup, which now became brown-beetle-turnip-and-spider-egg

soup. (That evening Aunt Zelda boiled the soup and had it for supper. At the time she

thought the flavor much improved by the extra day it spent sitting on the stove, and it was

only afterward that it crossed her mind that maybe spider eggs had something to do with

it. She went to bed feeling somewhat nauseous.)

Aunt Zelda was about to rescue the tube from the soup when, out of the corner of her

eye, she saw something move. Two huge, hairy legs were feeling their way out from the

space beneath the flagstone. With a shudder, Aunt Zelda heaved up the flagstone and let

go. It slammed down with a *thud* that shook the cottage—and parted mommy spider from

her babies forever.

Aunt Zelda retrieved the silver tube, then sat down at her desk and revived herself

with a cup of hot cabbage water into which she stirred a large spoon of Marshberry jam.

She felt shaken—the spider had reminded her of what she had sent Wolf Boy off to do

and what she had once also been dispatched to do by Betty Crackle. She sighed once

more and told herself that she had sent Wolf Boy off as well-prepared as she could—and

at least she hadn't written the note on cardboard, as Betty Crackle had done.

Carefully Aunt Zelda wiped off the brown-beetle-turnip-and-spider-egg soup from

the tube. She took out a small silver knife, cut the wax seal and drew out an ancient,

damp-stained piece of parchment with the words “Indentures of the Intended Keeper”

written at the top in old-fashioned, faded letters.

Aunt Zelda spent the next hour at her desk Naming Wolf Boy in the Indentures.

Then, in her very best handwriting, she wrote out her *Petition for Apprenticeship* for the

Queen, rolled it up with the Indentures and put them both into the silver tube. It was

nearly time to go—but first there was something she wanted to get from the UNSTABLE

POTIONS AND PARTIKULAR POISONS cupboard.

It was a tight squeeze in the cupboard for Aunt Zelda, particularly in her new

well-padded dress. She lit the lantern, opened a hidden drawer and, with the aid of her

extra-strength spectacles, she consulted a small, ancient book entitled UNSTABLE

POTIONS AND PARTIKULAR POISONS CUPBOARD: KEEPERS' GUIDE AND PLAN. Having

found what she was looking for, Aunt Zelda opened a small, blue-painted drawer of

Charms and Amulets and peered inside. An assortment of carved precious stones and

crystals were laid out neatly on the blue baize cloth that lined the drawer. Aunt Zelda's

hand hovered over a selection of SafeCharms and she frowned—what she was looking

for was not there. She consulted the book once more and then reached deep inside the

drawer until her fingers found a small catch at the back. With a great stretch of her stubby

forefinger, Aunt Zelda just managed to flip the catch upward. There was a soft *clunk* and

something heavy dropped into the drawer and rolled forward into the light of the lantern.

Aunt Zelda picked up a small, pear-shaped gold bottle and placed it very carefully in

the palm of her hand. She saw the deep, dark shine of the purest gold—gold spun by the

spiders of Aurum—and a thick silver stopper inscribed with the single hieroglyph of a

long-forgotten name. She felt a little nervous—the small flask that rested in her hand was

an incredibly rare *live* SafeCharm, and she had never even touched one before.

Marcia's visit to Keeper's Cottage to collect the potions for Ephaniah and

Hildegarde earlier that morning had left Aunt Zelda feeling very twitchy. After Marcia

had left, Aunt Zelda had been overcome by a sudden Sight: Septimus on Spit Fyre, a

blinding flash of light and nothing more, nothing but blackness. Feeling extremely

shaken, she had sat very still and Looked into the blackness but had seen nothing. And

nothing was a terrifying Sight.

After the Seeing Aunt Zelda had been in turmoil. She knew enough about what

people called second Sight to know that really it should be called first Sight—it was

never wrong. Never. And so she knew that despite Marcia's insistence that she herself

would be flying Spit Fyre to get Jenna, Nicko, Snorri and Beetle, it would actually be

Septimus on the dragon. What she had Seen would surely happen. There was nothing she

could do to stop it. All she could do was send Septimus the best kind of

SafeCharm she

had—and this was it.

Aunt Zelda squeezed out of the cupboard and very carefully took the live SafeCharm

over to the window. She held the little bottle up to the daylight and turned it around,

checking the ancient wax seal around the stopper. It was still intact—there were no

cracks or any sign of disturbance. She smiled; the Charm was still Sleeping. All was well.

Aunt Zelda took a deep breath and in a weird, singsong voice that would have given

goose bumps to anyone listening, she began to Waken it.

For five long minutes Aunt Zelda sang one of the rarest and most complicated chants

that she had ever performed. It was full of rules, regulations, clauses and subclauses,

which, if written down, would have put any legal document to shame. It was a binding

contract, and Aunt Zelda did her very best to make sure there were no loopholes. She

began by describing Septimus—the recipient of the Charm—in great detail and, as she

sang his praises, her voice rose to fill the tiny cottage. It cracked three panes of glass,

curdled the milk and then curled out of the chimney into the breezy spring Marsh

morning.

As Aunt Zelda chanted, her witchy voice went past the range of normal human

hearing and reached the pitch that Marsh creatures use for danger calls.

A family of

Marsh Hoppers hurled themselves into the Mott, and five Water Nixies buried themselves

deep in the Boggart's favorite mud patch. Two Marsh voles ran squealing across the Mott

bridge and fell into a sludge pit, and the Marsh Python, which was just taking the turn

into the Mott, decided against it and headed off to Chicken Island instead.

At last the chant was done, and the panic among the Marsh creatures outside the

cottage subsided. Aunt Zelda strung a fine leather cord through the twisted silver loop around the neck of the bottle and carefully placed it in one of the many deep pockets of her dress. Next she went out to the tiny kitchen at the back and set about one of her favorite tasks—making a cabbage sandwich. Soon the cabbage sandwich had joined the live SafeCharm in the depths of the pocket. She knew that Septimus would enjoy the cabbage sandwich—she wished she could be as sure about the SafeCharm.



3

BARNEY POT

Aunt Zelda was stuck. She didn't want to admit it, but she was. She was trying to go through the Queen's Way—a Magykal passageway that led straight from her UNSTABLE POTIONS AND PARTIKULAR POISONS cupboard to an identical one in the Queen's Room in the Palace, far away in the Castle. In order to activate the Way, Aunt Zelda needed first to close the cupboard door and then open a certain drawer beside her right foot. And after

a winter spent fattening up Wolf Boy—and herself—closing the cupboard door was not going to be easy.

Aunt Zelda squeezed herself against the tightly packed shelves, breathed in and

pulled the door shut. It sprang open. She heaved the door shut again and a row of potion

bottles behind her toppled over with a little clinking sound. Very carefully, Aunt Zelda

twisted around to right the bottles and in the process knocked over a stack of tiny boxes

of dried banes. The boxes clattered to the ground. Puffing, Aunt Zelda bent down to pick

them up and the cupboard door flew open.

Muttering to herself, Aunt Zelda piled up the boxes and lined up the potion bottles.

She surveyed the cupboard door with a baleful eye. Why was it being so contrary? With a

firm tug—to show the door just who was in charge—Aunt Zelda pulled it closed once

more. She stood very still and waited. It stayed closed. Very, very slowly and carefully

Aunt Zelda began to turn around until at last she was facing the shelves once more. She

breathed out with relief and the door sprang open. Aunt Zelda resisted the urge to utter a

very bad witchy word, reached behind her and slammed the door shut. A small troupe of

potion bottles rattled, but Aunt Zelda paid them no attention. Quickly, before the door got

other ideas, she pried open the bottom drawer with her foot. Success! Behind her a

telltale click inside the door told her that the UNSTABLE POTIONS AND PARTIKULAR

POISONS cupboard was Closed and the Queen's Way was Open. Aunt Zelda Went

Through the Queen's Way—and then became stuck at the other end.

It was some minutes later before Aunt Zelda finally managed to get out of the

identical cupboard in the Queen's Room. But after squishing herself sideways and

breathing in, the cupboard door suddenly flew open. Like a cork out of a

bottle, Aunt

Zelda made a fast and somewhat undignified entrance into the Queen's Room.

The Queen's Room was a small, circular chamber containing no more than a

comfortable armchair beside a steadily burning fire—and a ghost. The ghost was

ensconced in the armchair and sat gazing dreamily into the fire. She was—or had

been—a young Queen. She wore her dark hair long, held loosely by a simple gold circlet,

and she sat with her red and gold robes wrapped around her as if feeling the cold. Over

her heart the red robes were stained dark where, some twelve and a half years earlier, the

Queen—whom people in the Castle now called Good Queen Cerys—had been shot dead.

At Aunt Zelda's dramatic entrance Queen Cerys looked up. She regarded Aunt Zelda

with a quizzical smile but did not speak. Aunt Zelda quickly curtseyed to the ghost, then

bustled across the room and disappeared through the wall. Queen Cerys settled back to

her contemplation of the fire, musing to herself that it was strange how Living beings

changed so rapidly. Zelda, she thought, must have eaten an Enlarging Spell by mistake.

Perhaps she should tell her. Or perhaps not.

Out on the dusty landing Aunt Zelda headed for a flight of narrow steps that would

take her down through the turret. She hoped she had not been rude in rushing past Queen

Cerys, but there would be time enough later to apologize—right now she had to get to

Septimus.

Aunt Zelda reached the foot of the stairs, pushed open the turret door that led to the

Palace gardens and set off purposefully across the broad lawns that swept down to the

river. Far away to her right she could see a battered striped tent perched precariously

beside the river. Inside the tent, Aunt Zelda knew, were two of her

favorite ghosts, Alther

Mella and Alice Nettles, but she was heading the other way—toward a long line of tall fir

trees at the far left-hand edge of the lawns. As Aunt Zelda hurried toward the trees she

heard the loud *swoosh* of a dragon’s wing, a noise not unlike the flapping of a hundred

striped tents full of ghosts being blown away in a fearsome gale. Above the trees she saw

the tip of Spit Fyre’s wing as it stretched out, warming up his cold dragon muscles for the

long flight ahead. And even though she could not see the rider, Aunt Zelda Knew that it

was not Marcia on the dragon—it was Septimus.

“Wait!” she shouted, speeding her pace. “*Wait!*” But her voice was drowned out as,

on the other side of the trees, Spit Fyre brought his wings down and a great rush of air set

the fir trees swaying. Puffing and wheezing, Aunt Zelda stopped to catch her breath. It

was no good, she thought, she wasn’t going to make it. That dragon was going to fly off

any minute now, taking Septimus with him.

“You all right, miss?” a small voice somewhere below her elbow inquired anxiously.

“Uh?” gasped Aunt Zelda. She looked around for the owner of the voice and noticed,

just behind her, a small boy almost hidden behind a large wheelbarrow.

“Can I help or anything?” the boy asked hopefully. Barney Pot had recently joined

the newly formed Castle Cubs and needed to do his good deed for the day. He had at first

mistaken Aunt Zelda for a tent like the striped one on the landing stage and was now

wondering if she was perhaps trapped inside a tent and had stuck her head out of the top

to ask for help.

“Yes...you can,” Aunt Zelda said, puffing. She fished deep into her secret pocket

and brought out the small gold flask. “Take this...to the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice...Septimus Heap. He’s...over there.” She flapped her hands in the direction

of the waving fir trees. “Dragon. On the...dragon.”

The boy’s eyes widened farther. “The ExtraOrdinary Apprentice? On the dragon?”

“Yes. Give this to him.”

“What— *me*?”

“Yes, dear. Please.”

Aunt Zelda pressed the small gold bottle into the boy’s hand. He stared at it. It was

the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. It felt strangely heavy—much heavier than he

thought it should be—and on the top was some weird writing. Barney was learning to

write, but it wasn’t stuff like *that*.

“Tell the Apprentice that it is a SafeCharm,” said Aunt Zelda. “Tell him that Aunt

Zelda sends it to him.”

Barney’s eyes looked like they were going to pop out of his head. Things like this

happened in his favorite book, *One Hundred Stories for Bored Boys*, but they never

happened to him. “Wow...” he breathed.

“Oh and wait—” Aunt Zelda fished something else from her pocket and handed it to

Barney. “Give him that too.”

Barney took the cabbage sandwich warily. It felt cold and squishy and he thought for

a moment it might be a dead mouse, except dead mice didn’t have soggy green bits in the

middle of them. “What is it?” he asked.

“A cabbage sandwich. Well, go on, dear,” urged Aunt Zelda. “The SafeCharm is

very important. Hurry now!”

Barney did not need to be told twice—he knew from “The Terrible Tale of Lazy

Larry” that it was *always* important to deliver a SafeCharm as fast as you could. If you

didn’t, all kinds of awful stuff could happen. He nodded, stuffed the cabbage sandwich

deep into his grubby tunic pocket and, clutching the gold bottle, shot off toward the

dragon as fast as he could go.

Barney arrived just in time. As he ran onto the dragon field he saw the

ExtraOrdinary

Apprentice—a big boy with long, curly straw-colored hair and wearing the green

Apprentice tunic. Barney could see that the Apprentice was about to climb onto the

dragon. Barney's uncle Billy Pot was holding the dragon's head and stroking one of the

big spikes on its nose.

Barney didn't like the dragon. It was huge, scary and it smelled weird—like Uncle

Billy's Lizard Lodges, only a hundred times worse. And ever since the dragon had very

nearly stepped on him, and Uncle Billy had yelled because he had gotten in the way,

Barney had kept his distance. But Barney knew that there was no keeping out of the

dragon's way now—he was on an important mission. He ran straight up to the

ExtraOrdinary Apprentice and said, "Excuse me!"

But the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice took no notice. He slung a weird-smelling fur

cloak around his shoulders and said to Uncle Billy, "I'll hold Spit Fyre, Billy. Can you

tell Marcia I'm going now?"

Barney saw Uncle Billy glance over to the corner of the field where—*oh, wow*—the

ExtraOrdinary Wizard was standing talking to Mistress Sarah, who was in charge of the

Palace and was the Princess's mother even though she wasn't Queen. Barney had never

seen the ExtraOrdinary Wizard before, but even from far away she looked just as scary as

his friends said she was. She was really tall, with thick dark curly hair, and she was

wearing long purple robes that were flapping in the wind. She had quite a loud voice too,

because Barney could hear her saying, "Now, Mr. Pot?" to Uncle Billy. But Barney knew

he didn't have time to stare at the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He had to deliver the

SafeCharm to the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice, who was about to climb onto the dragon. He

had to do it now—before it was too late.

“Apprentice!” said Barney as loud as he could. “Excuse me!”

Septimus Heap stopped with his foot in midair and looked down. He saw a small boy

staring up at him with big brown eyes. The boy reminded him of someone he had known

a long time ago—a very long time ago. Septimus almost said, “What is it, Hugo?” But he

stopped himself and just said, “What is it?”

“Please,” said the boy—who even sounded like Hugo, “I’ve got something for you.

It’s really important and I promised to give it to you.”

“Oh?” Septimus squatted down so that the boy didn’t have to keep staring up at him.

“What have you got?” he asked.

Barney Pot uncurled his fingers from around the SafeCharm. “This,” he said, “it’s a

SafeCharm. A lady asked me to give it to you.”

Septimus drew back as though stung. “No,” he said abruptly. “No. No, thank you.”

Barney looked amazed. “But it’s for you.” He pushed the gold bottle toward

Septimus.

Septimus stood up and turned back to the dragon. “No,” he said.

Barney stared at the bottle in dismay. “But it’s a *SafeCharm*. It’s really important.

Please, Apprentice, you *have* to take it.”

Septimus shook his head. “No, I don’t have to take it.”

Barney was horrified. He had promised to deliver a SafeCharm and deliver it he

must. Awful things happened to people who promised to deliver SafeCharms and then

didn’t. At the very least he would be turned into a frog or—oh *yuck*—a lizard. He would

be turned into a smelly little lizard and Uncle Billy would never know; he would catch

him and put him in a Lizard Lodge with all the other lizards, and *they* would know he

was not a real lizard and they would *eat* him. It was a disaster. “You do have to take it!”

yelled Barney, jumping up and down desperately. “*You do! You have to take it!*”

Septimus looked at Barney. He felt sorry for the boy. “Look, what’s your name?” he

said kindly.

“Barney.”

“Well, Barney, a word of advice—never take a SafeCharm from anyone. *Never.*”

“Please.” Barney grabbed hold of Septimus’s sleeve.

“No. Let *go*, Barney. Okay? I’ve got to go.” With that Septimus grabbed hold of a

large spike on the dragon’s neck, swung himself up and sat down in the narrow dip in

front of the dragon’s powerful shoulders. Barney gazed up at him in despair. He couldn’t

even reach him now. What was he going to do?

Just as Barney had decided he would have to *throw* the SafeCharm at the Apprentice,

Spit Fyre turned his head; the dragon’s red-rimmed eye glared balefully at the small,

distraught figure jumping up and down. Barney caught the look and backed away. He

didn’t believe Uncle Billy when he said that Spit Fyre was a gentleman and would never

hurt anyone.

Barney watched Marcia Overstrand stride over to the dragon with Uncle Billy.

Perhaps he could give the SafeCharm to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and she would give it

to her Apprentice? He watched as the ExtraOrdinary Wizard checked to make sure the

two large saddlebags were securely fastened just behind where Septimus was sitting. He

saw the ExtraOrdinary Wizard lean over and give her Apprentice a hug, and he thought

the Apprentice looked a bit surprised. And then the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and Uncle

Billy suddenly stepped back and Barney realized that the dragon was about to take off. It

was *then* he remembered what else he was supposed to say.

“It’s from Aunt Zelda!” he yelled so loudly that his throat hurt. “The SafeCharm is

from Aunt Zelda! And there’s a sandwich too!”

But it was too late. A thunderous *whoosh* of air drowned out his shout,

and then a

great dragonny downdraft hit Barney and blew him into a pile of something very smelly.

By the time Barney had struggled to his feet, the dragon was way above his head,

hovering at the very tops of the fir trees, and all Barney could see of the Apprentice were

the soles of his boots.

“Here, Barney,” said his uncle, only just noticing him. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” sobbed Barney, and fled.

Barney scooted through a hole in the hedge at the end of the dragon field. All he could

think of was that he must give the SafeCharm back to the lady-trapped-in-the-tent and

explain what had happened—then maybe everything would be all right. But the

lady-trapped-in-the-tent was nowhere to be seen.

And then, to his relief, Barney saw the edge of a patchwork tent disappearing

through a little door into the old turret at the end of the Palace. Uncle Billy had told

Barney that he was not allowed in the Palace, but just then Barney did not care what

Uncle Billy had told him. He ran down the old brick path that led to the turret and a

moment later he was inside the Palace.

It was dark in the Palace; it smelled funny, and Barney didn’t like it very much at all.

He couldn’t see the lady-trapped-in-the-tent anywhere. To his right were some narrow,

winding steps going up into the turret and to his left a big old wooden door. Barney didn’t

think that the lady-trapped-in-the-tent would be able to fit up the narrow steps, so he

pushed open the old door and gingerly went through. In front of him was the longest

corridor Barney had ever seen. It was in fact the Long Walk, the broad passageway that

ran like a backbone through the middle of the Palace. It was as wide as a small road and

as dark and empty as a country lane at midnight. Barney crept into the

Long Walk, but

there was no sign of the lady-trapped-in-the-tent.

Barney didn't like the corridor; it scared him. And all along the edges were weird

things: statues, stuffed animals and horrible pictures of scary people staring at him. But

he was still sure that the lady-trapped-in-the-tent must be near. He looked at the

SafeCharm and a glint of light from somewhere glanced off the shiny gold as if to remind

him how important it was that he give the SafeCharm back. And then someone grabbed

him.

Barney struggled and kicked. He opened his mouth to shout, but a hand was

suddenly clamped over it. Barney felt sick. The hand smelled of licorice, and Barney

hated licorice.

"*Shhh!*" hissed a voice in his ear. Barney wriggled like a little eel, but, unfortunately, he was not quite as slippery as a little eel and was held fast. "You're the

dragon-minder's kid, aren't you?" said the voice. "Poo. You smell worse than he does."

"Lemmego..." mumbled Barney through the horrible licorice hand, which had

something really sharp on its thumb that hurt.

"Yeah," said the voice in his ear. "Don't want smelly kids like you around here. I'll

have that." His attacker's other hand reached down and wrenched the SafeCharm from

Barney's grasp.

"No!" yelled Barney, at last wriggling free. Barney made a lunge for the SafeCharm

and found himself face-to-face with—to his amazement—a Manuscriptorium scribe. He

couldn't believe it. A tall greasy-looking boy wearing the long gray robes of a scribe was

holding the SafeCharm above his reach and grinning. Barney fought back tears. He didn't

understand it. Nothing was right this morning. Why was a Manuscriptorium scribe

ambushing him and stealing his SafeCharm? You could trust scribes—

everybody knew
that.

“Give it back!” yelled Barney, but the scribe held the bottle just out of reach of

Barney’s desperate jumps.

“You can have it if you can reach it, Shorty,” taunted the scribe.

“Please, *please*,” sobbed Barney. “It’s important. Please give it back.”

“How important?” asked the scribe, holding the bottle even higher.

“Really, *really* important.”

“Well, bog off then. It’s mine.”

To Barney’s horror the scribe suddenly disappeared. It seemed to Barney that he had

jumped into the wall. He stared at the paneling in dismay, and a trio of shrunken heads

that were lined up on a shelf stared back. Barney felt scared. How could anyone

disappear like that? Maybe he had just been attacked by a horrible ghost. But ghosts

didn’t have licorice-smelling hands and they couldn’t grab things, could they?

Barney was alone; the long corridor was deserted and the SafeCharm was gone. The

shrunken heads grinned at him as if to say, *Enjoy being a lizard. Ha, ha, ha!*



4

Intended

While Barney Pot was being mugged in the Long Walk, Aunt Zelda watched

Septimus's departure from the little window at the top of the turret.

She saw Spit Fyre rise high above the Palace, his big white belly blotting out the sun.

She saw the shadows of the dragon's wings run across the Palace lawns as he headed

toward the river, and she saw what seemed to be the precariously balanced tiny green

figure of Septimus almost hidden behind the great muscled neck of the dragon. She

watched Septimus fly Spit Fyre three times around the striped tent on the landing stage

and saw Alther Mella emerge from the tent and wave him off. Then she strained her old

eyes to follow Septimus and his dragon as they set off toward a bank of mist coming in

from the Port. As dragon and rider became nothing more than a dark spot in the sky,

finally disappearing from view, Aunt Zelda sighed and told herself that at least Septimus

had the SafeCharm—a live SafeCharm, no less.

Aunt Zelda stepped away from the window. She took a golden key from her pocket,

pushed it into what appeared to be a solid wall and walked into the Queen's Room. As

she stepped into the quiet sanctuary, she put aside her worries about Septimus and turned

her thoughts to the boy who had once been Septimus's best friend. In the Young Army,

Septimus and Wolf Boy had been inseparable—until the terrible night when Wolf Boy

had fallen from the Young Army boat and disappeared into the dark waters of the river.

At the sound of Aunt Zelda's rustling dress, Queen Cerys turned slowly in her chair

and her deep violet eyes regarded her visitor vaguely. The ghost of the Queen rarely left

the room, for she guarded the Queen's Way. It was a quiet, usually uneventful existence,

and the ghost spent much of her time in a dreamlike state from which it was sometimes

difficult to rouse herself.

Aunt Zelda curtseyed once more and drew out the long silver tube from

her pocket.

The sight of the tube brought Queen Cerys out of her reverie, and she watched with

interest as Aunt Zelda took out a piece of parchment, carefully unrolled it and placed it

on the arm of the chair in which the ghost sat.

“This is for a new Intended Keeper, if it please you, Your Grace,” said Aunt Zelda,

who did not hold with calling Queens the newfangled “Your Majesty.”

Queen Cerys didn’t care what anyone called her as long as they were polite. Like her

daughter, Jenna, she had always thought that being called “Your Majesty” was somehow

ridiculous, and she considered Aunt Zelda’s use of “Your Grace” not much better. But

she said nothing and looked with interest at the sheet of parchment before her.

“I have not had the pleasure of seeing one of these before, Zelda,” she said with a

smile. “My mother saw none—although I believe my grandmother saw two or three.”

“I believe so, Your Grace. That was a bad run. By the time Betty Crackle took over,

it was chaos. Poor Betty. She did her best.”

“I’m sure she did. But you have been Keeper for a long time now, Zelda?”

“Indeed. For over fifty years, Your Grace.”

“Oh, please, Zelda, just call me Cerys. Fifty years? Time goes so fast... and yet so

slow. So who have you chosen? Not one of those Wendron Witches, I trust?”

“Heavens, no!” exclaimed Aunt Zelda. “No, it is someone I have had living with me

for a while now. A young person who has, I am pleased to say, a great feeling for the

Marsh and for all things within it. Someone who will make a good Keeper, of that I am

convinced.”

Cerys smiled at Aunt Zelda. “I am very pleased. Who is it?”

Aunt Zelda took a deep breath. “Um...Wolf Boy, Your Grace—Cerys.”

“Wolf Boy?”

“Yes.”

“A strange name for a girl. But times change, I suppose.”

“He’s not a girl, Your—Cerys. He is a boy. Well, a young man, almost.”

“A young *man*? Heavens.”

“I believe he would make a wonderful Keeper, Queen Cerys. And nowhere in the

Tenets of Keeping does it actually say that the Keeper must be a woman.”

“Really? Goodness me.”

“But of course the decision is yours, Queen Cerys. I can only advise and recommend.”

Queen Cerys sat and gazed at the fire for so long that Aunt Zelda began to wonder

whether she had fallen asleep, until her clear, slightly hollow voice began to speak.

“Zelda,” said the ghost of the Queen, “I realize that the duties of the Keeper have

changed now that the Dragon Boat has returned to the Castle.”

Aunt Zelda murmured, “That is true.” She sighed. Aunt Zelda missed the Dragon

Boat badly. She worried about the boat lying unconscious in the Dragon House deep

within the walls of the boatyard—even though that was the very place that had been built

to keep the Dragon Boat safe. And while Aunt Zelda knew that this meant Jenna was now

free to leave the Castle without exposing it to danger, Aunt Zelda still regretted the loss

of her Dragon Boat.

Queen Cerys continued. “So, it seems to me that, as the duties of the Keeper have

changed, maybe the very nature of the Keeper should change too. If you recommend this

Wolf Boy, I shall accept him.”

Aunt Zelda smiled broadly. “I do recommend him, Queen Cerys. Highly recommend

him, in fact.”

“Then I accept Wolf Boy as the Intended Keeper.”

Aunt Zelda clapped her hands excitedly. “Oh, that is wonderful, wonderful!”

“Bring him to me, Zelda, so that I may see him. Bring him through the Queen’s

Way. We must see that he can go through the Way.”

“Um...he already has. I, um, I had to bring him once before. In an emergency.”

“Ah, well. He seems eminently suited. I look forward to meeting him. He has done the Task, I suppose?”

A small butterfly of anxiety settled in Aunt Zelda’s stomach. “He has embarked upon it as we speak, Cerys.”

“Ah. So we shall await his return with interest. If he does return, then I shall indeed look forward to making his acquaintance. Good-bye, Zelda. Until the next time.”

Her delight at the Queen’s acceptance of her Apprentice was somewhat tempered by

the Queen’s mention of the Task, which Aunt Zelda had managed to put out of her mind

for a while. Slowly she rolled up the parchment and replaced it in the tube. Then she

curtseyed and went across the room to the UNSTABLE POTIONS AND PARTIKULAR

POISONS cupboard. Cerys watched her open the door and struggle to squeeze inside.

“Zelda?” Cerys called.

“Yes?” puffed Aunt Zelda, poking her head out of the cupboard with some difficulty.

“Is it possible to eat an Enlarging Spell without realizing it, do you suppose?”

Aunt Zelda looked puzzled. “I shouldn’t think so,” she said. “Why?”

“No reason. I just wondered. Safe journey.”

“Oh. Thank you, Queen Cerys.” And she heaved the cupboard door closed behind

her.



5

412 AND 409

Septimus felt elated. He was flying Spit Fyre, and from now on he could fly him

whenever he wanted. It was, he realized, the very first time that he had flown his dragon

without a sneaking feeling of guilt, and the knowledge that Marcia did not really approve

or had actually forbidden it.

But this time she had waved him off with a smile. She had even given him a

hug—which was a bit weird—and now he had the excitement of a whole journey ahead

of him, just him and his dragon. And even better, thought Septimus, as he took Spit Fyre

up through a low bank of mist and emerged into the sunlight, he was on his way to see all

the people who mattered to him the most. Well, nearly all. There were others, of course,

but it was Jenna, Beetle, Nicko and Snorri who were waiting for him in an old net loft far

away across the sea, and he was on his way to bring them home.

Septimus knew it would be a long flight. He had done it two days earlier with

Marcia, Sarah and the very sick Ephaniah Grebe, and it had not been easy, but that had

mostly been due to what Sarah had called Marcia's "backseat flying." But now it was just

Septimus and his dragon, and he would fly his dragon exactly how he wanted to.

And so, skimming above the mist, Spit Fyre followed the winding curves of the river

as it made its way down to the Port. Septimus sat in the Pilot Dip just behind the dragon's

neck and in front of the dragon's broad, bony shoulders. With every long, slow beat of

the wings, Septimus felt Spit Fyre's muscles move beneath the cool scales under him. He

leaned back and rested against a large, flat spine—known as the Pilot Spine—and held on

loosely to a short spine at the base of the dragon's neck, which some handbooks rather

scathingly referred to as the Panic Spine but which Septimus knew was more correctly

called the Guide Spine, for it was through this that he felt the dragon's every move.

Soon Septimus and Spit Fyre were flying across the Port. The mist had disappeared

and small white clouds were scudding high above them—happy clouds, thought

Septimus. A bright sun shone, and Spit Fyre's green scales glistened with a beautiful

iridescence. Septimus laughed out loud. Life was good—in fact, life was wonderful. He

had survived the Queste—even better, he had successfully completed it—the only

Apprentice ever to do so. And now, to his astonishment, he was a Senior Apprentice. He

checked the hems of his sleeves—yes, the purple stripes were still there, shimmering in

the sunlight.

Septimus looked down. Far below he saw the Port spread out like a patterned cloth.

Many of the streets were still dark, as the sun was not yet high enough to

reach deep into

the warehouse canyons and take away their shadows, but the rays shone on the old slate

roofs, which glistened from a recent shower of rain. Lazy curls of smoke rose from the

chimneys below, and Septimus caught the sweet smell of woodsmoke in his nostrils. It

was a good morning to be out on a dragon.

Leading away from the Port like a long white snake was a familiar raised road

reaching out to the Marram Marshes: the Causeway. He set Spit Fyre to follow the

Causeway, intending to fly out across the Marram Marshes to the Double Dune

Lighthouse and from there set his course out to sea. As he drew toward the Marsh end of

the Causeway, Septimus saw a figure, black against the whiteness of the road, making its

way toward the Port.

Septimus did not altogether believe in a sixth sense. He was inclined to agree with

Marcia that a sixth sense was “a load of witchy nonsense.” He did have, however, a

well-developed sense of knowing when he was being Watched, and suddenly Septimus

knew that the figure at the end of the Causeway was Watching him. Not Ill-Watching but

just plain Watching, the kind of thing a Wizard might do when he sees his child off to

school and follows his progress, checking that the local bullies aren't lying in wait.

Septimus gave Spit Fire two gentle nudges with his left foot and the dragon slowly

lost height. Now Septimus could see that the figure had stopped and was looking up,

shading his eyes with both his hands. “It's 409. I'm sure it is,” Septimus muttered,

lapsing into his habit of speaking his thoughts out loud when it was just himself and Spit

Fyre. “Go down, Spit Fyre. Go down. Hey—not so *faaaaaast*.”

Spit Fyre landed on the Causeway with a tremendous *thud* and went into a skid on

the slippery clay surface. Trying to brake, he held his wings out at ninety degrees to the

road and pushed his tail down but only succeeded in making a deep groove in the chalky

surface. Front feet splayed, heels dragging, Spit Fyre was still going fast and heading

straight for a deep puddle. A plume of dirty water spewed into the air, and finally the

dragon ground to a halt, the clay at the bottom of the puddle sticking to his feet like

Marcia's mouse glue—a concoction she used for trapping the paper-eating mice in the

Pyramid Library.

Septimus looked down from his perch. Where was 409? Surely he had been standing

just about where they had landed. A horrible thought occurred to Septimus—Spit Fyre

wouldn't have landed *on* him—would he? Septimus Listened. He Heard nothing, only the

soft sighing of the breeze rustling across the reeds on either side of the Causeway.

In a panic, Septimus scrambled down from the dragon. There was no sign of Wolf

Boy in the road behind him; all he could see was the long tail groove and the skid marks

of Spit Fyre's feet. Now an even more horrible thought came to Septimus—had the

dragon dragged Wolf Boy along underneath him? "Stand up, Spit Fyre," he said

somewhat squeakily.

The dragon regarded Septimus as if to say, *Why should I?* but Septimus was having

none of it. "Stand *up!*" he ordered. "Spit Fyre, stand up at once!"

Spit Fyre knew when he had to do as he was told, but it didn't mean he had to do it

gracefully. Irritably, he raised himself out of the puddle, which he was quite enjoying

sitting in. Very warily Septimus peered underneath and suddenly felt much better. There

was no sign of 409.

"Something wrong with the undercarriage, 412?" came a cheery voice from behind

Septimus.

“409!” said Septimus, spinning around just in time to see his old friend emerge

dripping with water from the reed beds. “I couldn’t Hear you. For a horrible moment I

thought...well, I thought—”

Wolf Boy’s brown eyes laughed. “409’s been squashed,” he finished. “No thanks to

you that I wasn’t. Your driving is a menace. Had to throw myself into the reed beds.” He

shook himself like a dog, and a shower of drips flew off and landed on Septimus’s

wolverine skin. Wolf Boy eyed the skin suspiciously. He didn’t like to see wolverine

pelts being worn. Wolverines were *family*.

Septimus caught Wolf Boy’s glance. Sheepishly he removed the wolverine skin and

threw it onto Spit Fyre. “Sorry,” he said.

“Don’t worry. People wear ’em, I know that.” Wolf Boy chuckled. “There’s always

trouble around here, isn’t there?” he said.

“Is there?” asked Septimus.

“Yeah. You know—weird stuff falling out of the sky. First your brother and now

you.”

Septimus was not sure he liked being compared to that particular brother. He knew

that Wolf Boy was referring to the time that Simon, in possession of the Flyte Charm, had

swooped down on them almost where they were standing now and had tried to grab

Jenna. But Septimus could never be annoyed when he was with Wolf Boy. He smiled and

said, “Well, at least you didn’t take a shot at me with your catapult.”

“Nah. Still carry it though. So what are you doing, then?”

“I’m going to get Jenna. And Nicko and Snorri. And Beetle. Bring them home.”

“What—all of them? On *that*?” Wolf Boy eyed Spit Fyre dubiously. The dragon

returned the compliment.

“Yep. It’ll be fun.”

“Rather you than me. I prefer where I’m going any day.”

“So where’s that—the Port?” This was not a difficult guess—the Causeway led nowhere else.

“You got it. Zelda wants me to—” Wolf Boy stopped. Aunt Zelda had told him to

tell no one what he was doing. “Do some stuff,” Wolf Boy finished lamely.

“Stuff?”

“Um, yeah.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to tell me. There are things Marcia doesn’t let me tell

anyone either. Want a ride?”

“Oh.” Wolf Boy looked at Spit Fyre. He had sworn that he would never, ever get on

that dragon again. The scales gave him the creeps, and the way Spit Fyre flew—up and

down like a yo-yo—made his stomach churn.

“It’s a long walk to the Port,” said Septimus, who didn’t want to leave his old friend

on his own in the middle of nowhere. “And we won’t go fast, I promise.”

“Well, I...oh, all right then. Thanks.”

Septimus was as good as his word. He flew Spit Fyre very slowly about fifty feet above

the Causeway, and they soon came to the first outlying buildings of the Port—a few

rundown workers’ cottages. Watched by some silent young children—who had emerged

wide-eyed at the sound of the dragon—Wolf Boy slipped down from his place behind

Septimus. He landed on the Causeway like a cat and pulled his backpack straight.

“Thanks, 412. That wasn’t so bad.”

“Anytime. Look, watch out for the Port Coven, won’t you? They’re worse than they

look.”

“Yeah. And they don’t look so great, either,” said Wolf Boy. “Hey—how d’you

know I’m going to the Coven?”

Septimus was suddenly concerned. “I didn’t,” he said. “You’re not really going to

the Coven, are you?”

Wolf Boy nodded. “Aunt Zelda, she...”

“Hmm,” said Septimus. “Well, just remember that Aunt Zelda didn’t get to be a

Keeper by being a goody-goody white witch all the time.” He fixed his gaze on his

friend’s dark brown eyes and lowered his voice. “*No one* gets to be Keeper without

touching Darke, 409. Take care. Don’t get too close, okay?”

“I won’t. And you take care too. Come and see us when you get back.”

Septimus thought how wonderful it would be to spend some time at Aunt Zelda’s

with Jenna and Nicko, just like it had been when they first met—only better. “We’ll *all*

come and see you,” he said. “I’ll bring Nicko and Snorri—and Beetle too, and Jenna.”

“Great. And I’ll show you the Marsh. I know all the paths—well, most of them. I’ll

take you to Chicken Island. I’ve got some good friends there.”

“Sounds good. Really good.” Septimus looked at Wolf Boy and wished he wasn’t

headed for the Port witches. Septimus wasn’t sure that his friend understood just how

dangerous they were. He reached into one of the pockets on his silver Apprentice belt and

drew out a small metal triangle. “Here, take this,” he said. “It’s a Reverse. If those

witches try anything, point the sharp end of this at them. It will send it right back to

them—with knobs on.”

Wolf Boy shook his head regretfully. “Thanks, but no thanks,” he said. “Gotta do

this on my own.”

“Okay,” said Septimus, replacing the Charm. “I understand. Be careful.” Septimus

watched Wolf Boy’s long, loping stride take him quickly past the cottages and onto a

narrow, cobblestone track that led into the dark streets of higgledy-piggledy houses,

which hugged the fringes of the Port. He watched until Wolf Boy turned a corner and

disappeared into the shadows. Then, under the somewhat disconcerting gaze of the silent

crowd of grubby toddlers and young children, he told his dragon, “Go

up.”

Spit Fyre, who—despite what Barney Pot thought—was very careful of small children, cautiously beat his wings, and Septimus slowly saw the ground below loosen its hold once more. They were on their way.



6

JIM KNEE

*L*ike a spider returned to its web, Merrin was back in his secret space. He had discovered it by accident a few days earlier when, sauntering down the Long

Walk on his way to the Manuscriptorium, he had seen Sarah Heap hurrying toward him.

Merrin had panicked; he was caught in a particularly open part of the Long Walk with no

shadows to lurk in and no doors or curtains to slip behind. Merrin never thought well in a

panic, so all he did was press himself against the ancient paneling and hope that, by some

miracle, Sarah Heap did not notice him. But, to Merrin’s amazement, another kind of

miracle happened—the paneling behind him swung open and he fell backward into an

empty space.

Merrin had sat, winded, deep in layers of dust and watched Sarah Heap hurry by with

never a glance at the dark gap in the panels. Once she was safely past, he had inspected

his hiding place. It was the size of a tiny room and contained nothing

more than a

broken-down old chair and a pile of blankets heaped in the corner. Half afraid of what

they might conceal, Merrin prodded the blankets with his foot—they promptly fell to

dust. Coughing, Merrin had rushed out of the cupboard only to see Sarah Heap heading

back toward him. He dived back into the concealed room and, desperately trying to stifle

the coughs, crammed his knuckles into his mouth. Merrin need not have worried, for

Sarah had other things on her mind right then, and the sound of muffled choking noises

coming from inside the wall did not even intrude on her anxious thoughts.

Since then, Merrin had paid quite a few visits to what he thought of as *his secret*

space. He had stocked it with essentials: water, candles and licorice snakes, plus a few

Banana Bears that were new at Ma Custard's and, if chewed at the same time as a licorice

snake, tasted rather interesting. Whenever he could, Merrin sat quietly in the room

listening and watching, a spider in the center of its web, waiting for a young, innocent fly

to wander by—and eventually one had indeed wandered by in the form of Barney Pot.

Merrin had been an efficient spider and now he was back in his den, excitedly

clutching the spoils of his very first ambush. He struck the flint of his tinderbox and, with

the spark, lit the candles that he had “borrowed” from the Manuscriptorium. Gingerly he

closed the section of paneling that faced the Long Walk, taking care to wedge the catch

open. Ever since his nurse—on the orders of DomDaniel—locked him in a dark cupboard

whenever he did not do what he was told, Merrin had a fear of being trapped in dark

spaces, and the one drawback of his den was that he could not figure out how to open the

door from the inside.

After testing the door thirteen times to make sure it still opened, Merrin settled

himself on some cushions that he had taken from a storage cupboard in the Palace attic.

Then he bit off the head of a brand-new licorice snake, stuffed a Banana Bear into his

mouth and sighed happily. Life was good.

Merrin inspected the small gold bottle, which was still warm from Barney's hand. He

smiled; he'd done well. He could tell the bottle was pure gold just by how heavy it was

and by the deep untarnished sheen that glowed almost orange in the candlelight. He

looked at the silver stopper and wondered what the strange little pictogram was on the

top. The bottle looked like a scent bottle, and he reckoned the symbol was the name of

the scent. He'd seen some similar ones in the window of a little jewelry shop near Ma

Custard's place, and some of them were very expensive indeed—enough to buy Ma

Custard's entire stock of licorice snakes, Banana Bears and probably most of the

FizzBom specials too. Merrin's mouth began to water, and he dribbled licorice spit down

the front of his gray Manuscriptorium robes. He grinned and popped another Banana

Bear into his mouth. Decision made—that was *exactly* what he would do: he would take

the gold bottle to the jewelry shop and sell it, then he would go straight to Ma Custard's

and buy up her entire stock of snakes and bears. *That* would show the old bat. (Merrin's

licorice-snake consumption had outrun his Manuscriptorium wages, and Ma Custard had

informed him that she did not do credit.)

Curiosity began to get the better of Merrin, and he wondered what the scent in the

bottle smelled like. If it smelled really nice, he thought, he could charge even more. He

inspected the brilliant blue wax that sealed the stopper; it would be easy enough to melt

the wax in the candle flame and reseal it—no one would know. He stabbed at the seal

with a grimy thumbnail and began to scrape it away. Soon most of the wax lay in grubby

curls in his lap and the smooth silver that had been hidden under the wax was shining in

the candlelight. Merrin took the little stopper between his finger and thumb and pulled. It

came out with a small sigh.

Merrin raised the gold bottle to his nose and sniffed. It didn't smell very nice. In fact,

it smelled distinctly *un* nice. However, he was not to know that jinn are not known for

smelling sweet—and many of them make a point of smelling fairly disgusting. In fact, the

jinnee that dwelled in the gold bottle clutched in Merrin's sticky hand did not smell too

bad, as jinn go—a subtle mixture of burned pumpkin mixed with a touch of cow dung.

But Merrin felt disappointed in his scent bottle. Just to make sure it really did smell so

bad, he put the bottle right up to his left nostril and sniffed hard—and the jinnee was

sucked up his nose. It was not a good moment for either of them.

The jinnee probably had the worst of it. It had waited in its bottle for many hundreds

of years, dreaming of the magnificent moment when it would be released. It had dreamed

of the sweet, cool air of a spring morning on a mountainside, just like the last time it had

been released by an unsuspecting shepherd, not long before some scheming no-good

witch had tricked it into the smallest bottle in which it was possible to fit a jinnee. Since

it had been Awakened by Aunt Zelda, the jinnee had been in a frenzy of anticipation,

imagining an endless variety of fantastic release scenarios. Probably the only one it had

not imagined was being sucked up Merrin Meredith's nose.

It wasn't nice up Merrin's nose. Without going into too many unpleasant details, it

was dark, damp and there was not a lot of space for a jinnee longing to

expand. And the

noise was atrocious—even in the center of an enchanted whirlwind, the jinnee had never

heard anything like the howls that filled the tiny cave it had been dragged into. But

suddenly, to the accompanying sound of the most enormous sneeze, the jinnee was let

out, propelled from the cave like a bullet from a gun. With a scream of exhilaration it hit

the open air and shot across the tiny room in a flash of yellow light, where it bounced off

the wall and was hurled deep into a pile of ancient dust. Merrin stared in absolute

amazement and not a little pride—he had never seen a booger like *that*.

Merrin's pride quickly evaporated and his amazement turned to fear as a large,

glowing yellow splodge emerged from the pile of dust—the booger in the dust was

growing. A squeak of terror escaped him as the mass spread and, like a pan of milk

boiling and bubbling, began rising up and up. Now the mass began to spin, pulling itself

upward as it swirled and grew, glowing ever brighter, drowning the warm candlelight and

filling the tiny chamber with a dazzling yellow light.

By now Merrin was cowering in the corner, whimpering. At first he had thought that

one of the Manuscriptorium scribes had somehow stuck an Expanding Booger Spell (an

old Manuscriptorium favorite) on him when he wasn't looking. But now—even with his

eyes shut tight—Merrin knew it was worse than that. He knew that inside the chamber

was another Being—a Being much bigger, older and scarier than he was. And something

told him that the Being was not particularly happy just then.

Merrin was right—the jinnee was not happy at all. It had been longing for wide-open

spaces and here it was boxed into a tiny cupboard, full of ancient dust and with the Great

One Who Had Released It cowering and sniveling in the corner. Of course, all jinn were

used to a bit of terror at their appearance—many went out of their way to cultivate

it—but there was something about this jinnee’s Great One that it did not take to. The

hunched-up, miserable-looking human had an unpleasant air about it and was most

definitely *not* the kind of Great One that the Awakening song had led the jinnee to

expect. It didn’t even look right. Annoyed at being tricked once again, the jinnee heaved

an irritable sigh. The sigh howled around the chamber like a banshee. Merrin threw

himself to the ground and covered his ears with his hands.

The jinnee spread itself across the ceiling and regarded Merrin’s prone, sniveling

figure with distaste. But if the jinnee wanted to stay out of the bottle, the next step had to

be taken fast. It had to receive a command and obey it. In this way, it would once again

become part of the world and could adopt human form—not that that was a great

advantage, thought the jinnee, looking at the pathetic figure below.

The next thing Merrin heard—despite sticking his fingers into his ears—was a voice

that felt as though it was deep inside his head, saying, “*Be you Septimus Heap?*”

Merrin opened one eye and looked up fearfully. The yellowish splotch on the ceiling

hovered menacingly. Merrin managed a small squeak. “Yes. I be—well, once I been. I

mean *was*.”

The jinnee sighed and a great howl of wind whistled through the little box of a room.

How could its Awakening have been so wrong? This sniveling brat had said he was

Septimus Heap, and yet the figure cowering in the dust was nothing like the glowing

description of the Magykal boy Aunt Zelda had given the jinnee. The portrayal of

Septimus Heap had been such that even the jaded jinnee had been almost looking forward

to seeing its new Master, but now it was clear—yet another double-

crossing witch had

deceived it. It had no choice but to continue with the Second Question.

“*What Do You Will, Oh Great One?*” Just for fun the jinnee made its voice the

scariest it possibly could. Merrin stuffed his fingers back in his ears and shook with terror.

The voice repeated its question impatiently. “*What Do You Will, Oh Great One?*”

“What?” said Merrin, covering his face with his hands and peering out through his fingers.

The jinnee sighed again. This was a really stupid one. It repeated its question yet

again, very slowly, and began to slide down the wall.

“What...do? I...will?” Merrin echoed like a scared parrot.

The jinnee decided it must have chosen the wrong language. For the better part of the

next five minutes it ran through all available languages while it wandered aimlessly

around the chamber, watched with horror by Merrin. It had no success. As it reached the

very last language it knew—a dialect from an undiscovered river valley in the Snow

Plains of the East—the jinnee was in a state of panic. If the stupid Great One didn’t

answer the question soon, it would be right back in that awful little bottle and then what?

It had to get an answer—*now*.

Merrin by now had gathered enough courage to sit up. “Wha—what are you?” he

stammered as the blob settled itself on the floor. The jinnee’s panic lessened a little—the

Great One was finally talking some sense, and it now knew which language to use. But

time was short. It was beginning to feel the pull of the little gold bottle, which the Great

One still clutched in his hand. It knew it must appear patient and friendly—that was its

only hope. Slowly it answered Merrin’s question.

“I am a jinnee,” it replied.

“A what?”

Oh merciful spirits, this was a truly *stupid* one. “A jinnee,” said the yellow blob,

very, very slowly. “Jin... *nee*.”

Merrin’s nose was blocked, his eyes were still watering from the jinnee incursion,

and his ears were still buzzing from the whistling sigh. He could hardly hear.

“You’re *Jim Knee*?” he asked.

The jinnee gave up. “Yes,” it agreed. “If you wish it, Great One, I am Jim Knee. But

first you must answer my second question: *What Do You Will, Oh Great One?*”

“Do? I will do *what?*”

The jinnee lost its temper. “Will!” it screamed. “*Will!* What—do—you—will, Oh

Great One? It means what do you want me to do, *stupid!*”

“Don’t call me stupid!” Merrin screamed back.

The jinnee stared at Merrin in amazement. “Is that your answer—don’t call you

stupid?”

“Yes!”

“Nothing else?”

“No! Yes, yes—go away, go *away!*” Merrin threw himself on the ground and had his

first tantrum since the last time his nurse had locked him in the closet.

The jinnee could not believe its luck. What a turnaround! Heady with celebration, the

jinnee took on human form in a more extravagant manner than it might have done had it

been less euphoric. Soon the secret chamber was no longer full of an amorphous yellow

blob but occupied by an exotic figure wearing a yellow cloak, jerkin and breeches, all

topped off by a hat—the jinnee liked hats—that looked remarkably like a pile of

ever-shrinking bright yellow doughnuts balanced on its head. The outfit was set off by

what the jinnee considered to be a most becoming mustache—it had always fancied a bit

of facial hair—and a set of long, curling fingernails. It had a slight squint, but some

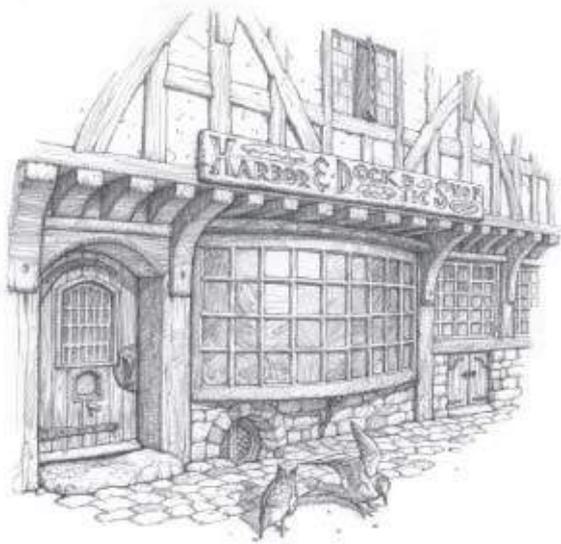
things could not be helped.

The jinnee could hardly believe his luck (it had decided to be a him—
with a name
like Jim Knee, what else could it be?). He had gone from the very brink
of being forced
back into his bottle to total—or almost total—freedom in one minute
flat. As long as he
steered clear of the old witch who had Awakened him for the next year
and a day he
would be fine, and he certainly had no intention of going anywhere near
the pestilential
marshes where he had been Awakened, no intention at all.

The jinnee looked at Merrin lying facedown on the floor, drumming his
feet and
wailing. He shook his head in bemusement. Even though in the dim,
distant past he had
been one himself, humans were a weird bunch—there was no denying it.
With an
overwhelming desire to smell some fresh air at long last, the jinnee
rushed out of the
secret chamber, causing a great draft of air to slam the door with a bang.
Inside the secret chamber Merrin’s tantrum abruptly ceased—just as it
always did as
soon as the nurse slammed the closet door on him. In the sudden silence,
with his ears
still ringing, Merrin slowly got up and tried to open the panel. It did not
move.

An hour later Merrin was slumped on his cushions, hoarse from yelling,
and Sarah Heap
was sitting in the Palace kitchen talking to the cook.
“I’m hearing things behind the wainscoting,” she said. “It’s those poor
little
princesses Jenna told me about. Poor little trapped ghosties. It’s so sad.”
The cook was matter-of-fact. “Don’t you go worrying about it, Mistress
Heap,” she
said. “You hear all kinds of things in the Palace. Terrible things ’as
’appened here over
the years. You just got to put it out of your mind. It’ll soon go away,
you’ll see.”

Sarah Heap tried, but the yelling continued all that evening. Even Silas
heard it. They
both went to bed with cotton stuffed in their ears.
Merrin did not go to bed at all.



7

THE PIE SHOP

From the shadows of a dank and smelly street, Wolf Boy saw Septimus and Spit Fyre

rise above the rooftops and fly off into the sun. He Watched until they were no more than

a small black speck in the sky, or possibly just a piece of soot on the end of his

eyelash—it was hard to tell. And then he set off, following the last of Aunt Zelda's maps.

Like Septimus, Wolf Boy felt elated by a new sense of freedom mixed with

responsibility. He was on his own but not alone, for he knew that Aunt Zelda was

thinking about him and that the job he had to do was important to her—very important.

He did not know why; he was just happy to be trusted to do it.

Wolf Boy had spent years living in the Forest and was unused to seeing so many

people at once. But as he made his way toward the Harbor and Dock Pie Shop—which he

had been looking forward to for days—he felt excited by the streets and the strange

mixture of people walking past him. It was, he thought, much like the Forest, only with

houses instead of trees and people instead of Forest creatures—although he thought that

the Port people were much weirder than any Forest creatures. As the

lanky boy with the
straggly dreadlocks, grubby brown tunic and loping wolflike gait wound
his way along
the cobblestone streets that snaked between the dilapidated warehouses,
he drew no
attention from the mongrel inhabitants and visitors to the Port. And that
was the way that
Wolf Boy liked it.
Aunt Zelda's map was good. Soon he emerged from a narrow cut
between two
warehouses into the breezy sunlight of the old fishing harbor. Before
him, bobbing in the
choppy water, was a motley collection of boats tended by fishermen and
sailors. Some
were being unloaded onto waiting carts and others were being made
ready for venturing
out into the wide blue expanse of sea that filled the horizon. Wolf Boy
shivered and
pulled his brown woolen cloak around himself. Give him the Marsh or
the Forest any
day, he thought; the vast emptiness of the sea scared him.
Wolf Boy breathed in deeply. He liked the faint salty tang of the air, but
even better
he liked the mouthwatering aroma of hot pies that told him he had come
to the right
place. His stomach gave a loud gurgle and he headed for the Harbor and
Dock Pie Shop.
The pie shop was quiet. It was just before the lunchtime rush, and a
plump young
woman behind the counter was busying herself getting another batch of
pies out of the
oven. Wolf Boy stood in front of the biggest variety of pies that he had
ever seen in his
life, trying to decide what to buy. He wanted to try them all. Unlike
Septimus, Wolf Boy
had not taken to Aunt Zelda's distinctive style of cooking and
immediately decided
against any pie with cabbage in it—which only cut out three. Finally he
bought five
different pies.
As he turned to go, the door to the shop burst open and a young, fair-
haired man

strode in. The young woman behind the counter glanced up and Wolf Boy saw an

anxious look cross her face. “Simon,” she said, “any luck?”

“Nope,” the young man replied.

Wolf Boy froze. He recognized that voice. From underneath his dreadlocks he stole a

look at the new arrival. Surely it wasn’t...it couldn’t be. But yes, there was a scar across

the young man’s right eye exactly where the stone from his catapult had caught him. It

must be him. It was—it was Simon Heap.

Wolf Boy knew that Simon had not recognized him. Indeed, Simon had barely even

glanced at him. He was deep in a murmured conversation with the woman. Wolf Boy

hesitated. Should he sidle out and risk Simon noticing him or should he stay put and feign

a continuing interest in the pies? With the hot pies just begging to be eaten, Wolf Boy

avored getting out fast before he was noticed, but something in Simon’s voice—a kind

of desperation—stopped him.

“I can’t find her *anywhere*, Maureen. It’s like she’s vanished into thin air,” Simon

was saying.

“She can’t have,” was Maureen’s sensible reply.

Simon—who knew more about these things than Maureen realized—was not so sure.

“It’s my fault,” he said miserably. “I should have gone with her to the market.”

Maureen tried to comfort him. “Now, you can’t go blaming yourself, Simon,” she

said. “Lucy has a temper on her. We both know that.” She smiled. “She’s probably just

gone off in a huff. You’ll see. She did that for a whole week once when she was here.”

Simon was not to be comforted. He shook his head. “But she wasn’t in a temper. She

was fine. I have a bad feeling about this, Maureen. Oh, if only I had Sleuth.”

“Had who?—ohmygoodnessthey’reburning!” Maureen rushed off to rescue the next

batch of pies.

Simon watched Maureen flap away the smoke with a dishcloth. “I’ll try and Trace

her steps once more, Maureen, then that’s it. I’m going to go and get Sleuth.”

“What’s Sleuth, some new detective agency?” Maureen asked, inspecting a

blackened sausage-and-tomato pie. “Rather them than me. The last one around here got

burned down. Looked even worse than this bunch of pies.”

“No, Sleuth’s my Tracker Ball,” said Simon. “Marcia Overstrand stole it.”

Shocked, Maureen looked up from her pies. “The ExtraOrdinary Wizard stole a

ball?”

“Well...she didn’t exactly steal it,” said Simon, trying his best to stick to his new

resolution to tell the truth at all times. “I suppose she kind of confiscated it, really. But

Sleuth’s not just any old ball, Maureen. It’s Magyk. It can locate people. If I can get

Marcia to give Sleuth back I could make it find Lucy, I’m sure I could.”

Maureen tipped the entire contents of the tray into the garbage with a regretful sigh.

“Look, Simon, don’t you go worrying too much. Lucy will turn up, I’m sure she will.

If I were you, I’d forget any thoughts about all that Magyk stuff and keep looking around

here. You know what they say—if you wait on the old quayside long enough, everyone

you have ever met will pass by. You could do worse.”

“Yeah...I suppose you’re right,” muttered Simon.

“Of course I am,” said Maureen. “Why don’t you go and do that? Take a pie with

you.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Wolf Boy watched Simon pick up a bacon-and-egg pie

and walk out of the shop. Through the steamed-up window he saw Simon walk slowly

along the harbor wall, eating his pie, deep in thought. It was a very different Simon from

Wolf Boy’s last encounter. Gone was the hooded, menacing look in his

eyes and the

feeling of Darkeness that had surrounded him. If he hadn't recognized the voice, thought

Wolf Boy, he would not have known him.

Wolf Boy left the pie shop and followed some steps down to the water, which took

him safely out of Simon's way. He sat watching some tiny crabs burrow into the damp

sand and, fending off repeated attacks from the notorious Port gulls, he munched his way

through a cheese-and-bean pie, a beef-and-onion pie and a particularly delicious

vegetable-and-gravy pie. Then he put the other two pies in his backpack and consulted

the map. It was time to go and do what he had come for. It was time to call on the Port

Witch Coven.



8

THE PORT WITCH COVEN

Wolf Boy was not often nervous, but as he stood on the suspiciously slimy steps of the

House of the Port Witch Coven, a flock of butterflies began playing football in his

stomach. There was something about the battered old front door with its

black peeling

paint and Reverse writing scrawled from top to bottom that scared him. He reached deep

into his tunic pocket and brought out the note that Aunt Zelda had insisted he not read

until he was standing on the very doorstep of the Coven. Wolf Boy hoped that the sight of

Aunt Zelda's friendly handwriting would make him feel better. However, as he slowly

began to read the note, it had quite the opposite effect.

Aunt Zelda had written her note on special paper that she had made from pressed

cabbage leaves. She had written very carefully in ink made from crushed beetles mixed

with water from the Mott. Aunt Zelda had not used cursive writing, because she knew

that Wolf Boy had trouble with letters—he would often complain that they rearranged

themselves when he wasn't looking. There were a lot of letters—it had taken a whole

family of beetles to make the ink. The beetles said:

Dear Wolf Boy,

Now you are outside the Port Witch Coven. Read this, remember every word

and then eat it.

Wolf Boy gulped. *Eat* it? Had he read that right? He looked at the word again. E-A-T.

Eat. That's what it said. Wolf Boy shook his head and continued reading very slowly. He

had a bad feeling about what was coming next. The note went on:

This is what you must do:

Take the Toad doorknocker. Knock only once. If the Toad calls, the Coven must answer.

The witch who answers the door will ask, "What be your business?"

You must say, "I have come to feed the Grim." Say nothing else.

The witch will reply, "So be it. Enter, GrimFeeder," and let you in.

Say nothing.

The witch will take you to the kitchen. She will tell the Coven that you have

come to feed the Grim.

When you reach the kitchen, speak only the words "yes" and "no" and "I

have come to feed the Grim. What will you give me?"
The Coven will bring you what they wish you to feed to the Grim. You may refuse anything human, but everything else you must accept. They will Awaken the Grim. Be brave. Now they will leave you alone with the Grim. You will FEED THE GRIM. (For this, Wolf Boy dear, you must be fast and fearless. The Grim will be hungry. It is more than fifty years since it has been fed.)
Take the silver knife I gave you this morning and, while the Grim is feeding, cut off the tip of one of its tentacles. Do not spill any blood.
At this point Wolf Boy gulped. *Tentacles?* He did not like the sound of that at all. How many tentacles? How big? As the bad feeling in the pit of his stomach grew, he continued reading.
Place the tentacle tip in the leather wallet I gave you, so that the Coven does not smell Grim blood. When the Grim has finished feeding, the Coven will return. Because you came in via the Darke Toad, they will allow you to leave in the same way. Come straight back along the Causeway, and Boggart will be waiting. Safe passage and a valiant heart,
Aunt Zelda xxx
When he finally reached the end of the letter, Wolf Boy's hands were shaking. He knew that Aunt Zelda had something special she wanted him to do, but he'd had no idea it was anything like *this*. Attracting curious glances from passersby and an offer of advice—"you don't wanna be standin' there, boy. I'd go an' stand anywhere but *there* if I was you"—Wolf Boy read Aunt Zelda's note again and again and again until he knew every word. Then he screwed it up into a ball and warily put it into his mouth. It stuck to the roof of his mouth and tasted disgusting. Very slowly, Wolf Boy began

to chew.

Five minutes later he had managed to swallow the last pieces of the note. Then he

took a deep breath and gathered his thoughts. As he did, a subtle change came over him.

Two girls walking past, who had been looking at Wolf Boy and giggling, fell quiet as the

dreadlocked boy on the step suddenly looked less boylike and more... wolflike. They

hurried on, clutching each other's arms, and later told their friends they had seen a real

live warlock outside the Coven.

Wolf Boy had retreated into his twilight world of wolverine ways—as he always did

when he felt in danger—and with a heightened awareness of everything around him,

Wolf Boy studied the door of the House of the Port Witch Coven. There were three

doorknockers positioned one above the other. The bottom one was a miniature iron

cauldron, the middle one was a curled silver rat's tail and the top one was a fat, warty

toad. It looked very realistic.

Wolf Boy reached up to the toad doorknocker and the toad *moved*. Wolf Boy pulled

his hand back as if he had been bitten. The toad was real. It was squatting on the

doorknocker, its dark little amphibian eyes staring at him. Wolf Boy loathed slimy

things—which was probably the reason he did not like much of Aunt Zelda's

cooking—but he knew he would have to touch the toad doorknocker, and that that would

probably not be the worst thing he would have to touch. Gritting his teeth, he reached for

the toad once more. The toad puffed itself up to twice its size so that it looked like a

small, toad-shaped balloon. It began to hiss, but this time Wolf Boy did not draw back.

As his hand began to close over the toad, the creature stopped hissing and shrank back to

its normal size—there was something Darke about the grubby hand,

scarred from the

Tracker Ball, that the toad recognized.

Taking Wolf Boy by surprise, the toad slipped from under his hand and hopped off

the doorknocker. It lifted it up and let it fall with a resounding *bang*.

Then the toad

resumed its place on the knocker and closed its eyes.

Wolf Boy was prepared to wait, but he did not have to wait long. Soon he heard the

sound of heavy footsteps on bare boards coming toward him, and a moment later the door

was wrenched open. A young woman dressed in raggedy, stained black Coven robes

peered out. She had a huge pink towel wrapped around her head and big, staring blue

eyes. She very nearly snapped, “Yeah?” as usual, but then she remembered that it was the

Darke Toad that had knocked. Taking care to keep her towel balanced, she stood up

straight and said in her formal witch voice—which was bizarrely squeaky and shot up at

the end of the sentence—“What be your business?”

Wolf Boy’s mind went blank. The taste of dried cabbage leaves and crushed beetle

filled his mouth once more. What was it he had to say? *He couldn’t remember*. He stared

at the young woman. She didn’t look too scary; she had big blue eyes and a

squashy-looking nose. In fact, she almost seemed nice—though there was something

peculiar about her, something that he couldn’t quite figure out. Oh! There was a weird,

bristly gray flap thingy escaping from underneath the towel—what was *that*?

The young witch, whose name was Dorinda, began to close the door.

At last Wolf Boy remembered what he had to say. “I have come to feed the Grim,”

he said.

“What?” said Dorinda. “You’re kidding me, aren’t you?” And then she remembered

what she was supposed to say. She readjusted her towel once more and resumed her

squeaky voice. “So be it,” she said. “Enter, GrimFeeder.”

Unfortunately he was not kidding, thought Wolf Boy, as he stepped into the House

of the Port Witch Coven and the door began to close behind him. He wished he were.

There was nothing he would like better right then than to step back into the sunny street

and run all the way home to the marshes, where he belonged. The thought of the marshes

made Wolf Boy remember that being in this ghastly place actually had something very

important to do with the marshes and all the things he loved there. And so, as he followed

Dorinda down the dark passageway, deep into the House of the Port Witch Coven, he

kept that in mind. He was determined to do what he had come to do—tentacles and all.

The passageway was pitch-black and treacherous. Wolf Boy followed the rustling

sound of Dorinda’s robes as they swept along the rough floor. Just in time he sidestepped

a gaping hole from which a foul smell rose, only to be assailed by a sudden onslaught of

Bothers—one of them very prickly. Frantically Wolf Boy batted the Bothers away, to the

accompaniment of Dorinda’s giggles. But he was not Bothered again as word of the

touch of the Darke Toad quickly spread through the Bother community, and Wolf Boy

was left at a respectful distance.

Wolf Boy followed Dorinda deeper into the house. At last they came to a tattered

black curtain hanging in front of a door. As Dorinda drew back the curtain, clouds of dust

made Wolf Boy cough. The dust tasted foul, of things long dead. Dorinda pushed open

the door, which someone had taken a huge chunk out of with an ax, and he followed her

into the kitchen.

It was just as weird as the time he had escaped the Coven with Septimus, Jenna and

Nicko, hands burning from the touch of Sleuth, the Tracker Ball. The

windows were

covered in shreds of black cloth and a thick coat of grease, which kept the light out. The

filthy room was illuminated only by a dull reddish glow, which came from an old stove.

Reflected in the glow were dozens of pairs of glittering cats' eyes ranged like malicious

fairy lights around the kitchen, all staring at Wolf Boy.

The contents of the kitchen seemed to consist of shapeless piles of rotting garbage

and broken chairs. The main feature was in the middle of the room, where a ladder led up

to a large ragged hole in the ceiling. The place smelled horrible—of stale cooking fat, cat

poo and what Wolf Boy recognized with a pang as rotting wolverine flesh. Wolf Boy

knew he was being Watched—and not only by the cats. His keen eyes scanned the

kitchen until he saw, lurking by the cellar door, two more witches staring at him.

Dorinda was gazing at Wolf Boy with some interest—she liked the way his narrowed

brown eyes were surveying the room. She smiled a lopsided, toothy smile. “You must

excuse me,” she simpered, readjusting her towel. “I’ve just washed my hair.”

The two witches in the shadows cackled unpleasantly. Dorinda ignored them. “Are

you *sure* you want to feed the Grim?” she whispered to Wolf Boy.

“Yes,” said Wolf Boy.

Dorinda regarded Wolf Boy with lingering look. “Shame,” she said. “You look cute.

All right then, here goes.” Dorinda took a deep breath and shrieked, “*GrimFeeder!* The

GrimFeeder has come!”

The thudding sound of feet running along the bare boards of the floor above echoed

into the kitchen, and the next moment the ladder was bouncing under the not

inconsiderable weight of the last two members of the Coven—Pamela, the Witch Mother

herself, and Linda, her protégée. Like two huge crows, Pamela and Linda

descended

laboriously into the kitchen, their black silk robes fluttering and rustling. Wolf Boy took a

step back and trod on Dorinda's toe. Dorinda yelped and poked Wolf Boy in the back

with a bony finger. The two witches in the shadows—Veronica and Daphne—sidled over

to the foot of the ladder and helped the Witch Mother down as she clumped onto the floor

with some difficulty.

The Witch Mother was *big*—or she appeared to be. Her circumference was what the

Witch Mother called “generous” and her stiff layers of black silk robes added yet more

width, but she was actually not much taller than Wolf Boy. A good foot of her height was

due to the very high platform shoes she wore. These shoes—were made to the Witch

Mother's own design and they looked deadly. Coming out of the soles was a forest of

long metal spikes, which she used to spear the giant woodworms that infested the House

of the Port Witch Coven. Her shoes were extremely successful, as the number of speared

giant woodworms languishing on the spikes showed, and the Witch Mother spent many

happy hours tramping up and down the passageways searching for her next woodworm

victim. But it was not just the shoes that made the Witch Mother look weird—so weird

that Wolf Boy could not help but stare.

The Witch Mother did not realize it, but she was allergic to giant woodworms, and

she covered her face in thick white makeup to hide the red blotches. The bumpy makeup

had cavernous cracks along the frown lines and around the corners of her mouth, and

from deep within the whiteness of the makeup her tiny ice-blue eyes stared at Wolf Boy.

“What is *this*?” she asked scathingly, as though she had found some cat poo impaled

on one of her shoe spikes.

“He came in by the Darke Toad, Witch Mother, and he’s come to—”
began Dorinda
excitedly.

“*He?*” interrupted the Witch Mother, who in the gloom had taken Wolf Boy’s
dreadlocks to be the long hair of a girl. “A *boy?* Don’t be ridiculous,
Dorinda.”

Dorinda sounded flustered. “He *is* a boy, Witch Mother.” She turned to
Wolf Boy.

“You *are*, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Wolf Boy replied, keeping his voice as gruff as he could. Then he
cleared his

throat and addressed the Witch Mother with the words he was allowed to
speak. “I have

come to feed the Grim,” he said. “What will you give me?”

The Witch Mother stared at Wolf Boy as she digested this information.
Wolf Boy

clenched and unclenched his hands. His scarred palms could no longer
sweat, but a cold

sweat trickled down his back.

The Witch Mother began to laugh. It was not a good sound. “Then you
must feed the

Grim!” she cackled. Turning to her Coven she laughed and said, “And I
think we all

know *what* we shall give him to feed it.”

The witches laughed, echoing the Witch Mother.

“Serves her right,” Wolf Boy heard Dorinda whisper to another witch.

“Yeah. Filthy little scumbucket. Did you hear what she called me last night?”

“Quiet!” ordered the Witch Mother. “Linda, go and get the Grim’s little...snack.”

There was more laughter, and Linda, who also sported a dead white face in imitation

of the Witch Mother, glided across the kitchen. She drew back a greasy blanket, pushed

open the door to the cellar and disappeared.

She returned dragging Lucy Gringe by her braids.



9

THE GRIM

Lucy Gringe, soaking wet and filthy, came in kicking and screaming.

“Get off me, you weird cow!” she yelled, and swung a kick that landed hard on

Linda’s shins. The rest of the Coven—including the Witch Mother—gaped. Not one of

them would have dared do that to Linda.

Linda stopped dead, and the Coven fell deathly quiet. Suddenly Linda yanked Lucy’s

head back with a vicious tug and twisted Lucy’s braids up into a tight

knot so that they

pulled hard against her scalp. Lucy yelped, though Wolf Boy could see she tried not to.

Linda narrowed her eyes, and twin blue needles of light shot through the gloom and

played on Lucy's pale face.

"I'd *do* you for that if you weren't heading for the you-know-what—you dirty little

ratbutt," the witch snarled. She gave another tug on Lucy's hair. Lucy twisted around

and, to Wolf Boy's admiration, she tried to land a punch. This time Linda deftly

sidestepped her.

Wolf Boy was shocked. It was Lucy Gringe— *Simon's girlfriend*. No wonder Simon

hadn't been able to find her. He relaxed a little. Simon's girlfriend or not, at least he now

had an ally, another human. There was something about the Coven that was *not* human.

He could feel it: a cold disconnection, an allegiance to something else. He guessed that

this was how people felt when surrounded by the wolverines in the Forest—totally alone.

But now he wasn't alone...another human being was in the room.

Linda dragged Lucy across the kitchen, kicking her way through the piles of trash.

She stopped beside Wolf Boy and then, as though handing over the reins, she gave him

Lucy's braids to hold. Wolf Boy took them reluctantly and flashed Lucy an apologetic

glance. Lucy took in the glance, then glared at the surrounding witches and tossed her

head angrily. She reminded Wolf Boy of an unpredictable pony.

What bothered Wolf Boy was why the witch had given him Lucy's braids to

hold—what were they planning? As if in answer, the Witch Mother teetered up to him on

her spiked shoes and stood so close that he could smell her cat breath and see the red

blotches deep inside the cracks in her makeup.

She pointed a grubby finger with a loose black fingernail at Lucy. "Feed *that* to the

Grim,” she spat at Wolf Boy. Then she spun around on her heel spikes and teetered back to the ladder.

Wolf Boy was horrified. “No!” he yelled, his voice shooting up an octave.

The Witch Mother stopped and turned to face him. “*What did you say?*” she asked

icily. The other witches shifted uncomfortably. When the Witch Mother spoke like that,

there was going to be trouble. Wolf Boy stood his ground. He remembered what Aunt

Zelda’s letter said: *You may refuse anything human.*

“No,” he repeated firmly.

“Witch Mother, let *me* feed the filthy little fleabrain to the Grim,” said Linda.

The Witch Mother looked proudly at Linda. She had chosen a worthy successor. “Do it,” she said.

Linda smiled in her special ghastly way that the Witch Mother loved so much.

Wolf Boy saw Lucy go tense, like a wolverine waiting to pounce. He could see she

was scanning the exits from the kitchen, but he had already done that, and he knew there

were none—except down to the cellar. Two witches had positioned themselves at the

kitchen door and Dorinda was lurking at the foot of the ladder. There was no way out.

In front of Wolf Boy and Lucy was a pile of stinking garbage, which Linda now

began to demolish. Wolf Boy gently tugged Lucy’s braids and they both stepped back

from flying lumps of slimy turnip and decayed rabbit. Soon the kitchen was strewn with

showers of trash, and Dorinda had a rotten chicken’s head peering out from the folds of

her towel turban. All that was left of the pile was a compacted black crust of ancient

vegetable peelings and bones.

Linda surveyed her work with satisfaction. She turned to Lucy and pointed to the

revolting mess. “Scrape it off, toad breath,” she hissed.

Lucy did not move. Dorinda—who was terrified of Linda and always tried to be

helpful—grabbed a spade from a pile of implements in the corner and handed it to Lucy.

Linda glared at Dorinda; this was not how she had intended for Lucy to remove the mess.

Lucy seized the spade, but Linda was no fool. She saw the way Lucy was eyeing her. “I’ll

do it,” Linda snapped, snatching away the spade.

Linda’s angry shoveling revealed a pressed dead cat, a rat’s nest with three

babies—which she flattened with the spade—and finally a massive rusted iron trapdoor.

“Oooh,” Dorinda trilled rather nervously.

Silence fell and everyone stared at the trapdoor. No one—not even the Witch

Mother—knew what lay beneath. Of course they had all heard stories, and if the stories

were only a little bit true it was certainly not going to be anything soft and cuddly.

Suddenly, very dramatically—because Linda liked a bit of drama—Linda raised her arms

and began to chant in a high wail, “Mirg...Mirg...Mirg ekawa, *ekawa*. Mirg...Mirg...Mirg—*ekawaaaaaaa!*”

Wolf Boy had learned enough from his time with Aunt Zelda to know that this was a

Darke Reverse Chant. But even if he had not known, there was something about the

weird, catlike way Linda sang the words that made the blood feel cold in his veins. In

front of him, Lucy shivered. She glanced back at Wolf Boy, the whites of her eyes

shining. For the first time she looked afraid.

The chant died away, silence fell once more and an unpleasant feeling of expectation

filled the air. Suddenly a tremor ran through the floor and Wolf Boy felt something shift.

It was not a good feeling—he knew the rotten state of the Coven’s floorboards and joists.

A small whimper escaped from Dorinda.

Linda’s eyes shone with excitement. She took the spade and stabbed it at the edge of

the trapdoor, dislodging a mummified black snake that was curled in the gap. The snake flew into the air and joined the chicken head on top of Dorinda's towel. Dorinda froze, not daring to move. With the snake gone, Linda got the spade under the gap around the trapdoor; she gave it a powerful shove, and the trapdoor began to rise. Wolf Boy discovered he had been holding his breath. He breathed out, and when he breathed in again the smell of old fish and dirty water filled his nose. As the trapdoor rose, a swishing, gurgling sound emerged, and Wolf Boy realized that there was water below—deep water, by the sound of it. The measured rising of the trapdoor mesmerized the occupants of the kitchen, including the cats, which for once stopped their hissing. Everyone watched the trapdoor slowly travel through 180 degrees and silently lay itself flat upon the floor, revealing a large square hole covered with a metal grating. Linda kneeled down, heaved off the grating and threw it to one side. She peered into the depths. Ten feet below, water rocked gently to and fro, its oily black surface just visible in the dim light. All seemed surprisingly calm. Irritated, Linda leaned farther—where was the Grim? As if in answer, the surface of the water suddenly broke, and with a tremendous *swish*, a long black tentacle snaked into the air and thumped down onto the kitchen floor. Dorinda screamed. Wolf Boy reeled back—the tentacle had a strong stench of the Darkness about it. Laughing, Linda smashed her spade on the tentacle. Wolf Boy winced—Darke or not, that must have hurt. The tentacle slithered back through the trapdoor and fell into the water with a *splash*. The water rocked and rippled for a few seconds, a few bubbles erupted, and some lazy red swirls of blood drifted to its oily surface.

Linda turned to face Lucy with a triumphant smile. “*That* was the Grim, Rabbitface.

It will be back soon. And when it returns you can say hello to it, can’t you? And if you

 speak nicely, it might be kind and drown you before it smashes you to bits. Or not. Ha

 ha.”

Lucy glared at Linda. This did not go down well with the witch; Linda liked her

 victims scared, screaming and begging for mercy. Preferably all three, but any one of

 those would do. But Lucy was not obliging and that was really getting to Linda. Angrily,

 she grasped Lucy’s arm and dug her nails in. Lucy did not flinch.

 Wolf Boy was deep in feral mode and thinking fast. Any minute now he was sure

 that Lucy’s defiance was going to get her thrown through the trapdoor—he had to do

 something. Wolf Boy realized what he must do, but the problem was he was pretty sure it

 was something that Lucy would not take to very well. But there was no choice. He took a

 deep breath and said again, “I have come to feed the Grim. What will you give me?”

Linda looked furious—what was the boy up to? But she knew the Rules of the

 Coven, and she wasn’t going to break them, particularly as she already thought of it as

her Coven. “May *I* answer, Witch Mother?” she asked.

 The Witch Mother was finding the whole Grim business rather a strain. Her memory

 was not so good nowadays. She was getting older and didn’t like changes in routine. And

 she particularly did *not* like tentacles.

 “You may,” she replied, unable to keep the relief out of her voice.

 Linda bared her teeth at Wolf Boy, like a dog that knows it has won a fight but will

 still not back down. “We give you this,” she replied, poking Lucy sharply with the spade.

 “What say you?”

 Wolf Boy took a very deep breath. “Yes,” he said.

 Lucy spun around and glared at Wolf Boy.

“Oooh,” Dorinda trilled, overcome with admiration for Wolf Boy.
“Ooooh!”

Linda looked somewhat deflated. She had decided to push Lucy straight in after the

boy refused her—which she was sure he would—and she had been looking forward to it.

She had, in fact, decided to push the boy in too. Linda read a lot of detective novels and

knew all about how important it was to get rid of witnesses. But she knew the Rules. She

sighed petulantly. “Then let her be yours for GrimFood. *Hmph.*”

“Good!” said the Witch Mother cheerily, as though someone had just told her that

supper was ready. “That’s settled then. Come on, girls. Time to go.”

Linda had forgotten this part—that the GrimFeeder must be left to feed the Grim

alone. For a moment her self-control left her—believe it or not, Linda had been

exercising a fair amount of self-control in her treatment of Lucy—and she stamped her

foot and screamed, “*Nooooooooo!*”

“Come along now, Linda,” said the Witch Mother disapprovingly. “Leave the

GrimFeeder to do his work.” And then, in a loud whisper, “We’ll go upstairs and listen.

Much more fun that way. And less...messy.”

Linda refrained from saying she *liked* the messy parts, that ever since she dragged

Lucy up from the cellar she had been really looking forward to the messy parts. Sulkily

she followed the Witch Mother up the ladder. She was not, she told herself, going to put

up with being bossed around for very much longer—not very much longer at all.

Wolf Boy and Lucy watched the spiky boots of the Witch Mother disappear through

the hole in the ceiling. They heard Linda heave the Witch Mother onto the landing (the

Witch Mother had trouble with her knees), and then they listened to the shuffling of feet

as the witches gathered to hear the sounds of the GrimFeeding.

Right on cue a great gurgling came from the pit below. Three tentacles

snaked out of

the black water and slammed down onto the edge of the trapdoor with a tremendous *thud*.

Lucy glared at Wolf Boy. Her nostrils flared like an angry horse, and she tossed her head.

“Don’t even *think* of it, rat boy,” she snarled, “or it will be *you* in there with the tentacles.”

“I *had* to say it,” hissed Wolf Boy, “otherwise they’d have pushed you in. This way, we get some time—some time to think how to get out of here.”

Wolf Boy knew that the witches were upstairs waiting for the sounds of him feeding

Lucy to the Grim, and he knew that they would not wait long. If they came down and

discovered Lucy still in an undigested state, he had a pretty good idea of what would happen—they would *both* be GrimFood.

“We haven’t got much time,” he whispered. “I’ve a plan to get out of here, but you’ll have to do what I say. Okay?”

“Do what you say? Why should I?”

Suddenly, with a head-spinning lurch, the floor heaved and a wash of filthy water spewed through the trapdoor. The Grim had surfaced.

“Yes,” Lucy hissed urgently. “*Yes*. I’ll do what you say. I *promise*.”

“Okay. Good. Now listen to me—you are going to have to scream. Can you do that?”

Lucy’s eyes lit up. “Oh, yes. I can scream. How loud?”

“As loud as you can,” said Wolf Boy.

“You sure?”

Wolf Boy nodded impatiently.

“Okay, here goes. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!
Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaagh!”

The Grim retreated in a flurry of filthy water. Darke creature though it was, it lived a

quiet life in the watery wastes of the Municipal drain, which ran along Fore Street and

widened out to a comfortable space below the House of the Port Witch Coven. The

Grim's hearing was adapted to the gentle gurglings and gloops of the drain, not to the

screams of Lucy Gringe. The Grim sank back down onto the muddy brick floor of the

Municipal drain and stuffed the tips of its tentacles into its multiple hearing tubes.

"Aaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Aaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

In the darkness of the Coven's kitchen lurked thirteen cats. The Coven's cats were a

litter of bloodsucking kittens—now grown—that had been thrown from an incoming ship

after they had ambushed the cabin boy and drained him dry of blood. Linda had

recognized them for what they were. She had snatched a small boy's fishing net, scooped

the vampire kittens from the harbor flotsam and taken them triumphantly back to the

Coven, from where they sallied out to prey upon babies and small children.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Aaaaaah! Aaaaagh! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

From the piles of rotting garbage, the cats Watched Wolf Boy frantically search for

something to feed to the Grim. Wolf Boy could feel the Watching of twenty-nine pairs of

eyes crawling across his skin and, in his feral state, he sensed where they were coming

from. In less than thirty seconds, he found two cats hidden in a giant fungus beneath the

sink. Wolf Boy pounced.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeooow!"

"Aaahaagh!"

Lucy's screams drowned out the cats' yowls perfectly.

Holding the struggling, scratching beasts at arm's length, Wolf Boy ran to the

trapdoor. The dark water slapped and slopped below, but there was no sign of the Grim.

It could feel the vibrations of Lucy's screams and it was not coming up for anything—not

even fresh cat.

Lucy's screams began to falter. *"Aaaa...aaa...ahem...uhurgh!"* She coughed and

put her hand to her throat. *I'm losing my voice*, she mouthed.

In the depths of the Municipal drain, the vibrations from Lucy's screams faded. The

Grim removed its tentacles from its hearing tubes—which doubled as its nose—and it

now smelled food. *Fresh* food. The oily water below the trapdoor began to stir, and

suddenly a great black glistening head broke the surface. Wolf Boy let the cats drop.

The effect was impressive.

The Grim flipped backward, revealing a great, gaping serrated beak. A forest of

tentacles enclosed the screaming cats, and the kitchen was filled with a revolting, sucking

sound as the Grim set about eating its first meal of fresh meat in almost fifty years. (The

last meat had been provided by a young Aunt Zelda. She had been offered the Coven's

goat and had accepted it, thankful that they had not given her the boy next door, which

they had done to her predecessor, Betty Crackle. Betty had never quite recovered from

this and refused to tell anyone whether she had accepted the boy or not. Aunt Zelda rather

feared she had.)

The Grim, excited by fresh food, put a few tentacles out the trapdoor and began

searching for more. (This had, on occasion, been successful. Intended Keepers did not

always return from their Task.) As the thick tentacles with their powerful suckers crept

toward Wolf Boy, his first instinct was to slam the trapdoor shut and get out of the

kitchen fast—but there was still something he must do. Bracing himself against the

Darke, Wolf Boy kneeled beside the trapdoor and took out a small, silver pocket knife.

And then, to Lucy's amazement, with one swift slice, he cut off the tip of its tentacle. The

Grim did not notice. It did not notice anything much anymore as, due to some bizarre

evolutionary blip, each tentacle held a portion of the creature's brain. And with each

successful visit of an Intended Keeper, the Grim became just a little bit more stupid.

Clutching the bloodied portion of Grim brain, Darke and dripping, Wolf Boy

triumphantly slammed the trapdoor shut—and immediately wished he hadn't. At the

clang of the door hitting the metal rim, a distinctive Dorinda squeal came through the ceiling.

“Oooh, he's *done* it. He's fed her to the Grim!”

Suddenly a great thundering of boots erupted on the ceiling above and a shower of

plaster rained down on Lucy and Wolf Boy. The Coven was on its way.



10

OUT OF THE STEW POT

W e've gotta get out of here,” Wolf Boy whispered, heading for the kitchen door. He

grabbed the handle and pulled—the doorknob came off in his hand and sent him flying

backward. There was a *clink* as the spindle fell out on the other side of the door. Wolf

Boy stared at the door—how were they going to open it now?

“Leave it, stupid!” hissed Lucy. “Come on!” She grabbed Wolf Boy's

hand—the one

that did not hold a disgusting tentacle tip—and dragged him across the sodden kitchen,

through the mush of garbage and past silent, Watching cats. They had just reached the

cellar door when the ladder began to shake. Wolf Boy glanced around and saw the

unmistakable spikes of the Witch Mother’s boots appear through the hole in the ceiling.

He did not resist when Lucy pulled him through the door.

Wolf Boy closed the door and began pushing the huge bolt across it.

“No,” whispered Lucy. “Leave it open. Like it was. Otherwise they’ll guess we’re

here.”

“But—”

“Come on. *Hurry.*” Lucy pulled Wolf Boy down the cellar steps. With every step he

felt more trapped—what was Lucy doing?

At the foot of the steps they were met by a sea of filthy water heavily populated by

pulsating brown toads. Wolf Boy was shocked—was *this* where Lucy had been kept

prisoner? He stopped for a moment, wondering how deep it was. He really didn’t like

water—it always seemed to turn up in his life when things were bad. Lucy, however, was

unperturbed. She waded in and, to Wolf Boy’s relief, the water only came up to her

knees.

“Come on,” said Lucy, kicking a toad out of the way. “Don’t just stand there

gawping like a stuffed herring.”

In the kitchen above, the Coven streamed off the ladder. The sound of their boots

hitting the ground sent Wolf Boy plowing through the toad-strewn water. Wading

frustratingly slowly, as if he were in a bad dream—a *really* bad dream—he followed

Lucy across the cellar, trying to avoid the well-aimed spit of the toads. At the far end of

the cellar, Lucy stopped and proudly indicated a few missing bricks in the wall.

“It’s the old coal chute. They bricked it up. But look at the mortar, they got the mix

wrong, it’s all powdery.” Lucy demonstrated, but Wolf Boy’s attention was not on the

quality of the mortar—he was listening to the heavy thumps coming from above. Lucy

took out a couple of bricks and handed them to Wolf Boy.

“Oh, gosh, hang on, I forgot,” said Wolf Boy, realizing he was still clutching the

tentacle tip. He quickly shoved it into the leather wallet that Aunt Zelda had made him

wear around his waist; then he took the bricks and quietly put them in the water.

“I spent all yesterday and today doing this,” Lucy whispered. “I was nearly out of

here when that spiteful cow came and grabbed me.” Quickly she removed a couple more

bricks. “We can get out through here onto the pavement. Good thing you’re thin. I’ll go

first and then I’ll pull you up. Okay?”

The voices of the Coven in the kitchen were getting loud and angry. Wolf Boy

helped Lucy up to the hole. She wriggled in, and soon all he could see of her were the

wet soles of her boots—and then she was gone. Wolf Boy peered in, and a shower of dust

fell. He wiped the dust from his eyes and grinned. Far above he could see Lucy’s grubby

face looking down and behind her was a small chink of blue sky.

“Come *on*,” she said impatiently. “There’s a weird nurse person wanting to know

what I’m doing. *Hurry!* ”

Suddenly a howl of rage came from the kitchen. “Blood! Blood! I smell Grim blood.

Blood, blood, I *taste* Grim blood!”

“Oooh!” This was from Dorinda.

And then: “The blood—it leads to the cellar. They’ve taken our Grim to the cellar!”

A thunder of feet pounded across the kitchen toward the cellar stairs.

“Hurry up! What are you waiting for?” Lucy’s voice came from far above.

Wolf Boy was not waiting for anything. With the sound of footsteps

clattering down

the stairs, he pulled himself up into the hole. It was not as easy as Lucy had made it look.

Although he was thin, Wolf Boy's shoulders were broad and the coal chute was a tight

fit. He raised his arms above his head to try to make himself narrower and, skinning his

elbows and knees, he pushed up through the rough bricks toward the light. Lucy's

helping hands reached down to him, but Wolf Boy could not reach them. Try as he might,

he could not move.

From the coal cellar came Linda's furious yell. "Double-crossing little toe rag! I can

see you. Don't think you can get away with this, you—you *GrimKiller*."

Now came the sound of splashing. Linda was wading across the cellar and *fast*.

Desperate, Wolf Boy thought feral. He was a wolverine trapped in a burrow. The owner

of the burrow, a Forest night creature, had woken beneath him. He must reach daylight

now. *Now*. And then suddenly Lucy's hands were in his, pulling him up, up toward the

light, dragging him out of the burrow while the night creature snapped at his heels and

dragged off his boots—yelping as the toad spit burned into her hands.

Wolf Boy lay prone on the pavement, shaking dark, wolverine thoughts from his

mind. But Lucy would not let him be.

"Don't just lie there, stupid," she hissed. "They'll be out here any minute. Come on."

Wolf Boy did not resist as Lucy dragged him to his feet and pulled him, barefoot,

along with her as she fled down the street in the late afternoon sunshine. Behind him

Wolf Boy was sure he could hear the locks and bolts of the Coven's door being opened

and feel the eyes of the Darke Toad following him.

The Coven—minus Linda—were out the door before Lucy and Wolf Boy had turned

the corner. Dorinda hung back, unwilling to risk her towel unwinding in a chase. The rest

set off in pursuit, but the Witch Mother got no farther than the front step of the house

next door before she gave up. Her boots were not made for hot pursuit. That left Daphne

and Veronica to go clattering down the road, running in their very own peculiar

knees-together-feet-out style. It was not an efficient way of covering ground, and Dorinda

knew they would never catch Wolf Boy and Lucy. Dorinda might not have bothered with

this had not the sight of Wolf Boy and Lucy fleeing hand-in-hand made her feel very

jealous. And so Dorinda scuttled off to the cellar to find Linda.

Linda was out the door in a flash—literally. The Coven did not do broomsticks— *no*

one did broomsticks anymore—but they did do some FlashBoard riding, and Linda did it

particularly well. A FlashBoard was a simple idea but a dangerous one. It required

nothing more than a small slab of wood and a slow-release StunFlash. The StunFlash was

harnessed to the wood, which the rider balanced on as best she could. Then the rider set

off the slow-release StunFlash, trusting to luck and no one being in the way.

Generally Linda found that no one ever did get in her way on the FlashBoard.

Dorinda and the Witch Mother watched admiringly as, with a roar of flame shooting from

below the board (which was, in fact, the top of Dorinda's dressing table), Linda careered

off down Fore Street, scattering a group of old ladies and setting fire to the cart of the

Port and Harbor Daily News delivery girl. In a Flash Linda overtook Daphne and

Veronica as they tripped girlishly around the corner and sent them tumbling down the

basement steps of the local fishmonger. They emerged sometime later covered in fish

guts.

To Linda's irritation, there was no sign of Lucy and Wolf Boy, but that did not deter

her. Linda was an expert at tracking down fugitives from the Coven. Using her own foolproof system, she began to systematically cover the warren of streets leading down to the harbor. In this way, Linda knew that her quarry must always be in front of her. It was, she thought, like herding sheep into a pen—sheep that were soon going to be acquainted with mint sauce and roast potatoes. It never failed.



11

HARBORSIDE

T hat afternoon, while Wolf Boy was trying not to feed Lucy to the Grim, Simon took

Maureen's advice. He sat on a bollard on the quayside and stared gloomily across the open space of the harbor front.

It was a wide, paved area surrounded on three sides by a variety of tall flat-fronted

houses. Sandwiched between the houses were a few shops. In addition to the popular

Harbor and Dock Pie Shop, there was a small, rundown shop selling artists' materials, a

tiny bookshop specializing in maritime manuscripts and Honest Joe's Chandlery. The

chandlery took up the ground floors of three adjoining buildings next to the Harbor

Master's imposing red-brick house. All manner of ropes, blocks,

windlasses, nets, boat

hooks, spars and sails tumbled out from its open doors and colonized the harbor front.

The Harbor Master was engaged in a perpetual quarrel with Honest Joe, for the

chandler's wares often spilled across his impressively pillared front doorstep.

Like an attentive audience in the theater, Simon watched the comings and goings

across the Quay. He saw the Harbor Master—a portly man wearing a navy jacket with a

good deal of gold braid—emerge from his house, pick his way over three coils of rope

that lay neatly set out on his doorstep and march into the chandlery. A line of children

chattering and clutching their notebooks walked past on their way to the little museum in

the Customs House. The Harbor Master—somewhat redder in the face than he had

been—came out of the chandlery and marched back into his house, kicking the rope to

one side and slamming the door behind him. A few minutes later Honest Joe scuttled out.

He recoiled the rope, replaced it on the doorstep and added a few boat hooks for good

measure. All this Simon watched with a steady gaze, waiting for the moment when Lucy

would walk across the harbor front, as surely she must—eventually.

Every now and then, when it grew quiet, Simon stole a glance at a small window at

the top of the stucco-fronted Customs House. The window belonged to the attic room that

he and Lucy had rented a couple of days ago, after leaving the Castle rather more

suddenly than they would have wished.

It wasn't a bad room, thought Simon. Lucy had seemed really excited when they saw

it, talking about how she would paint the walls pink with big green stripes (Simon hadn't

been so sure about that) and make some rag rugs to match. They had taken the room right

away, and when Lucy had said she wanted to go to the market “just to

check out that fun

stall with the fabrics and all those ribbony things,” Simon had pulled a face and Lucy had

laughed. “Yeah,” she had said, “you’ll only get bored, Si. I won’t be long. See you!” And

she had blown him a kiss and breezed out.

No, thought Simon, Lucy hadn’t been in a temper. If she had been, he would not

have wandered off, happy and carefree, down to the old bookshop in Fishguts Twist to

see if there were any Magyk books worth having. He had been lucky and found a very

mildewed and ancient Spell Book with the pages stuck together. A suspicious lumpiness

had told him that there were still some Charms trapped between the pages.

Simon had been so absorbed in extricating the Charms and discovering the delights

of his purchase—which was a good one—that he had been surprised to find it was

already getting dark and Lucy had not returned. He knew that the market closed one hour

before sunset, and his first thought was that she had gotten lost. But then he remembered

that Lucy knew the Port far better than he did—having spent six months living and

working with Maureen at the pie shop—and a stab of concern shot through him.

That night had not been good for Simon. He had spent it searching the dark and

dangerous streets of the Port. He had been mugged by a couple of pickpockets and chased

by the notorious Twenty-One Gang—a group of teens, many of them ex-Young Army

boys, who lived rough in Warehouse Number Twenty-one. At dawn he had trailed back

to the empty attic room in despair. Lucy was gone.

Over the next few days, Simon had searched for her ceaselessly. He suspected the

Port Witch Coven and had knocked loudly on their door, but no one had answered. He

had even crept around to the back of the house, but all was quiet. He

waited outside the
house the whole day and Listened. But he had Heard nothing. The place
seemed deserted,
and eventually he decided he was wasting his time.
By the time he had talked to Maureen in the pie shop that morning,
Simon had
convinced himself that Lucy had run off with someone else. He didn't
really blame
her—after all, what could he offer her? He would never be a Wizard, and
they would
forever be exiled from the Castle. She was bound to find someone else
sooner or later,
someone whom she could take home to meet her parents and be proud
of. He just hadn't
expected it to be quite so soon.
The afternoon wore on and Simon did not move from his bollard. The
harbor front
became busy. A flood of officials in navy blue Port uniforms embellished
with varying
amounts of gold swept across the quayside like a dark riptide. They
negotiated around the
ambush of boat hooks and rope and poured into the Harbor Master's
house for the annual
Harbor Moot. Behind them they left the usual detritus of the Port—
sailors and shopgirls,
fishermen and farmers, mothers, children, dockhands and deckhands.
Some rushed by,
some sauntered, some dithered, some dallied, some nodded to Simon and
most ignored
him—but not one of them was Lucy Gringe.
Still like a statue, Simon sat. The tide rose, creeping slowly up the harbor
wall,
bringing with it the fishing boats that were being made ready for
departure on the high
tide later that day. Morosely Simon stared at all who walked across the
harbor front, and
when it began to empty in the lull before the evening's activity, he stared
at the fishing
boats and their crew instead.
Simon did not realize how threatening he appeared to the fishermen. He
still had a
certain brooding quality to him, and his Magykal green eyes had a

commanding stare,

which was not lost on the superstitious fishermen. His clothes also set him apart from

normal Port folk. He wore some ancient robes that had once belonged to his old Master,

DomDaniel—when the Necromancer had been younger and a good deal thinner than he

later became. Simon had found them in a trunk and had thought them rather stylish. He

was unaware of the effect that the embroidered Darke symbols had on people, even

though they were hard to see now that the cloth had faded to a dull gray and the symbols

themselves had begun to unravel and fray.

Most fishermen were too wary to approach Simon, but one, the skipper of the nearest

boat—a large black fishing boat named *Marauder*—came up to him and snarled, *We*

don't want your kind here, ill-wishin' the fishin'. Bog off.

Simon looked up at the skipper. The man's weather-beaten face was far too close for

comfort. His breath smelled of fish, and his black-button little piggy eyes had a menacing

look. Simon got to his feet and the skipper stared belligerently, his short gray hair

standing on end as if personally offended. A large vein in his wiry neck throbbed

underneath a tattoo of a parrot, making it look as though the parrot was laughing. Simon

had no wish for a confrontation. With a certain dignity, he wrapped his tattered robes

around himself and walked slowly away to the Customs House, where he trailed up the

stairs to the attic room and resumed his watch from the window.

The window looked across the quayside, quiet now in the hiatus between the daytime

bustle and the nighttime Port life. The only activity worth watching was on the

Marauder. Simon saw the skipper yell at his crew—a boy of about fourteen and a thin,

shaven-headed man with a nasty scowl—and send them off to Honest Joe's. A tall, bony

woman with spiky hair emerged from the Harbor Master's house and went across to the

Marauder, where she stood on the quayside, talking intently to the skipper. Simon stared

at the woman. He was sure he knew her from somewhere. He searched his memory and

suddenly her name came to him—she was Una Brakket, someone with whom Simon had

had dealings during an episode involving some bones, an episode he would like to forget.

What, he wondered, was Una Brakket doing with the skipper? The boy and the

shaven-headed man came back clutching armfuls of rope—the boy carrying so much that

he looked like a pile of rope on legs. They were sent back for more, and the skipper's

conversation continued.

Simon thought the skipper and Una Brakket looked like a most unlikely couple, but

you never knew. After all, who would have thought he and Lucy... Simon shook his head

and told himself to stop thinking about Lucy. She must have found someone else; he was

just going to have to get used to it. He watched Una Brakket hand over a small package,

give the skipper a thumbs-up sign and stride off. Not the most romantic of good-byes,

thought Simon gloomily—but who cared? Romance was a waste of time.

A waste of time or not, Simon could not tear himself away from his window. The

shadows were beginning to lengthen and the wind was picking up, sending the occasional

pie wrapper skittering across the old stones. On the water the excitement of the high tide

was beginning to take effect. The last of the nets were being stowed, and fishermen were

beginning to unfurl their sails and make ready to leave. The *Marauder* already had her

heavy red canvas staysail fixed at her stern, and her crew were hauling up her mainsail.

Simon felt his eyelids begin to droop. He had had very little sleep since Lucy

disappeared, and the soporific feeling of the late afternoon was beginning to catch up

with him. He leaned his head against the cold glass of the window and briefly closed his

eyes. A chorus of shouts jolted him awake.

“Hey!”

“Bad luck—look away, *look away!*”

“Cast off, cast off!”

The crew of the *Marauder* were frantically untying their last mooring rope and

pushing off from the harbor. And as Simon wondered what could possibly be sending

them into such a panic, he saw a boy and a girl hand-in-hand, dirty and drenched, come

tearing across the quayside. The girl was dragging the boy behind her, her braids flying

just like Lucy’s always did, and—

Simon was out the door, leaping down the narrow stairs three at a time, down, down

through the tall Customs House he flew, skidding around the corners, scattering the

returning line of children and at last hitting the harborside just in time to see his Lucy

leap onto the departing *Marauder* with the barefoot boy at her side.

“Lu—!” Simon began, but his shout was cut short. A great roar like a furnace came

from behind him and something Darke pushed him out of the way. Simon fell through a

tangle of ropes, hit his head on an anchor and tumbled into the deep green water, where

he drifted down and came to rest on the harbor bed.



12

INTO THE FIRE

Simon lay on the stony harbor bed, fifteen feet underwater, wondering why he had

decided to lie down in such an uncomfortable, wet place. Dreamily he looked up through

the murky green blur. Far above him, the dark hulls of the fishing boats moved lazily in

the swell, long tendrils of seaweed wafting from their barnacle-encrusted keels. An eel

swam across his line of sight and a few curious fish nuzzled at his toes. In his ears the

swish-swash sound of the sea mixed with the rattle of the stones on the harbor bed and

the distant thud of the hulls bumping above. It was, he thought as he watched his robes

waft around in the cold currents of the incoming tide, very strange.

Simon did not feel the need to breathe. The Darke Art of Suspension

Underwater—something that the old bones of DomDaniel had made him practice every

day with his head in a bucket of water—had automatically kicked in. Simon smiled to

himself as he slowly came to and realized what he was doing.

Sometimes, he thought, a

Darke Art came in useful; he liked the almost forgotten feeling of being in total control,

but...Simon frowned and a few bubbles loosed themselves from his eyebrows and drifted

lazily to the surface far above. But that was not why he was down here. There was

something he had to do—something important. Lucy!

At the thought of Lucy, Simon's Darke control left him. A sharp pain shot through

his lungs, accompanied by an overwhelming urge to *breathe*. Panicking, Simon tried to

push himself off from the harbor bottom, but he couldn't move. His robes...they were

caught...on what—on *what*?

With frantic, cold fingers Simon pulled the frayed hem of his tunic off the barb of an

old anchor and, with his lungs screaming to take a breath *now, now, now*, he kicked off

from the gravelly harbor bed. The buoyancy of the water quickly propelled him upward,

and a few seconds later he broke the oily surface of the harbor like a cork out of a

bottle—to the amazement of a rapidly gathering crowd.

The crowd had not actually gathered to see Simon. But when Simon's seaweed-covered head appeared suddenly, coughing and spluttering, it quickly switched

its attention from Linda and her FlashBoard to Simon. And while the crowd watched

Simon swim to the steps and climb out, his robes dripping dramatically, the Darke

symbols standing out against the water-darkened fabric, his green eyes flashing in a way

that some of the female watchers found rather interesting, Linda took her chance. Quietly

she picked up the FlashBoard and sneaked away.

Linda had not had a good reception when she had screeched to a halt on the edge of

the quay. A crowd had quickly gathered, the majority of whom had been all for pushing

her into the harbor. The Port Witch Coven was not popular in the Port, and as Linda

slunk off into Fishguts Twist she knew that she had had a narrow escape.
Saltwater and

Darke Witchcraft do not mix well. A witch as steeped in the Darke as
Linda would be in

danger of dissolving into a pool of Darke slime within a few seconds of
contact with the

sea, which is one of the reasons you will never see a Darke witch cry.
Lucy Gringe had

taken advantage of this fact and had gambled that Linda would not dare
take the

FlashBoard out across the water—and she was right.

But Lucy had not thought past escaping the dreaded Linda. And as the
Marauder

sailed out of the harbor Lucy began to realize that maybe she had—as
her mother would

have put it—jumped out of the stew pot and into the fire. Lucy and Wolf
Boy had leaped

aboard one of the nastiest boats in the Port, skippered by a most
unpleasant—and deeply

superstitious—skipper. If there was one thing that this skipper disliked it
was women on

board, especially women with braids. Theodophilus Fortitude Fry,
skipper of the

Marauder, did not like women—or girls—with braids. Theodophilus
Fortitude Fry had

grown up as the youngest brother of eight sisters. And they had all worn
braids. And the

biggest, bossiest one had worn them with lots of ribbons, just like Lucy
did.

And so Skipper Fry surveyed his unexpected passengers with an
expression of

dismay, his bellow of, “Throw her off! *Now!* ” was perhaps
understandable—but not to

Lucy and Wolf Boy. To them, and Lucy in particular, it seemed very
unreasonable.

There were just two crew members aboard the *Marauder*: one was the
skipper’s son,

Jakey Fry, a redheaded boy with a mass of freckles and watery green
eyes like the sea.

He wore his hair cut short and a perpetually worried expression. Jakey
thought he was

about fourteen, although no one had ever bothered to tell him his exact

age.

The other crew member was Thin Crowe, one of the Crowe twins. The Crowe twins

were, theoretically, identical, but one was fat and one was thin—and that was the way it

had always been, since the day they were born. They were exceedingly stupid, possibly

not much more intelligent than the average Port fish crate—indeed, there were some Port

fish crates that might have successfully disputed that. Apart from their alarming

difference in size, the Crowes were remarkably similar. Their eyes were as blank and pale

as those of a dead fish on a slab, their heads were covered in a short black stubble and

cuts from the razors that they occasionally scraped across their bumpy skulls, and they

both wore short, filthy tunics of an indeterminate color and leather leggings. The Crowe

twins took turns crewing the *Marauder*. They suited Skipper Fry—they were nasty and

stupid enough to do what he wanted without asking questions.

And so, when Skipper Fry yelled, “Throw her off! *Now!*” he knew that that was

exactly what Thin Crowe would do, without a second thought. Skipper Fry didn’t like

second thoughts.

Thin Crowe was wiry, with muscles like steel ropes. He grabbed Lucy around the

waist, lifted her off her feet and headed rapidly to the side of the boat. “Let *go!*” squealed

Lucy. Wolf Boy lunged at him—the only effect of which was to make Thin Crowe grab

hold of him too.

“Throw ’em both off,” said Skipper Fry.

Wolf Boy froze. He had a horror of falling from boats.

As though he were throwing the day’s trash overboard, Thin Crowe heaved Wolf

Boy and Lucy over the side of the boat. But the *Marauder*’s hurried departure had led to

what Skipper Fry would call sloppy seamanship—a loose mooring rope hung down over

the side. Wolf Boy and Lucy grabbed the rope as they fell and dangled like a couple of

fenders as the *Marauder* sped through the waves.

Expertly—for he had done this many times before—Thin Crowe leaned over and

began to pry Wolf Boy's fingers from the rope. A more intelligent seaman would have

cut the rope, but this did not occur to him. This did occur to Skipper Fry, however, who

was watching impatiently.

"Cut the rope, fishbrain," he growled. "Let 'em sink or swim."

"I can't swim!" Lucy's voice came from over the side.

"Then yer can do the other thing," said the skipper with a gap-toothed scowl.

On the tiller Jakey Fry watched in dismay. By now the *Marauder* had cleared the

harbor and was heading out to open sea, where Jakey knew there was no hope for anyone

who fell into the sea and could not swim. He thought Wolf Boy and Lucy—especially

Lucy—looked like fun. With them on board, the prospect of the long days on the boat

with his unpredictable father and the bullying Crowe suddenly took on a less dreadful

aspect. And besides, Jakey didn't agree with throwing anyone off boats—even girls.

"No, Pa! Stop!" yelled Jakey. "If they drown 'tis worse luck even than the witch's

evil eye."

"Don't mention the witch!" yelled Skipper Fry, beset with more bad omens than any

skipper had a right to be.

"Stop 'im cutting the rope, Pa. Stop 'im or I'll turn back to Port."

"You will not!"

"I *will!*" With that, Jakey Fry pushed the tiller hard away from him; the great boom

of the mainsail swung across and the *Marauder* began to turn.

Skipper Fry gave in. To return to Port on the very tide on which a boat had left was

known to be the worst luck of all. It was more than he could take.

"Leave 'em!" he shouted. Thin Crowe was energetically sawing the rope with his

blunt fish knife. He was enjoying himself and was reluctant to stop.

“I said *leave* ’em!” yelled the skipper. “That’s an order, Crowe. Pull ’em in and take ’em below.”

Jakey Fry grinned. He pulled the tiller toward him and, as the *Marauder* swung back

on course, he watched Lucy and Wolf Boy being pushed through the hatch into the hold

below. The hatch was slammed shut and barred, and Jakey began to whistle happily. This

voyage was going to be *much* more interesting than usual.

Back on the harborside, Simon shook off concerned inquiries. He politely refused offers

from three young women to come to their houses to get dry and, instead, set off back to

his attic room in the Customs House.

“Simon. Simon!”

Simon ignored the familiar voice. He wanted to be alone. But Maureen from the pie

shop was not easily put off. She caught up with him and placed a friendly hand on his

arm. Simon turned to face her and Maureen was shocked—his lips were blue and his face

was as white as the plates on which she displayed her pies.

“Simon, you’re *freezing*. You come back with me and get warm by the ovens. I’ll

make you a nice hot chocolate.”

Simon shook his head, but Maureen was adamant. She linked her arm firmly through

his and propelled him across the square to the pie shop. Once inside, Maureen put up the

Closed sign and pushed Simon through to the kitchen at the back.

“Now, *sit*,” she instructed, as if Simon were a soaking wet Labrador that had been

stupid enough to jump into the harbor. Obediently Simon sat in Maureen’s chair beside

the big pie oven. Suddenly he began to shiver uncontrollably. “I’ll go and get some

blankets,” Maureen told him. “You can get out of that wet stuff and I’ll dry it overnight.”

Five minutes later Simon was swathed in a collection of rough, woolen blankets.

Now and then a shiver passed through him, but the color had returned to his lips and he

was no longer pie-plate white. “So, you saw Lucy?” Maureen was asking.

Simon nodded miserably. “Much good it did me. She’s got someone else—she was

running away with him. I *told* you she would. I don’t blame her.” He put his head in his

hands and another uncontrollable bout of shivering overcame him.

Maureen was a practical woman, and she did not put up with being miserable for

very long. She also believed that things were not always as bad as they might look.

“That’s not what I heard,” she said. “I heard that she and the boy were escaping from the

Coven. We all saw the witch, Simon.”

“Witch?” Simon raised his head. “What witch?”

“The really nasty one. The one that Shrank poor Florrie Bundy to the size of a tea

bag, so they say.”

“*What?*”

“A tea bag. The tea-bag witch was chasing Lucy and the boy. She was after them on

one of those FlashBoards—dangerous things.”

“*Chasing* Lucy?” Simon lapsed into silence. He was thinking hard. In the past he had

paid the occasional visit to the Coven. It was not something he enjoyed doing, but at the

time he had respected the Coven for their Darke Powers, and he had particularly

respected Linda, who, he remembered now, was indeed rumored to have Shrank her

neighbor. But Linda’s commitment to the Darke, combined with her maliciousness, had

scared even him, and the thought that she had been chasing Lucy made him shudder.

Maureen added another blanket. “It does explain why they escaped on the

Marauder,” she said, getting up to tend the boiling kettle that dangled above the fire.

“The *Marauder* is the last boat anyone would *choose* to jump aboard.”

Simon looked up at Maureen with a frown. “Why, what do you mean?”

“Nothing,” Maureen replied quickly, immediately wishing she hadn’t said anything.

What good would it do Simon to worry about something he could do nothing about?

“Tell me, Maureen. I want to know,” Simon said, looking her in the eye. Maureen

did not reply. Instead she got up and walked over to a small stove, where she had set a

pan of milk to heat. She busied herself there for some minutes, concentrating on

dissolving three squares of chocolate into the hot milk. She brought the steaming bowl

over to Simon. “Drink that,” she said, “and then I’ll tell you.”

Still beset by the occasional shiver, Simon sipped the hot chocolate.

Maureen perched on a small stool beside the oven. “It’s strange,” she said. “There’s

something about the pie counter that makes people think it’s a soundproof barrier and you

can’t hear what they’re saying on the other side of it. I’ve heard a lot of things while

selling pies—things I wasn’t meant to hear.”

“So what have you heard about the *Marauder*?” asked Simon.

“Well, it’s more about the skipper really...”

“*What* about the skipper?”

“He’s bad news. They remember him here when he was just plain Joe Grub from a

family of wreckers up the coast. But now that there’re more lighthouses, it’s not so easy

to go wrecking, is it? And that’s a blessing, if you ask me. It’s a terrible thing to lure a

ship to her doom on the rocks, a terrible thing. So with the profit gone from the wrecking,

Grub got himself taken on by one of those pirate ships that call in here sometimes, and he

came back with a bag of gold and a fancy new name to boot. Some say he got both from

some poor gentleman he threw overboard. But others say...” Maureen stopped, unwilling

to go on.

“Others say what?” asked Simon.

Maureen shook her head.

“Please, you have to tell me,” said Simon. “If I am going to be able to

help Lucy, I

must know everything I can. *Please.*”

Maureen was still reluctant, partly because it was considered bad luck to talk about

such things.

“Well...others say that a change of name means a change of master.

They say the

skipper’s new master is an ancient ghost up at the Castle, and that’s where all his money

came from. But imagine working for a ghost—how creepy is that?”

Maureen shivered. “I

don’t believe a word of it myself,” she said briskly.

But Simon did. “A ghoul’s fool,” he murmured.

“You what?” Maureen asked, getting up to put another log in the fire below the oven.

All the talk of ghosts made her feel cold.

Simon

shrugged.

“A

ghoul’s

fool,

a

phantom’s

bantam,

a

specter

protector—whatever you want to call it. I think the real term is a Spirit’s Bondsman. It’s

someone who sells himself to a ghost.”

“Goodness!” gasped Maureen, slamming the door to the firebox. “Why would

anyone want to do that?”

“Gold,” said Simon, remembering the time Tertius Fume had made him a similar

offer. “One hundred and sixty-nine pieces, to be precise. But they all regret it in the end.

There’s no escape, not once they’ve taken the payment. They are Haunted to the end of

their days.”

“My,” said Maureen, “the things people do.”

“Yeah,” Simon agreed. “Er, Maureen...”

“Yes?”

“So...what is the skipper’s new name?”

“Oh, it’s a nutty one if ever there was. Theodophilus Fortitude Fry. It makes you

laugh when you think he used to be just plain Joe Grub.” Maureen chuckled.

Simon did not join in Maureen’s laughter. He did not find the Darke obsession with

names at all funny.

“T.F.F.,” he muttered. “Same initials as old Fume. I wonder...” He sighed. “Oh

Lucy, what have you *done*?”

Maureen tried to think of something positive to say, but all she could come up with

was, “But his son, Jakey—he’s a good boy.”

Simon put down his empty bowl and stared gloomily at his bare feet sticking out

from under the blankets. He said nothing.

After some minutes Maureen murmured, somewhat unconvincingly, “Look, Simon,

Lucy’s a resourceful girl. And brave too. I’m sure she will be fine.”

“Fine?” asked Simon incredulously. “On a boat with a skipper like that? How can

she possibly be *fine*?”

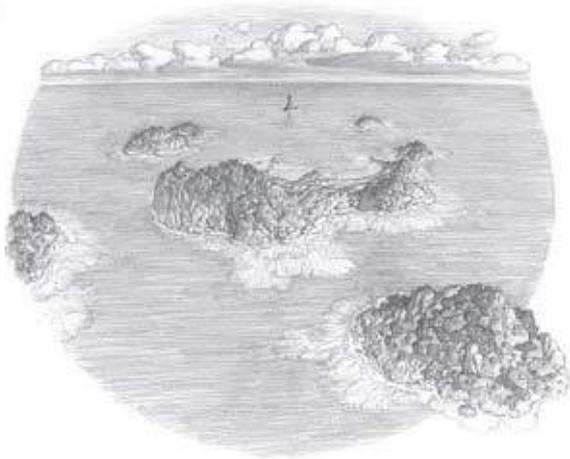
Maureen did not know what to say. She quietly got to her feet and set about making

up a bed for Simon on one of the wide benches along the side of the kitchen. Early the

next morning, just after dawn, when Maureen came down to the kitchen to get started on

the first batch of pies, Simon was gone. She was not surprised. She began kneading the

pastry and silently wished him and Lucy luck—they were going to need it.



13

DRAGON FLIGHT

The Double Dune Light was set high on a rickety metal frame at the end of a treacherous sandspit. From the air it looked thin and flimsy, as though the slightest gust of wind would blow it down, but Septimus knew that people said it was impressive from the ground.

At the light, Septimus turned Spit Fyre about forty-five degrees to the left and headed out to the open sea. Septimus knew he had no need to direct the dragon because

Spit Fyre was, for the moment, merely retracing his earlier flight, but he enjoyed the thrill of the dragon responding to his commands. When Spit Fyre was earthbound, Septimus

often had the uncomfortable feeling that the dragon was the one in charge and he was

merely there to do his bidding, but in the air the positions were reversed. Spit Fyre

became docile and calm; he obeyed—even anticipated—Septimus's every wish, to the

extent that sometimes Septimus felt as though the dragon could hear his very thoughts.

Septimus was not completely wrong about this. He did not know that a dragon

rider—particularly the dragon's Imprintor—imparts his thoughts through tiny flickers of

every muscle. A dragon reads the whole body of its rider and often will know which way

the rider wants to go before the rider knows him—or her—self. It was in this way that,

two days previously, Spit Fyre had flown a very agitated Marcia Overstrand all the way

to the House of Foryx without a single mistake. Given the fact that Marcia had gotten the

basic dragon-direction instructions completely backward, this was quite an achievement.

Marcia naturally believed it was her innate dragon-riding skills that had gotten them

safely there, but in fact it was down to Spit Fyre's innate ExtraOrdinary Wizard-ignoring skills.

Septimus and Spit Fyre headed out across the open sea. The air grew brighter and the

multitude of little white clouds disappeared, until Septimus could see nothing but

blue—the azure sky around him and the sparkling sea below. He gazed down, entranced,

watching the shifting shadows of the currents, seeing the dark shapes of the huge whales

that inhabited the deep trough over which they were flying.

The late spring air was cold at five hundred feet, but the warmth generated by Spit

Fyre's muscles provided Septimus with a not-unpleasant microclimate of his own—as

long as he ignored the occasional waft of hot, smelly dragon breath. Soon the rhythmic

up-down, up-down flight of the dragon lulled Septimus into a half-dreamlike state where

Magykal rhymes swirled around his head and dragonny songs played in his ears. Some

hours passed in this way until suddenly he was jolted awake.

“Septimus, Septimus...” *Someone was calling his name.*

Septimus sat up, at once alert and confused. How could anyone possibly be calling

him? He shook himself and muttered, “It was a *dream*, you dillop.” To chase away the

fuzziness in his head he looked down at the ocean once more—and gasped with wonder.

Far below was a jewel-like group of islands. A large central island lay surrounded by

six smaller satellite islands. All were a deep lush green bordered with little coves and white sandy beaches, while between the islands the delicate blue-green of clear, shallow sea sparkled in the sunlight. Septimus was entranced; suddenly he longed to be sitting on a warm hillside and drink from cool springs bubbling up through mossy rocks. For a second—no longer—he thought about taking Spit Fyre down to one of the little coves and landing on the sand. In response the dragon began dropping in height; immediately Septimus came to his senses. “No, Spit Fyre. No, we have to go on,” he said regretfully. Spit Fyre resumed his flight, and Septimus turned around to watch the exquisite circle of islands recede. Eventually the islands disappeared from view and a strange feeling of loss came over him—he and Spit Fyre were alone once more. Dragon and Imprintor flew on into the late afternoon. Above them white clouds came and went, and, below, the occasional ship trailed its white path through the endless pattern of waves, but there were no more islands. As early evening approached, the clouds began to thicken until they formed a thick, gray ceiling. The air temperature plummeted and Septimus felt chilled to the bone. He drew his wolverine fur around him more tightly, but he still felt cold. Septimus did not realize how cold he had become. It took him a good ten minutes to remember that Marcia had insisted on packing what she had called her Emergency Kit, which she had personally loaded onto Spit Fyre in heavy carpet saddlebags. Marcia had told Septimus that she had packed six bright red HeatCloaks, which she had been very excited to find in Bott’s Wizard Secondhand Cloak Shop. After another ten minutes spent trying to open the saddlebags—which Marcia had very effectively laced closed—Septimus managed to get his ice-cold

hand to pull out a

HeatCloak. He wrapped the oddly crinkly cloak around him; immediately the warmth

spread through him like a hot bath, and his thoughts began to work once more.

By now the light was dimming fast. Ahead on the horizon Septimus could see the

dark rim of the coming night. A spattering of rain began, but it seemed that the

HeatCloak repelled water too. Septimus pulled on his old red beanie hat, which he had

slipped into his pocket before he left. It was a tight fit now, but he didn't care. No other

hat felt quite the same. Now he was totally rain-and windproof.

Septimus turned his attention to the horizon once more. The dark line of night was

wider, and within it he thought he could see a faint ribbon of lights. Septimus kept his

eyes fixed on the horizon and, as the twilight deepened and Spit Fyre drew ever nearer,

the ribbon of lights shone brighter by the second. A thrill of excitement ran through

Septimus—he had done it. He had found his way back to the Trading Post, and one of

those lights belonged to Jenna, Nicko, Snorri and Beetle, sitting in their damp little net

loft, waiting for him to rescue them. Septimus leaned back against the Pilot Spine and

grinned. The dragon rescue team had done it again.

Half an hour later night had fallen and they had reached land. Spit Fyre was flying

low and fast along a sandy coast. The sky had cleared and the waning gibbous moon was

rising, casting a silver light and long shadows on the land below. Septimus leaned out and

saw, scattered among the sand dunes, the dark shapes of fishermen's cottages, faint

candles burning in the windows and little boats pulled up onto the beach for the night.

Beyond he could see the ribbon of lights of the Trading Post shining brighter than ever,

illuminating the long string of harbors.

Now Septimus slowed Spit Fyre down and swooped in even lower. Below, he saw
the first of the long line of harbors—Harbor Number Forty-nine, if he remembered
rightly. But, since Harbor Number Three was the one they were heading for, there was
still some way to go.
Spit Fyre’s wings beat steadily as he flew over each harbor in succession. Excited,
Septimus peered down and saw the dark shapes of ships tied up along harbor walls
standing out against the light from lines of lanterns and torches along the quaysides. He
could see throngs of people bustling about, busy loading and unloading, bargaining and
trading. The sound of voices drifted up—a cacophony of unfamiliar languages, of
arguments and laughter punctuated by the odd shout. No one noticed the dark shape of
the dragon above or its faint moon shadow moving silently over the quays. Septimus
patted Spit Fyre’s neck and whispered, “Well done, Spit Fyre, well done. We’re nearly
there.”
The Trading Post had grown along a sheltered shoreline on the edge of the vast, open
land that contained—among many other wonders—the House of Foryx. It had become a
center for Traders, not only the Northern Traders but those from even farther away.
Before the winter’s ice had even melted, fur-clad traders marooned deep in the Ice
Countries would push their long, narrow boats along the frozen ditches that snaked
through the forests until they came to the wide, free-flowing canals that eventually gave
out into the Trading Post. Tall, bright-robed Traders from the Hills of the Dry Deserts
brought their brilliantly painted ships across the sea, and occasionally even Traders from
countries beyond the Eastern Snow Plains could be seen with their distinctive tall pointy

hats and their staccato voices could be heard cutting through the hubbub.
As Spit Fyre flew on, Septimus kept a lookout for Harbor Number
Three. It was one
of the smaller harbors at the very end of the Trading Post, just beyond
the widest canal
(the one that led all the way to the other side of the world, so they said).
Harbor Number
Three was, he knew, easy to recognize by its unusual horseshoe shape. It
was not a
deep-water harbor but was used by fishermen with small boats, which
they left tied onto
outhauls stretched over the sand that was uncovered at low tide.
It was not long before Spit Fyre had crossed the wide, windswept canal
and Septimus
saw the welcome horseshoe shape below. Spit Fyre began circling,
looking for
somewhere to land, but the quay was cluttered with fish boxes and piles
of nets. There
was no open patch of ground large enough for a dragon to land, and no
dragon will ever
land near nets, due to a deep-seated dread of getting their talons trapped
in the mesh, a
fear left over from the great dragon-hunting days of the past.
The tide was going out, and in the shadows along the edge of the harbor
wall
Septimus spotted an empty strip of sand with no ropes across it. He
steered the dragon a
few hundred yards out to sea and then brought him in low across the
water, allowing him
to glide gracefully down until, with a soft *thud* and in a spray of wet
sand, Spit Fyre
landed. The dragon sniffed the air and then wearily laid his head on the
damp sand,
allowing Septimus to clamber down and set foot on land once more.
Septimus wiggled
his feet to try to get some feeling back into his toes. Then, a little
unsteadily, he went and
rubbed the dragon's velvety, ice-cold nose.
"Thank you, Spit Fyre," he whispered. "You're the best."
The dragon snorted, and from the shadows of the quayside above came a
woman's
voice: "Don't *do* that. It's so rude."

A man's voice protested, "Don't do what? I didn't do anything!"

"Huh. You always say that. You can't blame it on the dog out *here*."

The arguing couple wandered off, and before they were out of earshot, Spit Fyre had

fallen asleep. Septimus checked the tide. It was on its way out, and from the look of the

high-tide mark on the harbor wall he figured Spit Fyre had at least six hours to safely

sleep where he was. Septimus heaved off Marcia's saddlebags, extracted four roast

chickens and a bag of apples and placed them beside the dragon's nose in case he woke

for a midnight snack.

"Wait here, Spit Fyre. I'll be back," Septimus whispered. Spit Fyre opened a bleary

eye, blinked and went back to sleep.

Septimus shouldered the heavy saddlebags and wearily headed up the harbor steps.

Now all he had to do was remember which net loft it was that Nicko had chosen.



14

THE TRADING POST

Septimus reached the top of the steps and looked around. The arguing couple was gone

and the quayside was deserted. It was in semi-darkness, lit only by one large torch set

high on a post in front of a line of very tall, narrow wooden huts at the back of the
quayside. Despite the gusts of wind and the occasional spots of rain, the torch flame
burned steadily behind a thick shield of glass and cast a pool of dim yellow light across
the cobblestones. Septimus remembered that it marked the entrance of the alleyway that
Nicko had dragged them all down two days earlier. Smiling at the thought that he would
very soon see his brother again, Septimus hoisted the saddlebags onto his shoulders and
set off toward the torch, picking his way through the clutter of barrels and crates that
littered the quayside.
Septimus reached the torch and stepped into the alley. The torchlight threw his long
and flickering shadow in front of him. He turned a sharp corner and was plunged into
darkness—but only for a few seconds. Soon the Dragon Ring that he wore on his right
index finger began to glow and light the way. With the saddlebags balanced awkwardly
on his shoulders, Septimus negotiated another corner and stopped outside a narrow,
smelly, four-story wooden hut that sported a recently smashed front door tied together
with rope. Septimus put down the heavy saddlebags and looked up at the tiny windows
with their missing or smashed panes of glass. He was sure that this was the right hut, but
there was no one there—the windows were dark and the place was silent and empty. A
flicker of worry passed through Septimus, and then something caught his eye. A scrap of
paper was pinned to the door, and Septimus recognized Jenna's large, looping
handwriting. The note said:
Sep!
Hope you had a good flight! We are on the Cerys—big, flashy ship on Harbor Twelve. See you!!!
Love, Jen xx

Septimus smiled at the happy sight of Jenna's exclamation marks and then frowned. How

was he meant to get to Harbor Twelve?

Half an hour later Septimus's frown had deepened. He had battled the buffeting wind and

a sudden squally shower on the long exposed bridge that crossed the mouth of the wide

canal and had now reached an imposing wooden gateway at the end of the bridge, which

marked the boundary of Harbor Four. From behind the gate Septimus could hear the

sounds of the busy harbor. Warily he went to push the gate open and to his surprise, a

man stepped out of a sentry box that Septimus had taken to be some kind of store.

"Stop right there, sonny. Afore you go in you must read the Notice." The man, who

was wearing a dark blue seafarer's uniform sprinkled with big gold buttons, pointed to a

huge notice fixed to the wall. It was lit by two brass lanterns and was covered in large red

letters in various languages.

Septimus scowled. He did not like being called "sonny"—he was used to more

respect.

"An' you can take that scowl off your face too," growled the man. "Read the board,

all the way through, or you can go back to where you came from. Got that?"

Stonily Septimus nodded. Much as he wanted to tell the man to get lost, he *had* to get

into Harbor Four and enter the Large Harbor Network. He turned his attention to the

notice:

Harbor Four

ATTENTION!

You are now leaving Harbor Three,

The last of the Small Harbors (SH)

And entering the Large Harbor Network (LHN)

By passing through this gate you agree
To be bound by the Rules (Rs)
Of the Trading Post Large Harbor Association (TPLHA)
And to Obey all Instructions issued by
Harbor Officials, Groups or Societies (HOGS)

This was followed by a long list, each line beginning with the words
“DO NOT” in red

capital letters. Septimus did not like lists written in red and beginning
with the words

“DO NOT” they reminded him of the Young Army. But under the eagle
eye of the

official, he read it all the way through.

“Okay,” he said as he reached the end. “I agree.”

“You didn’t read it,” objected the official.

“I read fast,” Septimus told him.

“Don’t get smart with me,” said the man. “Finish reading it.”

“I have finished. So don’t get smart with *me*,” said Septimus, throwing
caution to the

wind.

“Right. You’re barred,” snapped the official.

“What?”

“You heard. You are barred from the LHN. Like I said, you can go back
to where

you came from.”

A wave of anger came over Septimus. He lifted his right arm and pointed
to his two

Senior Apprentice stripes, which shone a Magykal purple in the light of
the lantern. “I am

on official business,” said Septimus very slowly, trying not to show his
anger. “This is

my badge of office. I am not who you may think I am. If you value your
post, I would

advise you to allow me to pass.”

The authority with which Septimus spoke threw off the official, and the
Magykal

sheen on his cuffs confused him. In answer he pushed open the gate and,
as Septimus

stepped through, the official bowed his head almost imperceptibly.
Septimus noticed but

did not acknowledge it. The man closed the gate, and Septimus stepped
into Harbor Four.

It was another world. Dazed, Septimus stared—it was *packed*. This was

a serious

harbor, with deep water and big boats. It was lit by at least twenty torches and swarming

with people. One large fishing boat was in the process of being unloaded, and two tall

ships were being provisioned. An almost overwhelming feeling of weariness swept over

Septimus—how was he going to push his way through this crowd? Wishing that he had

left the heavy saddlebags on Spit Fyre, he set them down for a moment on the

cobblestones.

A loud voice came from behind him. “Don’t block the way, boy. There’s people here

with jobs to do.”

Septimus stepped to one side, forgetting the saddlebags. A burly fisherman carrying

a pile of precariously balanced fish boxes pushed past and promptly tripped over them,

sending the contents of the boxes flying. In a shower of herring, accompanied by an

angry torrent of words that he had not heard before, Septimus heaved up the saddlebags

and disappeared into the crowd. When he looked back, the crowd had closed behind him

and the fisherman was lost from view. Septimus smiled. Sometimes crowds had their

uses. He took a deep breath and began to push his way across the quayside of Harbor

Four until at last he reached the gateway to Harbor Five. This, to his relief, was

unmanned, though accompanied by the same domineering notice. Septimus ignored the

notice and stepped into Harbor Five.

An hour later Septimus had very nearly reached his goal. He stood before a sign that

informed him he was leaving Harbor Eleven and about to enter Harbor Twelve. Septimus

felt exhausted, and was by now extremely irritated with Jenna. Why did she have to go

prancing off to some fancy ship? Why couldn’t they have waited for him in the net loft as

they had arranged? Didn't they even think that he might be tired after such a long flight?

He had had to cross eight harbor fronts to reach them, and it had not been easy. Some had

been packed with people not always willing to make way for a bedraggled boy carrying

large saddlebags. One was deserted, unlit and crisscrossed with ropes that he had to pick

his way through like a dancing circus pony; two were all but blocked by a maze of barrels

and packing cases; and many had felt distinctly unfriendly.

The frazzled Septimus stopped to take stock. Harbor Twelve looked the most

difficult of all. It was the largest so far and was buzzing with activity. As he peered

across the hustle and bustle of the quayside, he could see a forest of tall masts with their

furled sails soaring into the night sky, illuminated by the rank of blazing torches that

lined the water's edge. The light from the torches sent a rich orange glow across the

scene, turning the night a deep indigo velvet and transforming the falling rain to drops of

diamonds.

There was a sense of wealth and pomp to Harbor Twelve that Septimus had not

encountered in the previous harbors. Officials were everywhere, and each one seemed to

Septimus to have more gold braid than the last. They wore short navy blue robes from

which their legs emerged swathed in buttoned leggings of golden cloth, and on their feet

they wore heavy boots festooned with a multitude of silver buckles. But what really

caught Septimus's eye were the wigs—and surely these must be wigs, he thought, for no

one could possibly have enough hair for such complicated arrangements. Some were at

least a foot high. They were brilliant white and coiled with curls, topknots, braids and

pigtails, and each one sported a large gold badge not unlike the rosettes that Septimus had

seen decorating the stable of Jenna's horse, Domino. Septimus smiled, imagining for a moment the officials lined up in a ring being judged on "the official with the softest nose" and "the official the judges would most like to take home." Septimus watched, getting his energy together for a final push through the throng. He had no idea what kind of ship the *Cerys* was, although the more he thought about it, the more the name sounded familiar. He took a deep breath, picked up the saddlebags—which felt as though someone had just slipped in a handful of rocks—and stepped into the crowd. A moment later he was roughly shoved aside by a couple of uniformed dockhands making a path through the crowd for a tall woman swathed in gold cloth. She looked ahead disdainfully, seeing nothing except the beautiful multicolored bird that she carried high on her wrist, like a lantern. Septimus had learned a lot about pushing through crowds in the previous hour, and he took his chance. Quickly, before the crowd could close in once more, he stepped in behind the woman and followed in her wake, taking care not to step on her trailing, shimmering gown. A few minutes later Septimus watched the woman ascend the gangplank of an ornate three-masted ship, very nearly the biggest in the harbor, he figured. In fact, only the one right next to it seemed bigger and possibly more ornate. Feeling faint with fatigue, Septimus stood under a golden torchpost and looked down the long line of ships, moored prow to stern, that disappeared into the night. They seemed to go on forever, and some had two or three ships tied up alongside them, stretching out into the harbor. A feeling of impossibility came over Septimus—there were so many ships, how was he possibly going to find the *Cerys*? And supposing the *Cerys* was one of the ships tied up on the outside of another ship—how did you get to those? Did people mind you

walking across

their ships? Were you supposed to ask? What if they said no? A hundred anxious

questions flooded his mind. Septimus was so immersed in his worries that he did not hear

his name being called.

“Septimus! Sep...ti... mus!” And then, more impatiently, “Sep, you cloth-ears, we’re

here.” It was the “cloth-ears” that caught Septimus’s attention above the noise of the

crowd. Only one person called him that.

“Jen! Jen, where are you?” Septimus cast around looking for the owner of the voice.

“Here! Here—no, *here!*”

And then Septimus saw her, leaning over the prow of the huge, richly embellished

ship on the right, waving her hardest and smiling broadly. Septimus grinned with relief,

and all the irritations of the previous hours fell away. Trust Jen to get herself onto the best

ship in the harbor, he thought. Septimus pushed his way past the small knot of people

who had gathered to look at the beautiful, dark-haired figurehead on the *Cerys* and, aware

of envious glances, he approached the liveried sailor on duty at the end of the gangplank.

The sailor bowed. “Septimus Heap, sir?” he inquired.

“Yes,” replied Septimus, much relieved.

“Welcome aboard, sir,” said the sailor, and saluted.

“Thank you,” said Septimus, and then, suddenly remembering something Nicko had

told him about it being considered bad luck to board a ship for the first time without

giving some kind of offering, he reached into the pockets of his cloak and took out the

first thing that came to hand—a herring.

He placed the fish into the sailor’s hand, then heaved the saddlebags over his

shoulder and stumbled up the gangplank—leaving the sailor and the fish staring, blank

and bemused, at each other.



15

THE CERYYS

*S*eptimus woke the next morning convinced that Marcia was calling him. He sat bolt upright, his hair sticking on end, his name still sounding in his ears. Where was he? And then he remembered. He remembered stepping aboard the *Cerys* and Jenna throwing her arms around him, laughing. He remembered her grabbing his hand and introducing him to a tall, dark-haired man whom he had recognized as Jenna's father, Milo Banda, and realizing that the *Cerys* was his ship—and *that* was why the name sounded familiar. And what a ship the *Cerys* was. Jenna had proudly showed him around, and he remembered—even through his exhaustion—being amazed at the stunning opulence. The brilliant colors and gold-leaf gilding shining in the torchlight, the neatness of countless coils of rope, the richness of the wood, the deep shine of the brass and the immaculate crew in their crisp uniforms silently busy in the background. Eventually Jenna had realized how tired he was and had led him to a tall hatchway

with gilded doors. One of the crew had sprung out of nowhere and opened the doors,

bowing as they stepped down to the deck below. He remembered Jenna taking him down

wide, polished steps into a paneled room lit by a forest of candles and then shouts of

excitement—Beetle grinning broadly, punching him on the arm and saying, “Wotcha,

Sep!” Nicko giving him a bear hug and lifting him off his feet, just to show that he was

still his older brother, and Snorri smiling shyly, hanging back with Ullr. And then he

remembered nothing more.

Blearily Septimus looked around his cabin. It was small but extremely comfortable;

his bunk was soft and wide and covered in a pile of warm blankets. A circular beam of

sunlight streamed from a large brass porthole, through which Septimus could see the

sparkling blue of the water and the dark shape of the harbor wall silhouetted against the

sea beyond. He lay down and gazed at shifting patterns of light reflecting on the polished

wood ceiling and felt pleased that it was obviously *not* Marcia calling him. Septimus,

who was naturally an early riser, was glad to sleep in—he ached all over from the effects

of two long dragon flights so close together. Dozily he wondered how many miles he and

Spit Fyre had covered, and suddenly he sat bolt-upright once more—*Spit Fyre!*

Septimus threw on his tunic and was out of his cabin in thirty seconds flat. He tore

along the paneled corridor, heading toward a companionway that led to a flight of steps

up to an open hatch showing blue sky beyond. He hurtled along, feet thudding on the

wooden boards, and cannoned straight into Jenna, throwing them both backward.

Jenna picked herself up and hauled Septimus to his feet. “Sep!” she gasped. “What’s

the hurry?”

“Spit Fyre!” said Septimus, unwilling to waste any time trying to explain. He raced

off, shot up the steps and out onto the open deck.

Jenna was not far behind. “What about Spit Fyre?” she asked, catching up with him.

Septimus shook his head and raced on, but Jenna grabbed hold of his sleeve and gave him

her best Princess stare. “Septimus, what about Spit Fyre? *Tell me!*”

“Left-him-on-the-sand-asleep-tide’s-come-in—oh-crumbs— *hours-ago,*”

Septimus

babbled. He wrenched free of Jenna and fled across the deck, heading for the gangplank.

Jenna, who was always faster on her feet than Septimus, was suddenly in front of him

blocking the gangway. “Jen!” Septimus protested. “Get out of the way! *Please,* I gotta

find Spit Fyre!”

“Well, you’ve found him—or rather, he found you. He’s *here,* Sep.”

“Where?” Septimus swung around. “I can’t see him.”

“Come on, I’ll show you.” Jenna took Septimus by the hand and led him along the

freshly scrubbed deck to the stern of the ship. The dragon lay peacefully asleep, his tail

flung over the gunnels with its barb resting in the water. On the quayside was a knot of

ecstatic admirers, members of the Trading Post Dragon-Spotting Club—a club formed

only recently, more in hope than expectation of ever seeing a dragon.

“He turned up last night, just after you fell asleep,” said Jenna. She grinned. “You

were so out of it, you didn’t even wake when he landed. There was a massive *thud* and

the whole ship rocked. I thought it was going to sink. The crew went crazy, but once I

explained that my dragon had—”

“*Your* dragon?” Septimus objected. “You said he was *your* dragon?”

Jenna looked sheepish. “Well, I *am* Spit Fyre’s Navigator, Sep. And I knew that if I

said he was mine, it would be okay. Because, well...” Jenna stopped and smiled.

“*Anything* I do on this ship is okay. Good, isn’t it?”

Septimus wasn’t so sure. “But he’s *my* dragon, Jen.”

“Oh, don’t be so silly, Sep. I know he’s your dragon. I’ll tell them he’s your dragon

if you like. But it wasn’t me who left him on the beach with the tide coming in.”

“It was going *out*.”

Jenna shrugged. “What *ever*. Anyway, the cook’s gone ashore to find some chickens

and stuff for his breakfast. Do you want breakfast too?”

Septimus nodded and somewhat sulkily followed Jenna back down below.

The day on board the *Cerys* did not progress according to Septimus’s satisfaction. He had

expected to be welcomed as a rescuer once more, only to find that Milo Banda had stolen

his thunder, and no one seemed at all interested in flying home with him on Spit Fyre.

They were all planning to sail home “in style,” as Jenna put it. “And without those dragon

smells, either,” Beetle had added.

Following a tedious breakfast with Milo and Jenna, which had been spent listening to

Milo’s accounts of his recent exploits and his excitement about the “stupendous cargo”

he was expecting at any moment, Septimus had wandered up on deck. He was pleased to

find Nicko and Snorri, who were sitting with their legs dangling over the side of the ship,

looking out to sea. Ullr, in his daytime guise as a small orange cat, was asleep in the

warm sunshine. Septimus sat down beside them.

“Hey, Sep,” said Nicko quietly. “Sleep well?”

“Yeah. Too well. Forgot Spit Fyre,” Septimus said with a grunt.

“You were very tired, Septimus,” said Snorri. “Sometimes it is good to sleep well.

And Spit Fyre is safe. He sleeps too, I think?” At that a loud snore shook the decks, and

Septimus laughed.

“It’s really good to see you, Nik,” he said.

“You too, little bro.”

“I thought we could go back on Spit Fyre later on this afternoon?”

Nicko took a while to reply. And when he did it was not what Septimus wanted to

hear. “No thanks, Sep. Snorri and me, we’re going to sail the *Cerys* back home with

Milo. Take some time out at sea.”

“But Nik, you *can’t*,” said Septimus.

“Why not?” Nicko sounded irritable.

“Mum, she really wants to have you safe at home, Nik. I promised her I would bring

you back on Spit Fyre.” Septimus had imagined the homecoming many times—the

excitement of landing his dragon on the Palace lawns, Sarah and Silas running down to

greet them, Alther and Marcia too, and maybe even Aunt Zelda. It was something he had

been looking forward to, the final completion of the search for Nicko that he and Jenna

had begun what seemed like so long ago. He suddenly felt cheated.

“Sorry, Sep,” said Nicko. “Snorri and I have to do this. We need time to get used to

things. I don’t want to see Mum again just yet. I don’t want to have to answer all her

questions and be happy and polite to everybody. And Dad won’t mind waiting, I know he

won’t. I just...I just need time to think. Time to be free, time to be *me*—okay?”

Septimus didn’t think it was okay at all, but it felt mean to say so. So he said nothing,

and Nicko said no more. Septimus sat with Nicko and Snorri for a while, looking out to

sea, wondering about the change that had come over his brother. He didn’t like it. Nicko

was ponderous and sluggish, as though the hands on his clock were traveling more

slowly—and he didn’t seem to care much about what anyone else felt either, Septimus

thought. And neither he nor Snorri seemed to feel the need to speak, which was

weird—Nicko had always had something to say, even if it was completely crazy.

Septimus missed the old Nicko, the Nicko who laughed when he shouldn’t and said

things without thinking. Now it felt as if Nicko would have to think for hours before he

said anything—and then it would be something serious and rather boring. After a while
spent sitting in silence, Septimus got up and wandered off. Neither Nicko nor Snorri
appeared to notice.

Later that afternoon, after a lunch spent listening to yet more seafaring tales from

Milo, Septimus was sitting morosely on deck, leaning against Spit Fyre, who was still

asleep. In fact, apart from gulping down half a dozen chickens, a bag of sausages and the

cook's best frying pan, the dragon had done nothing *but* sleep since he had arrived on the

Cerys. Septimus had loaded up the dragon with the saddlebags—more in hope than

expectation of being able to leave—and now he sat leaning against the scales, warmed by

the sun and feeling the slow rise and fall of the dragon's breathing. He stared moodily out

at the encircling harbor wall. It was bright and sunny, with a slight breeze—perfect

dragon-flying weather—and he was impatient to be off. He had tried his best to wake Spit

Fyre but to no avail. Even the surefire tricks of blowing up the dragon's nose and tickling

his ears had not worked. Irritably Septimus kicked out at a perfect coil of bright red rope

and stubbed his toe. He wanted to get on Spit Fyre right now and go home on his own.

No one would notice. If only his stupid dragon would *wake up*.

“Wotcha, your most Senior Apprenticeness!” Beetle's voice sounded out cheerily.

“Oh, very funny. Hello, Beetle—gosh, what *are* you wearing?” asked Septimus.

Beetle flushed. “Oh,” he said. “You noticed.”

Septimus stared at Beetle's new acquisition—a short, navy blue jacket adorned with

a plethora of gold braid and frogging. “I could hardly *not* notice,” he replied. “What is

it?”

“It's a jacket,” said Beetle a little peevishly.

“What, a captain's jacket?”

“Well, no. Admiral’s, actually. The shop’s got lots of ’em if you want one too.”

“Um, no thanks, Beetle.”

Beetle shrugged. He gingerly negotiated his way around Spit Fyre’s nose and

regarded Septimus with a grin, which faded when he saw Septimus’s frown. “Spit Fyre

okay?” he asked.

“Yep.”

“So what’s up?” asked Beetle, settling himself down beside Septimus.

Septimus shrugged.

Beetle regarded his friend quizzically. “You had a fight with Nicko or something?”

“Nope.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t be surprised if you had. He’s a bit edgy, isn’t he?”

“He’s different,” said Septimus. “He’s not like Nik anymore. And even Jenna’s

gotten weird—acting all Princessy, like she owns the ship or something.”

Beetle chuckled. “That’s probably because she does,” he said.

“She doesn’t. It’s Milo’s ship.”

“It *was* Milo’s ship. Until he gave it to her.”

Septimus stared at Beetle. “What, the *whole* ship?”

Beetle nodded.

“But why?” asked Septimus.

“I dunno, Sep. Because he’s her father? I suppose that’s what fathers do.”

Beetle

sounded wistful. “But if you ask me, it was to win Jenna over.”

“Huh,” said Septimus, sounding remarkably like Silas.

“Yeah. It was weird, you know. A real coincidence. We bumped into Milo when we

went out to get food. He was so thrilled to see Jenna, but I could see she didn’t feel the

same way. Then, when he found out we were camping in a rundown, filthy old net loft he

insisted we stay with him instead. Nicko and Snorri really wanted to—you know how

Nicko loves boats and stuff—but Jenna refused. She said we were fine in the net loft.”

“Well, you *were*,” said Septimus, thinking that was the first sensible thing he had

heard about Jenna for a while.

Beetle pulled a face. “Actually, Sep, it was horrible. It stank of putrid

fish, and there

was a big hole in the roof, and it was soaking wet and I fell through the rotten floor and

got stuck *forever*.”

“So what happened to change Jen’s mind?” asked Septimus. And then, answering his

own question, “I suppose Milo gave Jen his ship, just so she would come and stay with

him.”

Beetle nodded. “Yep. That’s about it.”

“And now she’s going to sail home with him?”

“Well, yes. He is her father, I suppose. But look, Sep, if you want some company on

the way back, I’d be happy to come with you.”

“On a smelly dragon?”

“Yeah. Well, he is smelly, you got to admit it.”

“No, he’s not. I don’t know why everyone goes on about that, I really don’t.”

“Okay, okay. But I *would* like to come back with you, honest.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. When do you want to go?”

“As soon as Spit Fyre wakes up. This ship is really getting to me. And if Jen wants to

stay on her ship, she can. And so can Nicko and Snorri too.”

“Jenna might not want to stay,” said Beetle hopefully. “You never know. She might

really want to fly back on Spit Fyre.”

Septimus shrugged. “Whatever,” he said.

Spit Fyre slept on. By the evening Septimus had given up any hope of getting away that

day and had resigned himself to another night on the *Cerys*. He and Beetle stood leaning

over the gunnels, watching the twilight come creeping in. Everywhere pinpoints of lights

were beginning to shine as lamps were lit on the ships and the shops and eating houses on

the quayside began to open for the evening’s trade. The sounds of the day’s work were

quieting. The *thud* s and *thump* s of cargo being shifted had ceased, and the shouts of the

dockhands had dulled to a quiet chatter as they made ready to go home. Something was

on Septimus's mind.

"I promised Marcia I'd be back by midnight tonight," he said. "But I won't be. It's

the first thing I promised her as Senior Apprentice, and I've broken my promise."

"It's tough at the top," Beetle said with a grin.

"Oh, do stop it, Beetle," Septimus snapped.

"Steady on, Sep. Look, I reckon you've earned those purple stripes and then

some—okay?"

"Okay."

"Anyway, it's not midnight yet," said Beetle, bringing out his precious timepiece.

"And it won't be midnight at the Castle for ages yet."

"It makes no difference. I still won't get back in time."

"Well, tell her you've been delayed. She'll understand."

"How can I possibly do that before midnight?"

"Easy," said Beetle. "Send a pigeon."

"What?"

"Send a Trading Post pigeon. Everyone does it. They're really fast, especially if you use the express service."

"I suppose that will have to do," said Septimus. "The thing is, Marcia trusts me now.

I don't want to let her down."

"Yeah, I know. Come on, I'll show you the Pigeon Post Office."



16

THE PIGEON POST OFFICE

The Pigeon Post Office was a long, low stone building that formed the boundary

between Harbors Twelve and Thirteen. On the ground floor was the

actual Post Office

and above it were the pigeon lofts, home to hundreds of carrier pigeons.

Two large

lamps—with pigeons on the top—flanked the wide double doors that led into the office

itself. Its long white roof shone in the light of the newly lit lamps and, as he and Beetle

got closer, Septimus realized that the whiteness of the roof was because it was thick with

pigeon droppings. It did not smell great. They ducked inside and only just avoided what

was known in the Trading Post as “pigeon shoulder” (considered marginally better than

“pigeon head”).

The Post Office was quietly busy. A line of businesslike white lamps hissed softly

overhead, reminding Beetle of Ephaniah Grebe’s basement. Along the length of the office

were seven counters with signs reading SEND, RECEIVE, LATE, LOST, FOUND, SPOILED and

COMPLAINTS, all of which had one or two people waiting—apart from COMPLAINTS,

which had a long line.

Septimus and Beetle made their way to SEND. They waited patiently behind a young

sailor, who was soon done, and less patiently behind an elderly man, who spent a long

time writing his message and then argued at length over the cost. He eventually wandered

off grumbling and joined the line at COMPLAINTS.

At last they stepped forward to the counter. Wordlessly the tight-lipped clerk—a

gray and dusty man with what looked suspiciously like a bad case of pigeon

head—handed them a form and a pencil. Beetle made a request and then, very carefully,

Septimus filled in the form:

RECIPIENT: *Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard*

ADDRESS: *Top floor, the Wizard Tower, the Castle, the Small Wet Country*

across the Sea

SENDER: *Septimus Heap*

ADDRESS OF SENDER: *The Cerys, Berth 5, Harbor Twelve, The Trading Post*

MESSAGE (one letter, space or punctuation mark only in each square of grid):

DEAR MARCIA. ARRIVED SAFELY. EVERYONE HERE. ALL WELL BUT RETURN

DELAYED. SPIT FYRE VERY TIRED. WE ARE ON MILO'S SHIP. WE HAVE NOT LEFT YET

BUT WILL ASAP. LOVE FROM YOUR SENIOR APPRENTICE, SEPTIMUS XXX. PS PLEASE

TELL MRS BEETLE THAT BEETLE IS FINE

SERVICE REQUIRED (SELECT ONE ONLY):

AT OUR CONVENIENCE

EXPRESS

He circled EXPRESS and handed in the form.

The clerk checked the form and frowned. He stabbed a grumpy finger at the box that

read SENDER. Septimus had signed his name with his usual illegible flourish. "What's

that?" he asked.

"My name," replied Septimus.

The clerk sighed. "Well, that's a start, I suppose. So where are the actual letters,

then?"

"Do you want me to write it again?" asked Septimus, trying to keep his patience.

"I'll do it," snapped the clerk.

"Okay."

"So what is it?"

"What is what?"

The clerk sighed once more and said, very slowly, "Your *name*, sonny. What is it? I

need to know so that I can write it down, see?"

Septimus was not surprised that there was a long line at the COMPLAINTS counter.

"Septimus Heap," he said.

Laboriously the clerk got out a glue pot and stuck a piece of paper on top of the

offending signature. He got Septimus to spell out his name three times and made a good

deal of fuss writing it down. At last he finished and tossed the message into a box marked

Sealing and Dispatch. A general sigh of relief accompanied Septimus paying the postage

and at last leaving the counter.

"Hey, you! Septimus Heap!" a voice called out. Septimus spun around and saw the

clerk at the RECEIVE counter beckoning to him. "I got a message for you."

"Me?" Septimus went up to the counter.

The clerk at the RECEIVE counter, a former sea captain with a bushy

white beard, was

a distinct improvement on the clerk at the SEND counter. He smiled.
“You *are* Septimus

Heap, aren’t you?”

Septimus nodded, puzzled. “Yes, but I’m not expecting any messages.”

“Well, ain’t it your lucky day, then?” said the clerk, and handed Septimus
a small

envelope with his name printed on it in the distinctive Pigeon Post type.
“Sign ’ere

please,” said the clerk, and pushed a piece of paper across to Septimus.
Somewhat

self-consciously, Septimus signed his name and pushed the paper back to
the clerk, who

made no comment.

“Thank you,” said Septimus.

“You’re welcome,” said the clerk with a smile. “We’re open until
midnight if you

want to send a reply. Next please.”

Septimus and Beetle stopped under a lantern a safe distance away from
the Pigeon

Post Office. After glancing up to check that there were no pigeons
roosting above,

Septimus opened the envelope, which was stamped in red with the words
PPO NON

STANDARD MESSAGE SAFETY ENVELOPE. He drew out a scrappy
piece of paper and, as

he read, a look of bafflement spread across his face.

“What does it say?” asked Beetle.

“I don’t understand...it’s a recipe for cabbage soup.”

“Turn it over,” said Beetle. “There’s writing on the other side.”

“Oh. Oh...it’s from Aunt Zelda. But how does she know...”

“What does she say?”

““Dear Septimus, enclosed are the instructions for your SafeCharm. I
forgot to give

them to Barney Pot. Do not hesitate to use it if you need to. It will be
loyal and true. Best

love, Aunt Zelda xxx.’ Oh bother. Bother, bother, *bother*.”

“Bother *what*, Sep?” asked Beetle.

“The SafeCharm. A little kid called Barney Pot tried to give it to me, but
I wouldn’t

take it. There was no way I was going to take a so-called SafeCharm
from a stranger, not

after taking the Questing Stone by mistake from someone I thought I actually knew.”

“But it wasn’t from a stranger, it was from Aunt Zelda,” Beetle observed irritatingly.

“I know that *now*, Beetle,” Septimus snapped. “But I didn’t know that *then*. Barney

didn’t say it was from Aunt Zelda; he just said it was from a lady. Could have been anyone.”

“Oh. Well, I’m sure it doesn’t matter, Sep. I don’t see that you’ll need it.”

“Yeah, I s’pose...but Aunt Zelda obviously thought I did need it. Dunno why.”

Beetle was silent as they negotiated their way back to the *Cerys*. As they neared the

tall ship, which was now ablaze with lanterns, he said, “So what exactly are these

instructions, Sep?”

Septimus shrugged. “What does it matter? I haven’t got the SafeCharm anyway.”

Beetle—who was fascinated by Charms of all descriptions and had hoped one day to

be the Charm Specialist at the Manuscriptorium—thought it did matter. At his insistence,

Septimus unfolded another piece of paper covered in Aunt Zelda’s most careful

writing—the kind that she had used for Wolf Boy’s instructions. As Septimus read it his

expression changed to one of amazement.

“What does it say, Sep?” asked Beetle impatiently.

“Oh, crumbs...it says, ‘Septimus, use this well and it will be your loyal servant for

evermore. Instructions as follows:

1. *Unseal bottle in well-ventilated area, preferably large open space.*

2. *If unsealing outside, ensure area is sheltered from the wind.*

3. *Once jinnee is out of—’”*

“Jinnee—ohmygoodness!” gasped Beetle. “She’s gone and sent you a live

SafeCharm. I don’t *believe* it.”

Septimus was silent. He read the rest of the instructions to himself with a horrible

feeling of regret.

“A *jinnee*—I can’t believe you turned that down,” Beetle was saying. “Oh, wow, what an opportunity.”

“Well, it’s too late now,” snapped Septimus. He refolded the instructions and put them carefully into his Apprentice belt.

Beetle carried on regardless. “I’ve always thought how *brilliant* it would be to have a

jinnee at your beck and call,” he said. “And *no one* has them anymore, Sep, they are so

incredibly rare. Most of ’em have been let out and no one knows how to put ’em back in

nowadays—except other jinn, of course, and they’re not saying. Phew... fancy passing up

a chance for that.”

Septimus had had enough. He turned on Beetle. “Look, just *shut up* about it, will

you, Beetle? Okay, I didn’t take it and, okay, maybe that was stupid, but I didn’t and that

is the end of it.”

“Hey, calm down, Sep. I never said it was stupid. But look...maybe...”

“Maybe *what?*”

“Maybe you should send Aunt Zelda a message to say you never got it. She ought to

get it back from Barney as soon as she can. I mean, supposing *he* opens it?”

Septimus shrugged irritably.

“It’s important, Sep,” Beetle persisted. “If Aunt Zelda meant it for you, she would

have Awakened it by telling it a whole load of stuff about you—all about your family,

about how you look, how wonderful you are and how the jinnee would be privileged to

serve you for the rest of its days blah blah blah. I’ve seen a written copy of an Awakening

and it’s like a real legal contract, and if the other half of the contract isn’t there then the

jinnee will consider itself Released. So if this kid Barney Pot gets curious and lets the

jinnee out, there’s going to be big trouble. The jinnee will be free to cause havoc—and

you can bet it will, too. The only person who can have any hope of

controlling it is the

one who Awakened it.”

“Aunt Zelda,” said Septimus.

“Yep. You have to tell her, Sep.”

Septimus and Beetle had reached the *Cerys*. The immaculately uniformed sailor

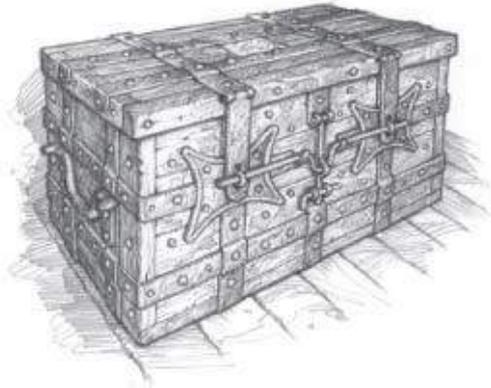
bowed as Septimus stepped onto the gangplank. The sailor bowed once more as he

stepped straight off.

“Okay.” Septimus sighed. “You’re right. We’ll go send a message. And if that clerk

tries to be funny again I shall—”

Beetle put his arm in Septimus’s. “Yeah,” he said. “I shall too.”



17

THE CHEST

While *Septimus and Beetle* were running the pigeon gauntlet once more, Jenna was

perched not unlike a pigeon herself. She was sitting, confidently swinging her feet, on the

lowest yardarm of the fore mast while she watched the loading of Milo’s long-awaited

cargo. Suspended from the arm of a gantry, a massive, battered ebony chest bound with

iron bands was swinging and twisting as it made its slow descent into the cargo hold.

Milo Banda stood at the edge of the hold, arms folded, the sun catching the gold

edging on his long red tunic. His dark curly hair fell to his shoulders and was held in

place by yet more gold—a broad headband that Milo thought gave him authority (it

certainly gave him red marks on his forehead when he took it off at night). Right then,

Milo Banda looked like a man who had succeeded and was proud of it. Far below Milo's sandaled feet, the cargo hold opened into the depths of the *Cerys*. It was lit by six torches dipped in tar, each one carried by an anxious deckhand guiding the precious chest into place. The hold itself was no more than half full. It contained the usual mixture of strange objects destined for the Palace and some things that Milo intended to sell in the Port—bales of woolen cloth, a selection of pearl necklaces from the Islands of the Shallow Seas, a stack of reindeer skins from the Lands of the Long Nights and ten crates containing assorted dishware, boots, cotton tunics and mousetraps procured at knock-down prices from one of the shadier Trading Post midnight auctions. For Sarah Heap there was a case of silver goblets, which Milo thought would be a great improvement on the rough pottery ones that she insisted on using. There were also the objects intended to liven up (as Milo put it) the Long Walk. Among these were a pair of painted statues that he had bought at a good price from some Traders from the Lands of the Singing Sands—accompanied by the usual ghastly ornate tourist jars of so-called singing sand, which had a habit of remaining silent once bottled. There was also a collection of bizarre pictures made from seashells and a family of stuffed giant sea snakes, which Milo (overly optimistically, as it turned out) envisaged hanging from the Long Walk ceiling. Milo was pleased with these acquisitions, but they were not the reason the *Cerys* had sat in her prime berth in Harbor Twelve for so many expensive weeks. The reason for that was now being very carefully lowered past Milo's watchful gaze and disappearing into the torchlit depths. Milo smiled as, guided by the deckhands, the chest settled into its

allotted place, fitting perfectly.

Milo beckoned to Jenna, still perched high on her vantage point. As practiced as

though she were a sailor herself, Jenna swung herself off the yardarm, slid down a rope

and landed lightly on the deck. Milo watched her with a smile, remembering the day her

mother had insisted on climbing the vine up the Palace wall, all the way up to the roof,

just to collect a tennis ball, and then slid down, taking most of the leaves with her. She

had landed laughing, covered in twigs and scratches—and had *still* won the game. Jenna

was so like Cerys, he thought. Every day he spent with Jenna, he remembered more about

her mother, though sometimes Milo wished he didn't—there was only so much

remembering that he could manage.

Jenna joined him, and Milo shook off his thoughts. He jumped onto the ladder and

led the way down into the hold. Jenna followed, the air becoming cold and damp as she

descended into the depths of the *Cerys* toward the flickering light of the torch flames and

the buzz of excitement that surrounded the new acquisition. It was a surprisingly long

way down; Jenna had not realized just how much of the ship lay beneath the waterline. At

last she joined Milo at the foot of the ladder and, accompanied by a deckhand holding a

torch to light their way, he ushered her over to the chest.

Jenna hung back. There was an odd atmosphere around the chest, and she wasn't

sure that she liked it very much.

Milo smiled. "You can touch it, it won't bite," he said.

Warily Jenna stepped up to the chest and touched it. The ancient wood was as cold

and hard as metal. It was dented and scratched and had a deep brown-black shine that

reflected the light from the torch flames and gave it an odd appearance of movement. The

iron straps around it were pitted with rust and notches and the chest

looked as though it

had seen some troubled times. Jenna stood on tiptoe and could just about manage to see

the top of the chest, where a large square of gold was inset into the wood. Three lines of

hieroglyphs were etched into the gold.

“Those look interesting,” said Jenna. “What do they say?”

“Oh, don’t bother about those old things,” said Milo dismissively. He turned to the

deckhands. “Leave us,” he said.

The deckhands saluted briefly and left.

Milo waited until the last man had climbed off the top of the ladder, then he turned to

Jenna with a gleam of triumph in his eyes. Jenna knew Milo well enough by now to sense

that he was building up to a speech. She suppressed a sigh.

“Well,” said Milo, “this is quite a moment. Ever since I met your mother I have

searched for this—”

“My mother?” asked Jenna, wondering why Sarah Heap had told Milo to go looking

for a battered old chest, until she remembered that Milo was talking about Queen Cerys,

whom Sarah Heap called her “first mother.”

“Yes, your dear, *dear* mother. Oh, Jenna, how like her you are. You know, your

mother used to look at me with the very same expression you have now, particularly

when I was telling her all my wonderful plans. But now my plans have at last borne fruit,

and we have that very fruit—er, chest—safe in the *Cerys*. And even better, my Princess is

here too, at the very moment of its arrival. A wonderfully good omen, would you not

say?” After his many years at sea, Milo had acquired a certain amount of seafarer’s

superstition.

Jenna, who did not think much of omens, did not reply.

Milo put his hands on the lid of the chest and smiled down at Jenna. “I think we

should open it, don’t you?”

Jenna nodded uncertainly. Although she was very curious to see what

was in the

chest, she could not shake off her feeling of unease in its presence.

Milo hardly waited for Jenna's agreement. Taking his knot spike from his belt, he

began to ease the ancient, hardened leather straps that held the iron bands together out of

their thick brass buckles. The first band sprang off with a clang and made Jenna jump; the

second fell off onto Milo's foot.

"Oof," Milo gasped. Gritting his teeth he took hold of the lid and slowly heaved it

open until it came to rest, pulling against two retaining straps.

"Look inside," he said proudly. "All this is yours."

Jenna stood on tiptoe and peered in. "Oh," she said.

"You should not be disappointed," said Milo. "This is a greater treasure than you can

possibly imagine."

Jenna doubted that was possible—she could imagine an awful lot of treasure if she

put her mind to it. Bemused, she looked into the chest—what was Milo making such a

fuss about? All she could see was bare worm-eaten wood—not even lined with silver, as

many treasure chests were—containing ranks of tiny battered and scratched lead tubes

resting in neatly stacked wooden trays. Each tube was sealed with wax and had a small

squiggle inscribed into it. They were arranged in neat squares in batches of twelve and

each set had the same squiggle. It was remarkably orderly but hardly the mass of jewels

and coins that Jenna had been expecting.

"You're not impressed?" asked Milo, sounding a little disappointed.

Jenna tried to think of something positive to say. "Well, there *are* a lot of them. And,

er, I'm sure it was really difficult to find so many."

"You have no idea quite how difficult," said Milo, gazing into the chest, enthralled.

"But it will be worth it, you wait and see." He turned to Jenna, his eyes shining. "Now

your future as Queen is secure. Oh, if only I had found it in time for your dear mother...."

Jenna looked at the chest, wondering if she was missing something.

“So is there something special underneath these, er, tube thingies?” she asked.

Milo looked a little irritated. “Are these not special enough?”

“But what *are* they? What is so amazing about them?” asked Jenna.

“I hope you never need to find out,” said Milo, closing the lid reverentially.

A feeling of annoyance welled up inside Jenna. She wished Milo wouldn’t be so

mysterious. It seemed to her that he never said anything in a straightforward way. He

offered glimpses but always held something back—kept her wondering, wanting to know

a little bit more. Talking to him felt like trying to catch shadows.

Milo busied himself securing the straps around the chest. “When we return to the

Castle, I shall take this straight to the Palace and place it in the Throne Room.”

“The *Throne Room*? But I don’t want—”

“Jenna, I insist. And I do not want you to tell *anyone* what is in this chest. This must

be our secret. No one is to know.”

“Milo, I am not keeping any secrets from Marcia,” said Jenna.

“Oh, of course we shall tell Marcia,” said Milo. “In fact, we shall need her to

accompany us to the Vaults in the Manuscriptorium, where I shall be collecting the final,

er, piece of this consignment. But I do not wish anyone on board or here in the Trading

Post to know. I am not the only person who has been searching for this—but I *am* the one

who has got it, and that is the way I intend it to stay. You understand, don’t you?”

“I understand,” said Jenna, a little reluctantly. She decided that, whatever Milo said,

she would tell Septimus as well as Marcia.

“Good. Now, let us secure the chest for its voyage home.” Milo raised his voice.

“Deckhands to the hold!”

Ten minutes later the smell of hot tar filled the air. Jenna was back on deck,

watching the doors to the hold being lowered. One by one they settled

into place, the

strips of teak on the doors lining up perfectly with those on the deck. Milo checked that

all was secure, and then he signaled to a young deckhand who was melting a small pan of

tar over a flame. The deckhand took the pot from the flame and brought it over to Milo.

Jenna watched Milo fish around in a pocket in his tunic and, a little surreptitiously,

take out a small black phial.

“Keep the pan steady, Jem,” Milo told the deckhand. “I’m going to add this to the

tar. Whatever you do, don’t breathe in.”

Concerned, the deckhand looked at Milo. “What is it?” he asked.

“Nothing you’ve ever come across,” said Milo. “Well, I hope not anyway. Wouldn’t

want our medic messing with *this*. Jenna, stand well back, please.”

Jenna stepped away. She watched Milo quickly take out the phial’s cork and tip the

contents into the tar. A small cloud of black vapor arose; Jem turned his face away and

coughed.

“Heat it to boiling,” said Milo, “then pour it on as usual and seal the hold.”

“Aye, sir,” Jem said, and returned the pot to the flame.

Milo joined Jenna.

“What was that stuff?” she asked.

“Oh, merely a little something I got from the Darke Deli on Harbor Thirteen. Just to

keep our treasure safe until the Port. I don’t want *anyone* getting in that hold,” Milo

replied.

“Oh, right,” said Jenna. She did not believe for a moment that Milo was messing

with Darke stuff, and it annoyed her that he thought she would. Silently, she stood and

watched Jem take the tar pan off the flame and very carefully walk around the edges of

the doors to the hold, pouring a thin stream of glistening black tar into the gap between

them and the deck. Soon all that marked the entrance to the hold were two inset brass

rings and a thin line of tar.

To Jenna's irritation, Milo placed his arm around her shoulders and walked her along

the deck on the opposite side from the harbor, away from the small admiring crowd that

always gathered to stare at the *Cerys*. "I know you think I am a neglectful father," he

said. "It is true, maybe I am, but *this* is what I have been looking for, *this* is why I have

been away so much. And soon, safe passage and fair winds permitting, it shall be safe in

the Palace—and so will you."

Jenna looked at Milo. "But I still don't understand. What is so special about it?"

"You will find out *When the Time Is Right*," said Milo.

Blissfully unaware that his daughter longed to yell, "Why don't you ever answer my

questions *properly*?" Milo continued, "Come, Jenna, let us go below. I think some

celebrations are in order."

Jenna fought back the urge to kick him.

While Milo ushered Jenna below, Jem was looking doubtfully at the black residue

stuck to the bottom of the pan. After some consideration, he tossed the pan over the side

of the ship. Jem had not always been a lowly deckhand. He had once been Apprenticed to

a famed Physician in the Lands of the Long Nights, until the Physician's daughter had

fallen for his crooked smile and dark curly hair, and life had become a little too

complicated for Jem's liking. Jem had left his Apprenticeship early, but he had learned

enough to know that Darke Sealants were not the kind of things you wanted on board a

ship. He stepped carefully over the thin streak of tar that delineated the line of the cargo

hatch doors and went below to the sick bay, where he wrote out a notice for the crew

informing them not to step on the cargo hatch door seals.

Deep in the cargo hold, the contents of the ancient ebony chest settled into the

darkness and Waited.



18

A PERFORMANCE

Milo's celebration took the form of a highly embarrassing banquet held on deck, in full

view of the quayside of Harbor Twelve. A gold-tasseled red awning was set up and a

long table was placed underneath, laid with all manner of finery: a white linen cloth,

silver goblets, golden cutlery, piles of fruit (not all of it real) and a forest of candles. Six

high-backed chairs with what looked suspiciously like coronets perched on the tops were

arranged around the table. Milo had placed himself at the head of the table, with Jenna on

his right. Septimus was next to Jenna, and Beetle, suitably resplendent in his Admiral's

jacket, was somewhat stranded at the far end, near to the sleeping Spit Fyre and

occasional wafts of dragon breath. On Milo's left was Snorri, with the Night Ullr lying

quietly at her feet and, next to her, Nicko.

Milo did the talking—which was just as well, as everyone else felt far too

embarrassed to talk. On the quayside below an increasing crowd was gathering,

observing the show with amused interest, rather as people will watch chimps in a zoo.

Jenna tried to catch Septimus's eye, hoping for a sympathetic glance, but Septimus sat

glowering resolutely at his plate. Jenna glanced around the table and no one would meet

her eye, not even Beetle, who appeared to have found something very interesting to look

at on the top of the nearest mast.

Jenna felt horribly uncomfortable; she was beginning to wish she had never bumped

into Milo in the dingy café on Harbor One. But at the time it had all seemed so

thrilling—being invited to Milo's ship, Nicko and Snorri's delight at being on board the

Cerys, and the wonderful feeling, so welcome after the last grueling days, of being cared

for, of sleeping in a comfortable bed and waking up knowing that she was safe. And then

there was the excitement of Milo telling her that the *Cerys* was now *her* ship, though he

had spoiled that somewhat when he later said that, naturally, it could not truly be hers

until she reached the age of twenty-five, the age at which it was possible to register

ownership. That was, thought Jenna, typical of most things that Milo offered—he always

kept something back, in his control. A wave of embarrassment suddenly swept over

Jenna. She was with three of the people she cared most about—Jenna excluded Snorri

from this list—and she was making them sit through this *performance*, all because she

had allowed herself to be carried away by Milo's attention.

The banquet progressed agonizingly slowly. Milo, as usual, regaled them with his

stock of sea stories, many of which they had heard before and which always seemed to

end in Milo triumphing at the expense of others.

And while Milo droned on, the ship's cook supplied a succession of overwrought

dishes, each one more ornate and piled ever higher, not unlike the wigs

worn by the

officials on Harbor Twelve. Each dish was accompanied by a great flourish from the

deckhands—now dressed in their evening white and blue robes—and, worst of all, a

horribly embarrassing speech from Milo, who insisted on dedicating each dish to one of

them, starting with Jenna.

By the time the dessert was due—which was to be dedicated to Beetle—the crowd of

onlookers were becoming boisterous and beginning to pass comments, none of them

particularly favorable. Wishing more than anything in the world that he could disappear

right now, Beetle's ears glowed brilliant red as he watched a deckhand emerge from the

hatch, proudly bearing the dessert aloft. It was an exceptionally odd creation—a large

plate of something black and wobbly, possibly a jellyfish, but equally possibly a fungus

plucked from the depths of the hold. Reverentially the deckhand placed the dish in the

center of the table. Everyone stared in astonishment. With a shock they all realized that it

looked like—maybe even *was*—a giant beetle boiled, peeled and laid on a bed of

seaweed.

Milo was relishing the moment. Glass in hand, accompanied by sporadic clapping

and whistles from the crowd below, he stood up to dedicate the dessert to Beetle, who

was seriously considering jumping overboard. But, as Milo opened his mouth to begin his

speech, Spit Fyre pounced.

It was a moment that Beetle would treasure for a very long time.

Spit Fyre had woken up feeling extremely hungry and was not going to be fussy

about what he ate. He thrust his snout past Beetle and sent his long green tongue snaking

down the table. Snorri—who was still on edge—screamed. Milo leaped to his feet and

ineffectively slapped his napkin on Spit Fyre's nose as the dragon sucked

up the beetle

jelly and then the napkin with a long, noisy slurp. But a beetle-shaped jelly and a scrap of

fine linen were not going to satisfy a hungry dragon. In hope of finding something else to

eat, Spit Fyre continued to suck and, with a noise like water going down the drain—but a

thousand times louder—the finery on the table began to disappear.

“*Not the goblets!*” yelled Milo, snatching away the nearest silver goblets. A gale of

laughter rose from the rapidly increasing crowd below. At the sight of his linen tablecloth

disappearing into Spit Fyre’s slobbery mouth, Milo dropped the goblets, grabbed hold of

his end of the tablecloth and pulled. Cheers and some shouts of encouragement rose from

the crowd.

No one else around the table moved a muscle. A flicker of a smile began to appear

around the corners of Septimus’s mouth as he watched his plate travel down the table

despite Milo’s best efforts. He glanced across at Nicko and, to his surprise and delight, he

saw the telltale signs of suppressed laughter. And then, with a deafening *whoosh*, the

entire contents of the table disappeared into Spit Fyre’s mouth. An explosive snort

erupted from Nicko and he fell off his chair in paroxysms of laughter. Snorri, used to a

more serious Nicko, looked on in confusion as he lay on the deck shaking. From the

quayside below, the answering sound of laughter spread like a wave.

Milo regarded the wreckage of his evening with dismay. Spit Fyre regarded the bare

table with disappointment. His stomach rattled with sharp things and he was still hungry.

Milo, not entirely sure whether the dragon drew the line at eating people, grasped Jenna’s

hand and began to back away, pulling her to her feet.

Jenna snatched her hand away. “*Don’t*,” she snapped.

Milo looked surprised and a little hurt. “Perhaps,” he said, “we should find

alternative accommodations for your dragon.”

“He’s not my dragon,” said Jenna.

“Oh? But you said—”

“I know I did. But I shouldn’t have. I am only the Navigator. He is Sep’s dragon.”

“Ah. Well, in that case you do understand that the dragon is subject to the Trading

Post quarantine regulations? Of course, while it’s on board—”

“He,” corrected Jenna.

“Well, while *he* is on board the regulations do not apply, but as soon as it —”

“He.”

“—he sets—er”—Milo glanced down to check that Spit Fyre did indeed have

feet—“foot on land it— *he*—will have to be escorted into quarantine.”

Septimus stood up. “That won’t be necessary,” he said. “Spit Fyre is leaving now.

Thank you for having us, but now that Spit Fyre is awake we have to go. Don’t we,

Beetle?”

Beetle was busy fending off Spit Fyre’s wet snout. “Get *off*, Spit Fyre. Oh...yes, we

do. But thanks, Mr. Banda. Thank you for letting us stay on your ship. I mean Jenna’s

ship. It was really...interesting.”

Milo was recovering himself. He bowed politely. “You are most welcome, scribe.”

He turned to Septimus. “But surely, Apprentice, you do not intend to fly immediately? I

have sailed the seven seas for many a long year, and I can tell you that I smell a storm in

the air.”

Septimus had heard enough about the seven seas to last him for a long time—and far

too much about Milo’s weather-predicting skills.

“We’ll fly above it,” he said, stepping over to Beetle. “Won’t we, Beetle?”

Beetle nodded somewhat uncertainly.

Milo looked puzzled. “But there is no *above* a storm,” he said.

Septimus shrugged and patted his dragon’s nose. “Spit Fyre doesn’t mind a little

storm, do you, Spit Fyre?” Spit Fyre snorted, and a line of dragon dribble

landed on

Septimus's precious purple ribbons, leaving a dark stain that would never come off.

Five minutes later Spit Fyre was perched like a massive seagull on the starboard side

of the *Cerys*, facing out to sea, and the quayside was packed with an even larger and

more excited crowd. Septimus was ensconced in the Pilot Dip behind the dragon's neck,

and Beetle was sitting farther back toward the tail, wedged behind the saddlebags. The

Navigator's seat was, however, still vacant.

Jenna stood beside Spit Fyre, her cloak wrapped tightly against the cold wind that

had begun to blow into the harbor. "Stay here tonight, Sep," she said. "Please. Spit Fyre

can sleep on deck for one more night. I don't want you and Beetle to go off into the

dark."

"We've got to go, Jen," Septimus replied. "There's no way Spit Fyre's going to sleep

tonight. He's just going to create trouble. And if he gets put in quarantine—well, I don't

even want to think about that. Anyway, we *want* to go, don't we, Beetle?"

Beetle had been watching the dark clouds scudding across the moon. He was not so

sure. Outside the harbor wall he could see the waves building, and he wondered whether

Milo was right about a storm coming. "Maybe Jenna's got a point, Sep. Maybe we should

stay tonight."

Milo chimed in. "You *must* wait until tomorrow," he said. "The crew will chain the

dragon to the main mast tonight"—Beetle, Septimus and Jenna exchanged horrified

glances—"and tomorrow," Milo carried on, "while the dragon is secure, we shall have a

grand farewell breakfast on deck to see you off in style. What do you think about that?"

Septimus knew exactly what he thought about that. "No, thank you," he said.

“*Ready, Spit Fyre!*” Spit Fyre spread his wings wide and tilted forward into the wind. The

Cerys listed dramatically to starboard, and someone on the quayside screamed.

“Careful!” yelled Milo, grabbing a handrail.

Septimus looked down at Jenna. “You coming, Navigator?” he asked.

Jenna shook her head, but there was something regretful in her expression that made

Beetle brave. “Jenna,” he said, “come with us!”

Jenna wavered. She hated seeing Septimus go without her, but she had agreed to

return in the *Cerys* with Milo. And there was Nicko too; she wanted to be with him while

he sailed home. Indecisive, she glanced at Nicko; he gave her a wry smile and put his arm

around Snorri.

“Please come with us, Jenna,” said Beetle very simply and without pleading.

“Of *course* she can’t go with you,” snapped Milo. “Her place is here, with her ship.

And with her father.”

That did it. “Apparently, it’s *not* my ship after all,” said Jenna, glowering at Milo.

“And *you* are not my *real* father. Dad is.” With that, she flung her arms around Nicko.

“I’m sorry, Nik. I’m going. Safe trip and I’ll see you back at the Castle.”

Nicko grinned and gave her a thumbs-up. “Good one, Jen,” he said. “Be careful.”

Jenna nodded. Then she reached up, grabbed hold of the Navigator spine and pulled

herself up into the Navigator’s space just behind Septimus. “Go, Sep,” she said.

“Wait!” yelled Milo. But Spit Fyre did not answer to anyone but his Pilot and

sometimes—if he was in a good mood—his Navigator. He most certainly did not answer

to anyone who proposed to put him in chains for the night.

Everything in Harbor Twelve stopped for Spit Fyre’s takeoff. Hundreds of pairs of

eyes watched the dragon lean out from the ship, raise his wings high and, on the

downward stroke, rise slowly into the air. A great downdraft of hot,

under-wing,

dragon-smelling air swept across the deck, sending Milo and his crew coughing and

retching, while the sound of applause rose from the quayside.

Spit Fyre raised his wings once more and flew higher, his outstretched wings beating

slowly and powerfully as he steadily gained height. Flying into the wind on a wide curve,

Spit Fyre wheeled across the harbor just above mast height and headed out over the

harbor wall. Briefly the clouds cleared from the moon, and a gasp of wonder came from

the quayside as the silhouette of the dragon with three small figures traveled sedately

across the white circle of the moon and headed out to sea, leaving Milo gazing after them.

Milo barked a few orders at the deckhands to clear up the decks and then disappeared

below, leaving Nicko and Snorri on deck with the cleanup in progress.

“I hope they will be safe,” Snorri whispered to Nicko.

“Me too,” said Nicko.

Nicko and Snorri watched the sky until the distant speck of the dragon disappeared

into a cloud and they could see no more. When they at last looked away, the deck was

clean, tidy and deserted. They huddled together in the cold wind that was blowing in

from the sea and watched as the lanterns of the Trading Post were extinguished for the

night and the ribbon of lights stretching out along the shore became thinner, with only the

flames of the torches burning. They listened as the sounds of voices quieted until all they

could hear was the creaking of the timbers of the boats, the splash of the waves and the

plink of the taut ropes on the wooden spars as the wind caught them.

“Tomorrow we sail,” said Nicko, staring out to sea longingly.

Snorri nodded. “Yes, Nicko. Tomorrow we shall go.”

And so they sat, well into the night, wrapped in the soft blankets that Milo kept in a

trunk on deck. They watched as, one by one, the stars disappeared below the incoming

bank of clouds. Then, curled up beside Ullr for warmth, they fell asleep. Above them, the storm clouds gathered.



19

STORM

Beetle was not sitting in the most comfortable position in which to ride a dragon. He

was behind the wings and on the downward slope toward the tail, which meant that,

because Spit Fyre used his tail to control his flight, Beetle found himself moving up and

down like a yo-yo. He was, however, tightly wedged between two very tall spines and

kept telling himself that there was no way he could fall off. He did not find himself

totally convinced.

After Spit Fyre had taken off, Beetle had twisted around and looked back past Spit

Fyre's massive tail, watching the boats in the harbors grow ever smaller, until they

looked no bigger than tiny toys. Then he had concentrated on the twinkling lights of the

Trading Post, strung like a necklace along the shore. Beetle had watched them grow ever

dimmer and, when the night finally closed in behind them and the last faint glimmer

disappeared, a feeling of dread had crept over him. He shivered and

pulled his HeatCloak

closer, but Beetle knew he was not cold—he was *scared*.

Being scared was not something that had happened to Beetle before, as far as he

could remember. He'd had moments in the Ice Tunnels, especially during his first few

trips, when he had been a bit uneasy, and he had not felt too great in the frozen forest on

the way to the House of Foryx either, but he didn't think he had ever felt the feeling of

dread that was now sitting like a fat snake curled up in the pit of his stomach.

Spit Fyre flew steadily on. Hours passed—which felt like years to Beetle—but his

fear did not subside. Beetle now realized why he felt so bad. He had ridden Spit Fyre

before with Septimus on illicit trips out to the Farmlands and once even up to Bleak

Creek, which had been extremely creepy. He had even sat exactly where he was sitting

now when they had all flown from the House of Foryx to the Trading Post, but he had

always flown low and had been able to see the land beneath. Now, in the dark and high

up over the sea, the great emptiness all around them overwhelmed him and made him feel

as though his life were hanging by a thread. It didn't help that it was becoming

increasingly windy, and when a great gust of wind suddenly caught Spit Fyre and sent

him wheeling sideways, the snake in Beetle's stomach curled up a little tighter.

Beetle decided to stop looking out at the night and focus instead on Septimus and

Jenna, but he could only see Jenna—and not much of her. She too was wrapped in a

HeatCloak, and the only clue as to who was actually inside it was an occasional long

tendrils of hair escaping in the wind. Septimus was out of sight, down in the dip of the

dragon's neck and hidden by the broad Pilot Spine. Beetle felt weirdly alone. He would

not have been surprised to suddenly find that he was the only one riding Spit Fyre.

Septimus, however, was fine. Spit Fyre was flying well, and even the gusts of wind,

which were getting stronger and more frequent, did not seem to bother the dragon. True,

Septimus wondered if he could hear distant thunder, but he told himself that it was

probably the noise of Spit Fyre's wings. Even when a sudden squall of freezing rain hit

them, Septimus was not too concerned. It was cold, and it stung when it briefly turned to

hail, but Spit Fyre flew through it. But it was the sudden *craaaaack* of lightning that

shocked him.

With the sound of a million ripping sheets, the lightning snaked out of the clouds in

front of them. For a split second, caught in the flash, Spit Fyre shone a brilliant green, his

wings transparent red with a tracery of black bones—and his riders' faces a ghastly

white.

Head up, nostrils flaring, Spit Fyre reeled back from the flash. For a terrifying

moment, Beetle felt himself slipping backward. He grabbed hold of the spine in front and

pulled himself back as Spit Fyre righted himself, put his head down and continued on.

Some of Septimus's confidence began to ebb away. He could now hear a constant

rumble of thunder, and ahead he could see flickering bands of lightning playing across

the tops of the clouds. There was no getting away from it: Milo had been right—they

were flying toward a storm.

Jenna tapped Septimus on the shoulder. "Can we go around it?" she yelled.

Septimus twisted around and looked behind, only to see a fork of lightning streak

down, narrowly missing Spit Fyre's tail. It was too late—suddenly the storm was around

them.

“I’ll take him down...fly near the water...less windy...” was all Jenna heard as the

wind snatched Septimus’s words out of his mouth.

The next thing Beetle knew, Spit Fyre was dropping like a stone. Beetle was

convinced that Spit Fyre had been struck by a lightning bolt; the snake lying in the pit of

his stomach began to tie itself in knots; he screwed his eyes shut and, as the roar of the

waves got louder and the salt spray blew into his face, he waited for the inevitable *splash*.

When it didn’t come Beetle risked opening his eyes—and wished he hadn’t. A wall of

water as high as a house was heading right for them.

Septimus had seen it too. “Up! Up, Spit Fyre!” he yelled, giving the dragon two

hefty kicks on the right. Spit Fyre didn’t need to be told—or kicked. He disliked walls of

water as much as his passengers did. He shot up just in time, and the huge wave traveled

on below, showering them with spray.

Septimus took Spit Fyre up a little higher so that the dragon was flying just out of

reach of the spray and peered down at the sea. He had never seen it like this—deep

trenches and rolling mountains of water, their tops blown off by the wind into horizontal

streaks of spume. Septimus gulped. This was serious.

“Keep going, Spit Fyre!” he yelled. “Keep going! We’ll be out of this soon.”

But they weren’t out of it soon. Septimus had never before considered how large the

storm might be. Storms were always something that passed overhead, but now he began

to wonder how many miles wide the storm might actually be, and—more important—was

it traveling with them or crossing their path?

They lurched on. The wind howled and the waves roared and crashed like marauding

armies, throwing them to and fro in the midst of their battle. Violent gusts of wind

snatched at Spit Fyre’s wings, which Septimus was beginning to realize

were somewhat

flimsy—just thin dragon skin and a lightweight tracery of bones. Every time a squall

caught Spit Fyre, they were thrown sideways or, even worse, backward—which was

much more difficult to recover from and left Beetle gasping in terror. Septimus knew that

Spit Fyre was getting tired. The dragon's neck drooped, and beneath his hands Spit

Fyre's muscles felt knotted and weary.

"On, Spit Fyre, on!" Septimus yelled over and over again, until his voice was hoarse.

They plunged forward through the wind and the driving rain, jumping at each roll of

thunder, flinching with every *craaaaack* of lightning.

It was then that Septimus thought he saw the light of a lighthouse in the distance. He

stared, just to make sure it was not another lightning flash, but the glow that lit up the

horizon was no flash—it burned steady and bright. At last Septimus felt they had a

chance. Remembering what Nicko had told him about the passage home, he changed

course and set Spit Fyre heading toward the light—into the teeth of the wind.

At the back of the dragon, Beetle registered the change of course and wondered why,

until he caught a glimpse of the light ahead. Suddenly his spirits lifted—it must be the

Double Dune Light. Warm and happy thoughts of the welcoming Port not far ahead

flooded him, and he even began to hope that maybe—if they were lucky—the Harbor and

Dock Pie Shop might still be open, and one of his cousins could be prevailed upon to give

them all a bed for the night.

As Beetle daydreamed about a warm, dry bed and a Harbor and Dock pie, Septimus

felt hopeful too, as he was sure the storm was abating. He flew Spit Fyre high once more

so that he could get a better view of where they were going.

The light shone brilliantly into the night, and Septimus smiled—it was as

he had

hoped. There were two lights close together, just as Nicko had described—now he knew

where they were. He flew steadily on until he was so close that he could even see the

peculiar earlike points at the very top of the lighthouse tower. But as he flew Spit Fyre up

a little higher before he made the course change, the storm had its last throw. From

directly above, a great *craaaack* of lightning snaked down and, this time, it scored a

hit—Spit Fyre was sent reeling. An acrid smell of burning dragon flesh enveloped them

as the dragon fell from the sky.

They were sent plummeting toward the lighthouse. And as they fell Beetle came

back to reality—he realized that the light was not housed in the ramshackle metal frame

of the Double Dune Light but was two lights atop a blackened brick tower sporting two

points that looked, Beetle thought in his terrified state, like cat ears.

As they tumbled toward the sea, Beetle saw that there were no friendly lights of the

Port awaiting them. Only blackness.



[20](#)

MIARR

M *iarr* gazed out from the Watching platform on the CattRokk Light—a

lighthouse

perched on a rock in the middle of the sea, the very top of which resembled the head of a

cat, complete with ears and two brilliant beams of light that shone from its eyes.

Miarr was on Watch—again. At his insistence, Miarr did every night Watch and

many of the day Watches too. He did not trust his co-Watcher any further than he could

throw him—and given their huge discrepancy in size, that would not be very far,

unless...a small smile flickered over Miarr's delicate mouth as he allowed himself his

favorite daydream—heaving Fat Crowe out of one of the Eyes. Now *that* would be a very

long throw indeed. How far down was it to the rocks below? Miarr knew the answer well

enough—three hundred and forty-three feet exactly.

Miarr shook his head to clear it of such beguiling thoughts. Fat Crowe would never

even make it up to the Light—there was no way he could squeeze through the tiny

opening at the top of the pole that led from the Watching platform to the Arena of Light.

Thin Crowe, on the other hand, would have no trouble. Miarr shivered at the thought of

Thin Crowe squeezing up to his precious Light like a weasel. Given the choice between

the Crowe twins—not a choice he ever wanted to make—he would choose the fat one

any day. The thin one was vicious.

Miarr pulled his close-fitting sealskin hat down so that it covered his ears and

wrapped his cloak tightly around him. It was cold at the top of the lighthouse, and the

storm made him shiver. He pressed his small, flat nose to the glass and stared out into the

storm, his big, round eyes wide open and his keen night sight piercing the dark. The wind

screamed and the rain whipped against the thick green glass of the Watching platform

windows. The two beams of Light picked out the undersides of the black

storm clouds,

which formed a continuous blanket so low that Miarr was sure the Ears of the lighthouse

must be touching them. A silent sheet of lightning passed through the clouds, and the

hairs on the back of Miarr's neck crackled with electricity. A burst of hail spattered

against the glass, and he jumped in surprise. It was the wildest storm he had seen in a

long time; he pitied anyone out there tonight.

Miarr prowled lightly around the Watching platform, checking the horizon. On a

night like this it would be all too easy for a ship to be swept too close to the lighthouse

and the danger zone. And if that happened he would have to get down to the rescue boat

and try to guide the ship to safety—no easy task on a night like this.

From the tiny sleeping cabin far below, loud catarrhal snores from Fat Crowe echoed

through the cavernous stairwell of the lighthouse. Miarr sighed heavily. He knew he

needed a helper, but why the Port Harbor Master had sent him the Crowe twins he had no

idea. Ever since his fellow Watcher, his cousin, Mirano—the very last member of his

family left, apart from him—had disappeared the night of the first visit of the new supply

boat, *Marauder*, Miarr had been forced to share his lighthouse with what he had at the

time considered to be creatures little better than apes. Since the Crowes' arrival Miarr

had—out of respect to apes—revised that opinion. He now thought of them as little better

than slugs, to which both Fat and Thin Crowe bore a remarkable resemblance.

So now, in the depths of the lighthouse in what had once been his and Mirano's cozy

little sleeping cabin, Miarr knew that Fat Crowe was occupying what had once been *his*

comfortable goose-down bunk. Miarr, who had not slept properly since Mirano's

disappearance, growled unhappily. Like all Watchers he and Mirano had

taken turns to

sleep in the same bed, spending only a few hours each day together when they sat on the

Watching platform eating their evening meal of fish before the Change of Watch. Now

Miarr slept—or tried to—on a pile of sacks in a chamber at the foot of the lighthouse. He

always barred the door, but the knowledge that a Crowe was loose in his beautiful

lighthouse meant he could never relax.

Miarr shook himself to get rid of his miserable thoughts—it was no good brooding

about the good old days when CattRokk Light was one of four Living Lights and Miarr

had more cousins, brothers and sisters than he had fingers and toes to count them on. It

was no good thinking about Mirano—he was gone forever. Miarr was not as stupid as the

Crowes thought he was; he did not believe their story that Mirano had been sick of his

company and had sneaked away on their boat for the bright lights of the Port. Miarr knew

that his cousin was, as Watchers used to say, swimming with the fishes.

Miarr crouched beside the thick, curved window, staring into the dark. Far below he

saw the waves building, growing too high for their own strength and then breaking with a

thunderous crash, sending great showers of spume high into the air, some even splattering

the Watching glass. Miarr knew that the foot of the lighthouse was now under water—he

could tell by the deep shudders and thuds that had begun reverberating up through the

granite blocks below, thuds that traveled all the way up through the pads of his

felt-booted feet to the tip of his sealskin-clad head. But at least they drowned out the

snores of Fat Crowe, and the shrieks of the wind carried away all Miarr's thoughts of his

lost cousin.

Miarr reached into the waterproof sealskin pouch that he wore slung from his belt

and brought out his supper—three small fish and a ship’s biscuit—and began to chew.

All the while, eyes wide, he Watched the sea, illuminated by the two great beams of light

that swept across the heaving mountains of water. It was, he thought, going to be an

interesting night.

Miarr had just swallowed the last of his fish—head, tail, bones and all—when he

realized just how interesting the night was going to be. Miarr usually Watched the water,

for what could there possibly be of interest in the sky? But that night the mountainous

waves blurred the boundary between water and sky, and Miarr’s wide eyes took in

everything. He was a little distracted by dislodging a fine bone wedged between his

delicate, pointy teeth when one of the beams of the Light briefly caught the shape of a

dragon in its glare. Miarr gasped in disbelief. He looked again but saw nothing. Now

Miarr was worried. It was a bad sign when Watchers began to imagine things—a sure

sign that their Watching days were numbered. And once he was gone, who would Watch

the Light? But in the next moment all Miarr’s fears disappeared. As clear as day the

dragon was back in the path of the beam and, like a giant green moth hurtling toward a

flame, it was coming straight for the Light. Miarr let out a yowl of amazement, for now

he saw not only the dragon *but its riders*.

A sudden crash of thunder directly overhead shook the lighthouse, a brilliant snake

of lightning streaked down, and Miarr saw the lightning bolt hit the dragon’s tail with a

blinding blue flash. The dragon tumbled out of control and, horrified, Miarr watched as

the dragon and its riders, outlined in an iridescent mantle of electric blue charge, hurtled

straight for the Watching platform. The Light briefly illuminated the terrified faces of the

dragon's riders, then instinct took over and Miarr threw himself to the floor, waiting for the inevitable crash as the dragon hit the glass.

But none came.

Gingerly Miarr got to his feet. The two beams of Light illuminated nothing more

than the empty rain-filled sky above and the raging waves below. The dragon and its riders were gone.



21

TAILSPIN

E ven though he had his eyes closed, Beetle knew what was happening—he could smell

burning dragon flesh. This is not a good smell when you are actually flying on the

burning dragon some five hundred feet in the air. It is not, in fact, a good smell at any

time, particularly for the dragon.

The lightning had struck Spit Fyre with an earsplitting crash, sending a bone-juddering jolt of electricity through them all. After that everything had happened

extremely fast—and yet Beetle was to remember it later in silent slow motion. He

remembered seeing the lightning streak toward them, then the jarring shock that ran

through Spit Fyre as the bolt hit and Spit Fyre's head rose high in pain. Then a lurch, a roll and a sickening free fall as the dragon dropped out of the sky, heading straight for the lighthouse. It was at that moment when, at the very top of the lighthouse, Beetle had seen the little man with the huge eyes staring out in horror, that Beetle had shut his own eyes.

They were going to crash into the lighthouse and he didn't want to see it. He just didn't.

But Septimus had no such luxury—his eyes were *wide* open. Like Beetle, he too saw

the shocked face of the little man at the top of the lighthouse; indeed, for a split second,

as Spit Fyre hurtled toward the tower, their eyes met, both wondering if this was the last

thing they would ever see. And when, at the very last minute, Septimus managed to steer

his floundering dragon away from the lighthouse, he instantly forgot about the Watcher in

the lighthouse, as all his concentration focused on keeping Spit Fyre in the air.

With each wing beat, Septimus willed Spit Fyre on. The dragon lurched past the

black rain-soaked tower, through the brilliant beam of light and into the night once more.

And then Septimus saw something—a pale crescent of sand catching the moonlight in a

brief break in the clouds.

Excited, he turned to Jenna, who was white-faced with shock, and pointed ahead.

“Land!” he yelled. “We’re going to make it, I know we are!”

Jenna couldn't hear a word Septimus said, but she saw his relieved, excited

expression and gave him a thumbs-up. She turned around to Beetle to do the same and

got a shock—Beetle had all but disappeared; all she could see was the very top of his

head. Spit Fyre's tail had drooped right down, taking Beetle with it. Jenna's feeling of

optimism evaporated. Spit Fyre's tail was injured—how much longer could he keep

flying?

Septimus urged Spit Fyre on toward the sliver of sand, which was drawing ever

closer. Spit Fyre heard Septimus and struggled onward, but his trailing, useless tail

dragged him down, until he could barely skim over the top of the turbulent sea.

The storm was passing now, taking its lightning and torrential rain to the Port, where

it would soak Simon Heap as he lay sleeping under a hedge on his way to the Castle. But

the wind was still strong and the waves were wild, and as Spit Fyre struggled through the

spray his strength began to desert him.

Septimus clasped the dragon's neck. "Spit Fyre," he whispered, "we're nearly there,

nearly there!" The dark shape of an island, outlined by the white of a long strip of sand,

rose tantalizingly near. "Just a little farther, Spit Fyre. You can do it, I know you can...."

Painfully the dragon stretched out his torn wings, somehow regained control of his

tail for a few seconds and with all three of his riders willing him on, he glided across the

top of the last few waves of an incoming tide and plunged down onto a bed of soft sand,

just missing an outcrop of rocks.

No one moved. No one spoke. They sat shocked, hardly daring to believe that there

was land beneath their feet—or rather, beneath Spit Fyre's stomach, for the dragon's legs

were splayed out in deep sand troughs where he had skidded to a halt and lay exhausted,

resting his entire weight on his wide, white belly.

The clouds parted once more and the moon shone down, showing the contours of a

small island and a gently curving sandy bay. The sand glistened white in the

moonlight—it looked wonderfully peaceful—but the sound of the waves as they

thundered onto rocks and the salt spray dusting their faces reminded them of what they

had only just escaped.

With a great, shuddering sigh, Spit Fyre laid his head onto the sand. Septimus shook

himself into action and scrambled down from his pilot seat, closely followed by Jenna

and Beetle. For a horrible moment Septimus thought Spit Fyre's neck was broken, as he

had never seen him lie like this—even in his deepest, most snore-filled sleep Spit Fyre

had a curve to his neck, but now it lay on the sand like a piece of old rope. Septimus

kneeled and placed his hand on Spit Fyre's head, which was wet with rain and salt spray.

His eyes were closed and did not flicker open at Septimus's touch as they always did.

Septimus blinked back tears; there was something about Spit Fyre that reminded him of

how the Dragon Boat had looked when Simon's Thunderflash had hit her.

"Spit Fyre, oh, Spit Fyre—are you...are you all right?" he whispered.

Spit Fyre responded with a sound that Septimus had never heard before—a kind of

half-strangled roar—which sent a spray of sand into the air. Septimus stood up, brushing

the sand from his sodden HeatCloak.

Jenna looked at him in dismay. "He—he's bad, isn't he?" she said, shivering, water

dripping from her rat-tailed hair.

"I...don't know," said Septimus.

"His tail doesn't look too good," Beetle said. "You ought to have a look."

Spit Fyre's tail was a mess. The lightning bolt had struck just before the barb, and it

had left a mangled jumble of scales, blood and bone and had very nearly severed the barb

itself. Septimus crouched down for a closer look. He didn't like what he saw. The scales

on the last third of the tail were blackened and burned, and where the lightning had hit,

Septimus could see chunks of white bone glistening in the moonlight. The sand

underneath was already dark and sticky with dragon blood. Very gently,

Septimus put his

hand on the wound. Spit Fyre gave another half-strangled roar and tried to move his tail

away.

“*Shh*, Spit Fyre,” Septimus called. “It will be all right. *Shhh*.” He took his hand away

and looked at it. His hand shone wet with blood.

“What are you going to do?” asked Beetle.

Septimus tried to remember his Physik. He remembered Marcellus telling him that

all vertebrate creatures were built to what he called “the same plan,” that all the rules of

Physik that worked for humans would also work for them. He remembered what

Marcellus had told him about burns—immediate immersion in salty water for as long as

possible. But he wasn’t sure if you should also immerse an open wound. Septimus stood,

indecisive, aware that both Jenna and Beetle were waiting for him to do something.

Spit Fyre roared once more and tried to move his tail. Septimus made a decision. Spit

Fyre was burned. He was in pain. Cold salt water would take away the pain and stop the

burning. It was also, if he remembered rightly, a good antiseptic.

“We need to put his tail in that pool,” said Septimus, pointing to a large pool set back

in the narrowly missed rocks.

“He won’t like it,” said Beetle, running his hand over his hair like he always did

when he was trying to solve a problem. He frowned. His hair was sticking up like a

chimney brush. Beetle knew he shouldn’t be thinking of things like hair right now, but he

really hoped Jenna hadn’t noticed.

Jenna had noticed Beetle’s hair. It had made her smile for just about the first time

that night, but she knew better than to say anything. “Why don’t you go and talk to Spit

Fyre, Sep,” she suggested. “Tell him what we’re going to do, and then Beetle and I can

lift his tail and put it in the pool.”

Septimus looked doubtful. “His tail is really heavy,” he said.

“And we’re really strong, aren’t we, Beetle?”

Beetle nodded, hoping his hair didn’t wobble about too much. It did wobble, but

Jenna deliberately stared at the tail.

“Okay,” agreed Septimus.

Septimus kneeled once more beside Spit Fyre’s inert head. “Spit Fyre,” he said, “we

need to stop your tail from burning. Jenna and Beetle are going to lift it and put it in some

cold water. It might sting a little, but then it will feel better. You’ll have to shuffle back a

bit, okay?”

To Septimus’s relief, Spit Fyre opened his eyes. The dragon stared glassily at him for

a few seconds, then closed them once more.

“Okay!” Septimus called back to Beetle and Jenna.

“You sure?” asked Beetle.

“Yep,” said Septimus. “Go ahead.”

Beetle took the injured part of the tail—which he knew would be by far the

heaviest—and Jenna took the barb at the end, which was still hot to the touch.

“I’ll say ‘one, two, three’ and then we’ll lift, okay?” said Beetle.

Jenna nodded.

“One, two, three and—oof! He is *heavy!*”

Staggering under the dead weight of the huge, scaly tail, Jenna and Beetle lurched

step-by-step backward toward the pool, which shone flat and still in the moonlight. The

muscles in their arms were screaming under the weight, but they dared not drop the tail

before they reached the water.

“Sep, he needs to...kind of...swivel,” Jenna said, gasping.

“Swivel?”

“Umph.”

“Left or right?”

“Um...right. No left, *left!*”

So under Septimus’s direction, Spit Fyre painfully shuffled around to the left, and his

tail obligingly traveled to the right, taking its two lurching helpers with it.

“Now back— *back!*”

Slowly and very painfully, Spit Fyre, Jenna and Beetle shuffled backward along a

narrow gap in the rocks toward the pool.

“One...more...step,” grunted Beetle.

Splash! Spit Fyre’s tail was in the rock pool. A great spray of water rose up. Spit

Fyre lifted his head and roared in pain—the water stung a lot more than Septimus had

told him it would. A loud hiss came from the pool, and steam rose as the heat burning

deep inside the dragon flesh was dissipated through the water. A colony of small octopi

marooned in the tidal pool turned red and shot for cover in a crevice of a rock, where they

spent an unhappy night white with fear, trapped by Spit Fyre’s tail.

Spit Fyre relaxed as the cold water began to soothe the burn and numb his tail senses.

Gratefully he pushed his nose into Septimus’s shoulder, and Septimus promptly fell over.

Spit Fyre opened his eyes once more and watched Septimus get up, then he laid his head

down on the sand, and Septimus saw that the natural curve in the dragon’s neck had

returned. A minute later the dragon’s snores had also returned, and for once Septimus

was glad to hear them.

With Spit Fyre asleep, Jenna, Beetle and Septimus flopped down beside the dragon.

No one said much. They looked out to sea and watched the moonlight on the waves,

which were calmer now and fell with no more than a busy rush onto the sand. In the far

distance they saw the beams of light from the strange lighthouse that had guided them to

safety, and Septimus wondered what the little man in the window was doing right then.

Jenna got up. She took her boots off and walked barefoot across the fine sand down

to the sea. Beetle followed her. Jenna stood at the edge of the waves, looking around. She

grinned as Beetle joined her.

“It’s an island,” she said.

“Oh,” replied Beetle. He assumed that Jenna had seen it from the air and he felt a

little embarrassed that he had had his eyes closed.

“I can feel it. There’s something...islandy about it. You know, I read about some

islands in one of my Hidden History classes,” said Jenna. “I wonder if this is one of them.”

“Hidden history?” asked Beetle, intrigued.

Jenna shrugged. “Queen stuff. Really boring most of the time. Gosh, the water’s

cold, my feet have gone numb. Shall we go and see what Sep’s doing?”

“Okay.” Beetle followed Jenna back to the dragon, longing to ask about “Queen

stuff” but not daring to.

Meanwhile Septimus had gone domestic. He had pulled the sodden saddlebags off

Spit Fyre and had spread the contents out on the sand. He was very impressed—and

touched—by what he found. He realized that, during the dark winter evenings by the fire,

when he had often talked about his time in the Young Army, Marcia had not only listened

to his descriptions of the night exercises, she had remembered them—right down to the

makeup of various survival backpacks. To Septimus’s amazement, Marcia had put

together the perfect Young Army Officer Cadet Hostile Territory Survival Pack, with

some rather nice added extras in the form of a self-renewing FizzBom special, a Ma

Custard bumper variety pack of sweets and a fancy WaterGnome. He could not have

done it better himself. He was eyeing the collection with approval when Beetle and Jenna

sat down beside him.

“Anyone would think Marcia had been in the Young Army,” said Septimus. “She’s

put in everything that I would have.”

“Maybe she was,” Jenna said, grinning. “She does the same kind of shouting.”

“At least she doesn’t do the same kind of shooting,” said Septimus with a grimace.

He held up a small box with a circular wire attachment on the top of it. “Look, we’ve got

a stove with that new Spell she was doing, FlickFyre. You just flick it like this—” He

demonstrated, and a yellow flame shot out of the top of the box and ran around the wire.

“Argh, hot!” Septimus quickly put the stove onto the sand and, leaving it burning, he

showed off the rest of the contents of the saddlebags. “See, there’s food to last us for *at*

least a week, plates, pots, cups, stuff to build a shelter and look—we’ve even got a

WaterGnome.” Septimus held up a small figure of a little bearded man wearing a pointed hat.

“Is that one of the rude ones?” asked Beetle.

“No way,” Septimus said with a laugh. “Can you see Marcia letting one of *those*

through the door? The water comes out of his watering can. See?” Septimus tipped the

figure and, sure enough, a small spout of fresh water came out of the WaterGnome’s tiny

watering can. Jenna picked up one of the leather cups and held it under the spout until it

was full, then drank it down in one gulp.

“Tastes good,” she said.

Using an assortment of packets labeled *WizDri*, Septimus put together what he called

a “Young Army stew, only much better.” They sat and watched the stew bubble in the pot

on the stove until the aroma made it impossible to just watch it anymore. They ate it with

Marcia’s StayFresh bread and washed it down with hot chocolate—made by Jenna with

the help of her ChocolateCharm, which she had used on some seashells.

As they sat around the flickering FlickFyre stove, silently drinking the hot chocolate,

each one of them felt surprisingly content. Septimus was remembering another time on

another beach—the first time he had ever tasted hot chocolate or ever sat

around a fire

and not had someone yelling at him. He looked back with a feeling of real fondness for

that time; it had been the very beginning of his new life—although back then, he

remembered ruefully, he had thought it was the end of the world.

Jenna felt happy. Nicko was safe. He would be sailing home soon, and all the trouble

that had begun with her taking Septimus to see the Glass in the Robing Room would be

over. It would not be her fault anymore.

Beetle felt amazing. If anyone had told him a few months ago that he would be

sitting on a deserted beach—well, deserted apart from a snoring dragon and his best

friend—in the moonlight with Princess Jenna, he would have told them to stop fooling

around and go and do something useful, like clean out the Wild Book Store. But here he

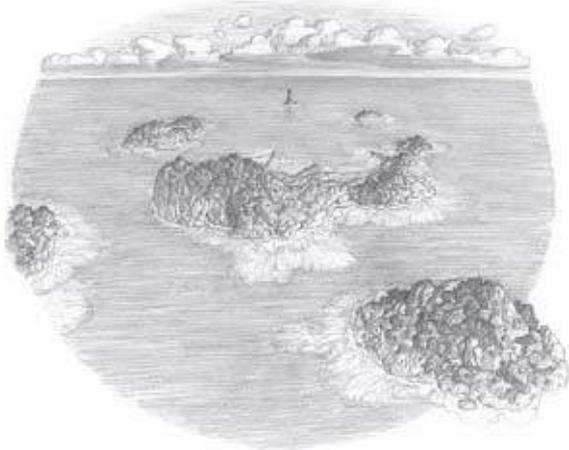
was. And right next to him was Princess Jenna. And the moon...and the gentle

splish-splash of the sea and... *eurgh*—what was *that*?

“Spit Fyre!” Septimus jumped up. “Oof, that was *bad*. I suppose his stomach is a bit

upset. I’d better go and bury it.”

Marcia had thoughtfully provided a shovel.



22

THE ISLAND

Jenna, Beetle and Septimus awoke the next morning under a makeshift shelter of

HeatCloaks that they had hastily rigged up beside Spit Fyre when fatigue

had finally set

in. They crawled out and sat on the beach, breathing in the soft, salty breeze and soaking

up the warmth of the sun, gazing at the scene before them. It was breathtakingly

beautiful.

The storm had left the air feeling washed clean, and there was not a cloud in the

brilliant blue sky. The deep azure sea sparkled with a million dancing points of light and

filled the air with the sound of its gentle ebb and flow as the tiny waves crept up the

beach and then retreated, leaving gleaming, wet sand behind. To their left stretched a

long, gentle curve of white sand with hillocks of sand dunes behind, which opened onto a

plateau of rock-strewn grass that led to a tree-covered hill. To their right were the

round-topped rocks they had so narrowly missed the night before—and Spit Fyre's rock

pool.

"Isn't it fantastic?" Jenna whispered in the small hiatus that occurs after the waves

wash onto the shore and before they swish back into the sea once more.

"Yeah..." said Beetle dreamily.

Septimus got up and went to check on Spit Fyre. The dragon was still asleep, lying in

a dip behind the rocks, sheltered from the sun. He was breathing steadily and his scales

were pleasantly warm to the touch. Septimus felt reassured, but when he walked back to

the rock pool he felt less so. The water in the pool was a dull reddish color, and through

the murky water Spit Fyre's tail did not look good. There was a definite downward kink,

and the barb was resting on the sandy bottom of the rock pool. This worried

Septimus—Spit Fyre always held the barbed end of his tail high, and the natural curve of

the tail would normally have led to the barb sticking up out of the water, not lying limp

and lifeless. With a sinking feeling, Septimus realized that the tail was

broken.

But worse than that, the part of the tail past the break—or the distal part, as

Marcellus would have called it—was not a healthy color. The scales had gone a darker

green, had lost their iridescence, and the barb, from what he could see of it below the

water, looked almost black. Flakes of dead dragon scales were floating on the surface of

the water, and when Septimus lay down on a rock and leaned over for a closer look, he

realized that the whole pool had a whiff of decay about it. Something had to be done.

Jenna and Beetle were daring each other to go for a swim when Septimus rejoined

them. He felt a little like Jillie Djinn breaking up a gaggle of giggling scribes as he

emerged from the rocks and said, “His tail looks really bad.”

Jenna was giving Beetle a push toward the sea. She stopped dead. “Bad?” she said.

“How bad?”

“You’d better come and take a look.”

The three of them stood on the edge of the rock pool and looked at the water in dismay.

“Yuck,” said Beetle.

“I know,” said Septimus. “And if it gets any more yuck he’s going to lose the end of

his tail...or worse. We’ve got to do something fast.”

“You’re the expert, Sep,” said Beetle. “Tell us what to do and we’ll do it. Won’t we,

Jenna?”

Jenna nodded, shocked at the sight of the mucky-looking water.

Septimus sat down on a rock and stared at the pool in thought. After a while he said,

“This is what I think we should do. First we collect some seaweed and find a long,

straight piece of wood. Then—and this is not going to be nice—we get into that pool and

we heave his tail out. Then I can get a proper look at it. I’m going to have to clean away

all the yucky stuff, and that won’t be nice for Spit Fyre, so you’re going to have to stay

up by his head and talk to him. I'll pack the wound with seaweed because that's got a lot

of good stuff for healing in it. If the tail's broken, which I'm pretty sure it is, we'll have

to splint it—you know, bind it up with the piece of wood so that he can't move it. And

after that we will just have to hope that it gets better and that it doesn't..." Septimus

trailed off.

"Doesn't what, Sep?" asked Beetle.

"Fall off."

Jenna gasped.

"Or worse, get what Marcellus used to call, 'the deadly stinking black slush.'"

"Deadly stinking black slush?" asked Beetle, impressed. "Wow, what's *that*?"

"Pretty much what it sounds like. It gets all—"

"Stop it," Jenna said. "I really don't want to know."

"Look, Sep," said Beetle, "you tell us what to do and we'll do it. Spit Fyre will be

fine, you'll see."

Two hours later Jenna, Beetle and Septimus sat soaked and exhausted on the rough grass

above the rocks. Below them lay a dragon with an extremely odd-looking tail. It looked,

Beetle observed, like a snake that had swallowed a boulder, with the added interest that

someone had wrapped the bump where the boulder was in a large red cloth and tied it in a

bow.

"It's not a bow," Septimus objected.

"Okay, a big knot then," said Beetle.

"I had to make sure the HeatCloaks stayed put. I don't want sand getting into it."

"Spit Fyre did really well, didn't he?" said Jenna.

"Yeah," Septimus agreed. "He's a good dragon. He does listen when he knows it's

serious."

"Do you think it still *is* serious?" asked Beetle.

Septimus shrugged. "I dunno. I did my best. It looked a lot better when I cleaned all

the grunge out, and..."

“Do you mind not mentioning *grunge*, Sep?” asked Jenna, looking queasy. She stood up and took a deep breath of air to clear her head. “You know,” she said, “if we’re going to be stuck somewhere for a few weeks, I can think of worse places to be stuck in. This is so beautiful.”

“I suppose we *are* stuck here until Spit Fyre gets better,” said Beetle. The amazing possibility of long, lazy weeks in such a beautiful place in the company of Princess Jenna—and Sep, of course—washed over him. He couldn’t quite believe it.

Jenna was restless. “Let’s go and explore a little,” she said. “We could go along the beach and see what’s on the other side of those rocks right at the end.” She pointed to a distant rocky outcrop that marked the boundary of the far left side of the bay.

Beetle jumped to his feet. “Sounds like a great idea,” he said. “Coming, Sep?” Septimus shook his head. “I’ll watch Spit Fyre. I don’t want to leave him today. You go ahead.”

Jenna and Beetle left Septimus sitting beside his dragon and set off down the beach, wandering along the line of seaweed, driftwood and shells that had been thrown up by the storm.

“So...what *do* you remember about the islands from your Hidden Histories?” Beetle picked up a large, spiky shell and held it up to see what was inside. “Like, does anyone live here?”

“I don’t know.” Jenna laughed. “I guess you’ll have to shake it and see what comes out.”

“Huh? Oh, funny. Actually, I don’t think I’d like to meet what lives in here. Big and spiky, I bet.” Beetle put the shell back on the sand, and a small crab scuttled out.

“Actually, I was thinking about that this morning before all the yucky tail

stuff,” said

Jenna, picking her way through the pile of seaweed to reach the firmer sand below. “But I

don’t know if anyone lives here. I remember now—I only read the first part of the

chapter about the islands. It was when all that stuff with the Glass happened and then we

lost Nicko...and when I got home, my tutor was annoyed that I’d missed so much and

she made me start straightaway on the next subject, so I never read the rest. Bother!”

Jenna kicked a tangle of seaweed in irritation. “All I can remember is that there are seven

islands, but they were once one island, which got flooded when the sea broke through and

filled up all the valleys. But there must be some kind of secret here, because the chapter

was called ‘The Secret of the Seven Islands.’ It is so annoying. I have to read so much

really dull stuff; it’s typical that the one thing that would have been useful is the one

thing I didn’t get to read.”

“Well, we’ll just have to find out what the secret is.” Beetle grinned.

“It’s probably something really boring,” said Jenna. “Most secrets are, once you

know them.”

“Not all,” said Beetle, following Jenna through the seaweed and down toward the

sea. “Some of the Manuscriptorium secrets are incredibly interesting. But of course, I’m

not supposed to tell—or rather, I wasn’t. Well, actually I’m still not supposed to

tell—*ever*.”

“So they’re still secrets, which means they’re still interesting. Anyway, Beetle, you

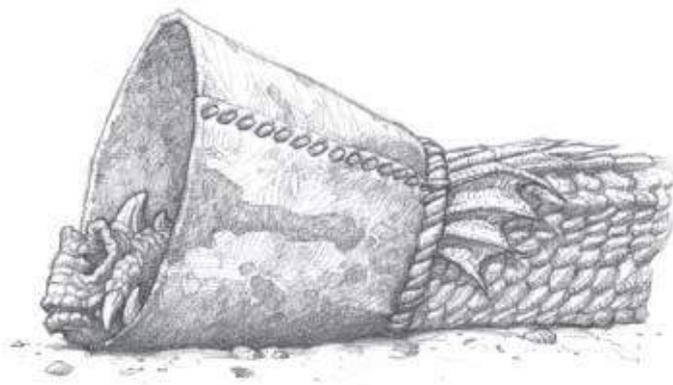
like stuff like that—you’re clever. I just get bored.” Jenna laughed. “Race you.”

Beetle raced after Jenna. “Whoo- *hoo!*” he yelled. Jenna thought he was clever—how

amazing was *that*?

Septimus was sitting on the warm rocks, leaning against Spit Fyre’s cool neck while the

dragon slept peacefully. There was something very relaxing about the breathing of a sleeping dragon, especially when in front of him lay a deserted strip of white sand and, beyond that, a calm blue sea. The only sounds Septimus could hear, now that Jenna and Beetle had disappeared over the rocks at the far end of the bay, were the slow *swish-swash* of the waves, punctuated by the occasional snuffling snore from Spit Fyre. The weariness from the last week began to catch up with Septimus. Lulled by the warmth of the sun, his eyes closed and his mind began to drift. "Septimus..." A girl's voice, light and melodic, wandered through his drowsiness. "Septimus," it called softly, "*Septimus...*" Septimus stirred, and he half opened his eyes, looked at the empty beach and allowed them to close once more. "Septimus, Septimus." "Go 'way, Jen. I'm 'sleep," he mumbled. "Septimus..." Blearily Septimus opened his eyes and then closed them again. There was no one there, he told himself. He was dreaming.... A slim girl in green stood in the sand dunes above the rocks looking at the dragon and the boy below. Then she slid down the dunes and padded silently over to a warm, flat rock, where she sat for a while and Watched Septimus as he slept, exhausted, in the sun.



Septimus slept on, and the sun reached its midday zenith. Fascinated by sleep, the girl in

green sat motionless on her rock, Watching. After some time the feeling of being

Watched began to filter through even to Septimus's deep sleep, and he stirred. Quickly

the girl got to her feet and slipped away.

The heat was slowly warming Spit Fyre's chilled dragon blood, and as his circulation

began to quicken, his tail started to throb with pain. The dragon let out a long, low groan,

and instantly Septimus was awake and on his feet.

"Spit Fyre, what is it?"

As if in reply, Spit Fyre suddenly twisted around, and before Septimus could stop

him, he had his tail in his mouth.

"No! No, Spit Fyre. Stop, stop!"

Septimus raced back to the tail. He grabbed hold of one of Spit Fyre's nose spines

and pulled as hard as he could. "Spit Fyre, let go, let go!" he yelled as he struggled to

wrench the dragon's curved fangs out of the carefully wrapped HeatCloaks, to no effect.

"Spit Fyre," Septimus said sternly, "I command you to let go of your tail. Now!"

Spit Fyre, who was not feeling quite his normal confrontational self that morning—and did not like the taste of his tail at all—let go.

Much relieved, Septimus pushed the dragon's head away. "Spit Fyre, you must not

bite your tail," he told him. He rewound the shredded HeatCloaks while the dragon

regarded his bandaging attempts with a baleful eye. He finished knotting the cloaks

together, looked up and met Spit Fyre's stare.

"Don't even think about it, Spit Fyre," he said. "You must leave your bandage alone.

Your tail will never get better if you keep biting it. Come on, move your head this way.

Come on." Septimus grabbed hold of the large spike on the top of Spit Fyre's head and

pulled him away from his tail. It took ten minutes of persuasion, pushing and shoving to

get the dragon's head to a safe distance from his tail once more.

"Good boy, Spit Fyre," said Septimus, crouching down beside him. "I know it hurts,

but it will get better soon. I promise." He fetched the WaterGnome and poured a long

stream of water into Spit Fyre's mouth. "Go to sleep now, Spit Fyre," Septimus told him

and, to his surprise, Spit Fyre obediently closed his eyes.

Septimus felt hot and sticky after his exertions with Spit Fyre's tail. The sea looked

cool and inviting and he decided to dip his toes in the water. He sat down on the edge of

Spit Fyre's rock and, unaware that Spit Fyre had opened one eye and was regarding him

with some interest, he undid his laces, pulled off his boots and thick socks and wiggled

his toes in the warm sand. Immediately Septimus felt a wonderful feeling of freedom. He

walked slowly down the gently shelving beach toward the water and across the line of

firm wet sand left by the retreating tide. He stood at the edge of the sea, watching his feet

sink a little into the sand as he waited for the next tiny wave to meet his toes. When it did,

Septimus was surprised at how cold the water felt. He waited for the next wavelet and, as

he breathed in the clean salt air, he felt, for a fleeting moment, indescribably happy.

There was a sudden flash of movement behind him.

Septimus spun around.

"No, Spit Fyre!" he yelled. The dragon had his tail firmly clamped in his jaws once

more and this time he was chewing. Septimus raced back across the sand, leaped onto the

rock and proceeded to drag the dragon away from his tail.

"You are a *bad dragon*, Spit Fyre," Septimus told him sternly as he finally managed

to pull the dragon's jaws off the now-shredded bandage. "You must *not* bite your tail. If

you do, it won't get better, and then..." Septimus was about to say, "and then we'll be

stuck here forever," but he stopped. He remembered something Aunt

Zelda used to

say—that, once spoken, things come true more easily—and he changed it lamely to, “and then you’ll be sorry.”

Spit Fyre didn’t look like he was about to be sorry for anything. He looked, thought

Septimus, extremely grumpy. Ignoring his dragon’s bad-tempered stare, Septimus bound

up what was left of the tattered HeatCloaks and stood on guard while he tried to figure

out what to do. He wished that Beetle and Jenna would come back; he could do with

some help—and some company. But there was no sign of them. He had to do something

about Spit Fyre biting his tail, and he had to do it now—he didn’t think the tail would

survive many more attacks like the last one. He maneuvered Spit Fyre’s head away from

his tail once again, and then, keeping a firm hand on Spit Fyre’s nose, he sat down and

began to think.

Septimus remembered an incident with Beetle’s mother’s cat some months earlier.

The cat—an aggressive creature that Beetle had never taken to—had also had trouble

with its tail after a vicious fight. Beetle’s mother had lovingly bound up the tail, only for

the cat to do exactly what Spit Fyre had done—over and over again. Mrs. Beetle had had

more patience than Septimus and had sat with the cat for three days and nights before

Beetle insisted she get some sleep and promised that he would watch the cat. Beetle,

however, was not as devoted as his mother. He cut out the bottom of an old toy bucket

and stuck the bucket over the cat’s head so that the creature had to wear it in the manner

of a bizarre necklace. But the bucket had solved the problem beautifully—the cat could

no longer attack the bandages around its tail, as it was unable to reach its head past the

sides of the bucket. Mrs. Beetle was horrified when she awoke and saw

her beloved cat

with a bucket on its head, but even she had to admit that Beetle's idea worked well. She

had spent the following weeks apologizing to the cat while the cat studiously ignored her.

But the tail healed, the bucket came off and the cat eventually stopped sulking. Septimus

thought that what worked for a grumpy cat was likely to work for an equally grumpy

dragon—but *where* was he going to find a giant bucket?

Septimus decided he would just have to make his own bucket. He took a leather cup

from Marcia's saddlebag, cut out the bottom and also cut along the seam that ran up the

side of it. Then, telling Spit Fyre very firmly that he was *not to move an inch or there will*

be big trouble, he laid the small, almost crescent-shaped strip of leather on the sand and

performed seven Enlarging Spells—allowing the leather to grow slowly and avoiding the

risk of collapse, which can so often happen with an over-enthusiastic Enlarging Spell.

Eventually he had a piece of leather about ten feet long and four feet wide.

Now came the hard part. Septimus approached Spit Fyre, dragging the Enlarged

sheet of leather across the sand; Spit Fyre lifted his head and eyed him suspiciously.

Septimus caught the dragon's gaze and held it, then very formally he said, "Spit Fyre, as

your Imprintor, I hereby command you to *stay still*." The dragon looked surprised but, to

Septimus's amazement, obeyed. Septimus was not sure how long the dragon's obedience

would last, so he quickly set to work. He wrapped the unwieldy piece of leather around

the dragon's head and Sealed it along the line where he had cut it a few minutes earlier.

When his Imprintor at last released him from his command and stepped back to view

his handiwork, Spit Fyre was wearing what looked like an enormous leather bucket on

his head—and an extremely irritated expression.

As Septimus stood watching Spit Fyre, he became aware that he himself was

being Watched.

“Septimus.”

He spun around. There was no one there.

“Septimus... *Septimus.*”

The hairs on the back of Septimus’s neck rose. This was the voice he had heard

calling to him when he had flown out to the Trading Post.

Septimus stood beside his dragon for protection. Keeping his back to Spit Fyre, he

turned slowly in a circle and scanned the rocks, the beach, the empty sea, the sand dunes,

the rocky scrub grass behind the dunes and the hill beyond—but he saw nothing. He

repeated the circle once more, using the old Young Army technique of detecting

movement by looking ahead but paying attention to what was at the edge of his field of

vision; and then—there it was. A figure... *two figures...*walking across the scrub grass

behind the dunes.

“Jenna! Beetle!” Septimus called out. An immense feeling of being released from

something came over him, and he ran up the dunes to meet them.

“Hey, Sep,” said Jenna as she and Beetle scrambled down the last dune toward him.

“You okay?”

“Yep.” Septimus grinned. “I am now. You two have a good time?”

“Lovely. It’s such a beautiful place here and—hey, *what’s that on Spit Fyre’s head?*”

“It’s a cat bucket,” said Beetle. “That right, Sep?”

Septimus grinned. It was so good to have Jenna and Beetle back. There was no

denying it—the island was a creepy place to be on your own.

That afternoon, Septimus made a hideout.

The feeling of being Watched had unsettled him, and Septimus felt himself slipping

into his Young Army way of thinking. The way he was beginning to see it, they were

trapped in a strange place with unknown, maybe even invisible, dangers,

and they needed

to act accordingly. This meant having somewhere safe to spend the nights.

Using the contents of Marcia's Young Army Officer Cadet Hostile Territory

Survival Pack, and with rather reluctant help from Jenna and Beetle—who liked sleeping

on the beach and didn't understand what he was bothering about—Septimus constructed

a hideout in the dunes. He chose a spot overlooking the bay but near enough to Spit Fyre

to keep an eye on him.

He and Beetle took turns digging a deep hole with sloping sides and strengthened it

with driftwood to avoid any danger of collapse. Septimus then pushed Marcia's set of

bendy telescopic poles deep into the sand around the hole and covered them with a roll of

lightweight Camouflage canvas, which he found wedged at the bottom of the bag and

which blended into the dune so well that Beetle nearly stepped on it and fell in. Septimus

then covered the top of the canvas with a thick layer of grass pulled from the dunes,

because that was how they had always done it in the Young Army, and it felt wrong not

to. He stood back to admire his handiwork. He was pleased—he had constructed a classic

Young Army hideout.

The inside of the hideout was surprisingly spacious. They lined it with more long,

coarse grass and placed the opened-up saddlebags on top as a rug. Jenna was won

over—she pronounced it “really cozy.”

From the outside, the entrance was hardly visible. It was no more than a narrow slit

that looked out through the dip between two dunes to the sea beyond. Septimus was

pretty sure that, once it too was covered with grass, no one would ever guess they were

there.

That evening they sat on the beach and cooked fish.

The Young Army Officer Cadet Hostile Territory Survival Pack did, of course,

include fishing line, hooks and dried bait, which Marcia had naturally remembered. And

as the evening tide came in over the warm sand, bringing a shoal of black and silver fish

with it, Beetle had sat on a rock and caught six in quick succession. Fish held high, he

had waded back triumphant and worked with Jenna to make a driftwood fire on the

beach.

They cooked the fish in the approved Sam Heap style, by threading them onto wet

sticks and holding them over the glowing embers. Marcia's StayFresh bread and dried

fruit provided the rest of supper, and the WaterGnome fueled so many FizzFroots that

they lost count.

They sat late into the night, chewing Banana Bears and Rhubarb Lumps, and

watched the sea as it began once again to retreat, leaving the sand shining in the

moonlight. Far across the bay they saw the long line of dark rocks that led to a lone rock

standing tall like a pillar, which Jenna named the Pinnacle. To their right, past Spit Fyre's

rocks, they saw the rocky summit of a tiny island at the end of the spit, which Jenna

declined to name, as she had an odd feeling that the island knew its own name and would

not take well to being given another. The island was, in fact, called Star Island.

But for much of the time they looked neither right nor left but gazed straight ahead to

the distant lights of the lighthouse, the lights that had drawn them to the island and saved

them. They talked about the little man at the top of the lighthouse and wondered who he

was and how he had gotten there. And then, much later, they squeezed into the hideout

and fell fast asleep.

Sometime later, in the early hours of the morning, the thin shadowy

figure of a girl in

green wandered back down the hill and stood over the hideout Listening to the sounds of sleep.

Septimus stirred. In his dreams someone was calling to him; he dreamed that he put a bucket on his head and heard no more.



[24](#)

POST

Back at the Wizard Tower, Marcia was having a very late breakfast. On her table,

beside a scattering of toast crusts and a sulky coffeepot (which had fallen out with the

toast rack over a question of precedence), lay a glass capsule—neatly snapped in half

along its red dotted line—and a flimsy strip of rolled-up paper. On the floor beside her

feet, a pigeon pecked at a pile of grain.

In the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's kitchen the stresses of the previous week were

showing. A pile of dishes lay unWashed in the sink and a variety of crumbs, much to the

pigeon's delight, were scattered on the floor. Marcia was still a little distracted—while

she had been Stirring her oatmeal that morning, the coffeepot had managed to get away

with nudging the toast rack off the table without her even noticing.

Marcia herself was not looking her best. Her green eyes had dark shadows beneath

them, her purple tunic was crumpled and her hair was not as carefully combed as it might

have been. And a late breakfast was almost unheard of—except possibly on MidWinter

Feast Day. But Marcia had not slept much the previous night. After Septimus's

self-imposed midnight deadline for his return had expired, she had spent the night staring

out of the tiny lookout window high in the roof of the Pyramid Library, hoping to see the

sight of a returning dragon. But she saw nothing until, at first light of dawn, she saw the

dark shape of the Pigeon Post pigeon flapping purposefully toward the Wizard Tower.

The pigeon had arrived bearing a message capsule. Marcia had breathed a sigh of

relief when she had opened it and seen Septimus's name (oddly sticky) on the outside of

the tiny scroll. She had unwound the flimsy piece of paper, read the message and, feeling

immensely relieved, immediately fallen asleep at her desk.

Marcia now swallowed the last of her coffee and reread the message:

DEAR MARCIA. ARRIVED SAFELY. EVERYONE HERE. ALL WELL BUT

RETURN DELAYED. SPIT FYRE VERY TIRED. WE ARE ON MILO'S SHIP.

WE HAVE NOT LEFT YET BUT WILL ASAP. LOVE FROM YOUR SENIOR

APPRENTICE, SEPTIMUS XXX. PS PLEASE TELL MRS BEETLE THAT

BEETLE IS FINE

It was easy to read—each letter was placed neatly in a square on a grid. Perhaps, thought

Marcia with a wry smile, she ought to get Septimus to write like that in the future. She

fished her pen out of her pocket to write the reply, and the edge of her sleeves brushed

the remaining toast crusts off the table. Irritably Marcia yelled for the dustpan and brush

to come and Sweep. As the dustpan and brush whooshed in, Marcia carefully filled out

the reply grid on the back of the message:

SEPTIMUS: RECEIVED NOTE. SAFE VOYAGE. WILL MEET YOU AT PORT

ON RETURN OF CERYS. MARCIA X

Marcia rolled up the piece of paper and replaced it in the capsule. She twisted the two

halves of glass together and held them in place until the glass had ReSealed.

Ignoring the clatter around her feet as the brush swept a panicking toast rack into the

dustpan and refused to let it out again, Marcia scooped up the pigeon and reattached the

capsule to the tag on its leg. Clutching the pigeon—which pecked happily at a few stray

toast crumbs on the sleeve of her tunic—she walked over to the tiny kitchen window and

opened it.

Marcia plunked the pigeon outside on the window ledge. The bird shook itself to

settle its ruffled feathers and then, with a clattering of its wings, it rose into the air and

flapped off toward the higgledy-piggledy roofs of the Ramblings. Oblivious to the sound

of the dustpan emptying its contents down the kitchen rubbish chute and the victory

dance of the coffeepot among the dirty plates, Marcia watched the pigeon as it headed

over the bright patchwork of rooftop gardens and out across the river, until she finally

lost sight of it over the trees on the opposite bank.

There was, however, one more message to be dealt with.

The hands of the kitchen clock (a frying pan that Alther had converted and that

Marcia did not have the heart to throw out) were just coming up to a quarter to twelve,

and Marcia knew she had to hurry. She strode into the sitting room and from the wide,

semicircular shelf above the fireplace she took the stiff Palace card that was propped up

against a candle. Marcia did not like messages from the Palace, as they were generally

from Sarah Heap with some picky inquiry about Septimus. However this message, which

had arrived very early that morning, was not from Sarah but was equally
—if not

more—irritating. It was from Aunt Zelda, written in an impossible-to-
ignore thick black

ink, and it read:

Marcia,

*I must see you as a matter of urgency. I shall come to the Wizard Tower
at*

midday today.

Zelda Heap

Keeper

Marcia glanced once more at the message and felt the usual flicker of
irritation that

accompanied anything to do with Aunt Zelda. She frowned. She had an
important

appointment at the Manuscriptorium for three minutes past midday. It
went against all her

principles to be early for an appointment with Jillie Djinn, but this time it
was worth

it—if she hurried, she could just get to the Manuscriptorium before
Zelda came trundling

up Wizard Way. Right now she could do without a white witch burbling
witchy nonsense

at her—in fact, she could *always* do without a white witch burbling
witchy nonsense at

her.

Marcia threw her new summer cloak of fine wool trimmed with silk over
her

shoulders and rushed out of her rooms, taking the large purple door by
surprise. As she

hurried across the landing to the silver spiral stairs, the door closed very
carefully—Marcia did not like doors that banged. The spiral stairs
stopped dead and

politely waited for her to step on. Farther down the stairs, a series of
Ordinary Wizards all

had their journeys suddenly halted. They tapped their feet impatiently
while far above, on

the twentieth floor, their ExtraOrdinary Wizard stepped onto the stairs.

“Fast!” Marcia instructed the stairs, and then, at the thought of bumping
into Aunt

Zelda, “Emergency!” The stairs whizzed into action, spinning around at
top speed, and

the waiting Wizards below were pitched forward. Two of the Wizards who did not have

time to grab on to the central handrail were unceremoniously flung off at the next

landing. The rest had to go all the way up to the top of the Tower and come back down

again once Marcia had alighted at the Great Hall. Three complaint forms were signed and

handed in to the duty Wizard, who added them to a stack of similar forms relating to the

ExtraOrdinary Wizard's use of the stairs.

Marcia hurried across the Wizard Tower courtyard, relieved that there was no sign of

Aunt Zelda, who was always easy to spot in her billowing patchwork tent. As she strode

into the shadows of the Great Arch, the *tip-tap* of her pointy purple python shoes echoing

off the lapis-lazuli walls, she glanced down at her timepiece—and cannoned into

something soft and suspiciously billowy and patchworky.

“*Oof!*” gasped Aunt Zelda. “*Do* try and look where you are going, Marcia.”

Marcia groaned. “You’re early,” she said.

The tinny chimes of the Draper’s Yard clock began to sound over the rooftops.

“I think you’ll find that I’m exactly on time, Marcia,” said Aunt Zelda as the clock

chimed twelve times. “You did get my message, I hope?”

“Yes, Zelda, I did. However, what with the disgraceful state of the Message Rat

Service and the consequent length of time it takes mere Wizards to get messages across

the Marshes, I was unfortunately unable to reply that I had a previous engagement.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I bumped into you then,” said Aunt Zelda.

“Is it? Well, I’m terribly sorry, Zelda. I would *love* to have a little chat, but I simply

must rush.” Marcia set off, but Zelda, who could be quick on her feet when she wanted to

be, jumped in front of her and barred Marcia’s way out of the Arch.

“Not so fast, Marcia,” said Aunt Zelda. “I think you will want to hear this. It

concerns Septimus.”

Marcia sighed. What didn't? But she stopped and waited to hear what Aunt Zelda had to say.

Aunt Zelda pulled Marcia into the sunlight of Wizard Way. She knew how voices under the Great Arch carried across the Wizard Tower courtyard, and she did not want any nosy Wizard to hear—and *all* Wizards were nosy, in Aunt Zelda's opinion.

“There's something going on,” whispered Aunt Zelda, keeping a restraining hand on Marcia's arm.

Marcia adopted a bemused expression. “There usually is, Zelda,” she observed.

“Don't try and be clever, Marcia. I mean with Septimus.”

“Well, yes, obviously there is. He has flown all the way to the Trading Post on his own. That is quite a big something.”

“And he is not back?”

Marcia did not see what business it was of Aunt Zelda's where Septimus was, and

she was sorely tempted to say that he *was* back, but mindful of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard

Code, Section 1, clause iiiia (“An ExtraOrdinary Wizard will never knowingly promulgate

a falsehood, even to a witch”), she replied, rather shortly, “No.”

Aunt Zelda leaned toward Marcia in a conspiratorial way. Marcia took a step back.

Aunt Zelda smelled strongly of cabbages, woodsmoke and marsh mud. “I Saw

Septimus,” she whispered.

“You *saw* him? Where?”

“I don't know *where*. That's the trouble. But I Saw him.”

“Oh, *that* old Saw.”

“There's no need to be so sniffy about Sight, Marcia. Sight happens. And it happens

to work. Now listen to me—before he left, I Saw a terrible thing. So I gave Barney Pot—”

“Barney Pot!” exclaimed Marcia. “Whatever has *Barney Pot* to do with all this?”

“If you would stop interrupting, you might just find out,” said Aunt Zelda sniffily.

She turned around as if looking for something. “Oh, there you are, Barney dear. Now

don’t be shy. Tell the ExtraOrdinary Wizard what happened.”

Barney Pot emerged from behind Aunt Zelda’s voluminous dress. He was pink with

embarrassment. Aunt Zelda pushed him forward. “Go on, dear, tell Marcia what

happened. She won’t bite.”

Barney was not convinced. “Um...I...er,” was all he could manage.

Marcia sighed impatiently. She was very nearly late, and the last thing she needed

just then was to have to listen to a stammering Barney Pot. “I’m sorry, Zelda. I am sure

~~apprentice~~

~~apprentice~~

Barney has a fascinating story to tell, but I really *must go*.” Marcia shook off Aunt

Zelda’s restraining hand.

“Marcia, *wait*. I asked Barney to give Septimus my live SafeCharm.”

This stopped Marcia in her tracks. “Heavens above, Zelda! A *live* SafeCharm? You

mean—a *jinnee*?”

“Yes, Marcia. That is what I said.”

“Goodness me. I really don’t know what to say.” Marcia looked stunned. “I had no

idea you had such a thing.”

“Betty Crackle got it. I daren’t think how. But the thing is, Septimus wouldn’t take it.

And yesterday I got a letter from Barney.” Aunt Zelda rummaged through her pockets

and drew out a crumpled piece of paper that Marcia thought smelled suspiciously of

dragon poop. She thrust it into Marcia’s unwilling hand.

Holding the note at arm’s length (not just because she could not stand the smell of

dragon poop—Marcia did not want Zelda to realize she needed spectacles), Marcia read:

Dear miss Zelda,

i hope this gets to yu i am very very sory but the

apprintice wood not take the safe charm yu gave me and then a scribe

took it

and i want you to no this becus i do not want too be a lizzard

From Barney Pot.

PS plees tell me if I can help becus I wood like too

“Lizzard?” asked Marcia, looking at Barney, puzzled.

“I don’t want to be one,” whispered Barney.

“Well, Barney, who does?” observed Marcia. She gave the note back to Zelda. “I

don’t know what you are making such a fuss about, Zelda. Thank goodness Septimus

didn’t take it, and after all that trouble with the Questing Stone I wouldn’t expect him to.

It’s a good thing the scribe *did* take it for SafeKeeping—at least someone had a sense of

responsibility. Frankly, Zelda, it’s not fair giving a live SafeCharm to someone so young,

not fair at all. I will most definitely *not* allow Septimus to have a jinnee. We have enough

trouble with that wretched dragon of his without some pesky Entity hanging around too.

Now I really *must* leave. I have an important appointment at the Manuscriptorium.” With

that Marcia strode off down Wizard Way.

“*Well!*” Aunt Zelda exclaimed to a group of onlookers who were rather thrilled to

have seen their ExtraOrdinary Wizard living up to her argumentative reputation and were

looking forward to regaling their friends with the story.

Aunt Zelda impatiently pushed her way through the small crowd. And as she

emerged with Barney Pot hanging on to her dress like a little limpet, Barney squealed,

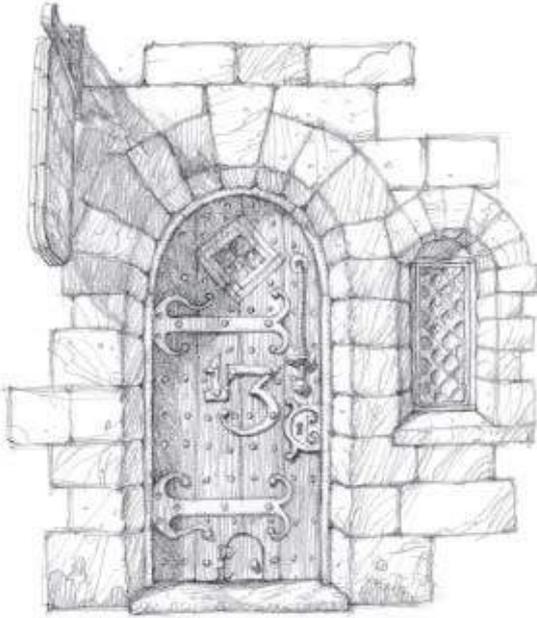
“There he is! The scribe! The scribe who took the SafeCharm!”

Halfway down Wizard Way, a disheveled, gangly boy in a grubby scribe’s uniform

saw a large patchwork tent emerge from a small crowd. He turned and ran.

“Merrin!” yelled Aunt Zelda in a voice that rang down Wizard Way. “Merrin

Meredith, I want a word with you!”



[25](#)

WIZARD WAYS

A accompanied by an assertive ping and the click of a counter turning to thirteen, Marcia

pushed open the Manuscriptorium door and walked into the front office. The front office

was empty and had a neglected air to it. It made Marcia realize how much Beetle, as

Front Office Clerk, had actually done. The place had always looked clean and well

organized, and even though the window was piled high with books and papers (and the

occasional sausage sandwich), it had a tended look to it, as though someone actually cared.

Marcia marched up to the desk—which was strewn with papers, crumbs and candy

wrappers—and rapped on it sharply. She inspected her knuckles with distaste; they were

sticky and smelled of licorice. Marcia didn't like licorice.

“Shop!” she yelled impatiently. “*Shop!*”

The door in the wood-and-glass screen that divided the Manuscriptorium itself from

the front office burst open and none other than the Chief Hermetic Scribe, Miss Jillie

Djinn herself, marched out, her dark blue silk robes rustling with indignation.

“This is a place of study and concentration, Madam Marcia,” she said crossly.

“Please respect that. Have you come to pay your bill?”

“Bill?” Marcia bristled. “What *bill*?”

“Invoice number 0000003542678b is still outstanding. For the window.”

Marcia sniffed. “I believe we are in dispute about that.”

“*You* may be in dispute, but *I* am not,” said Jillie Djinn. “There is nothing to dispute.”

“What *ever*,” said Marcia, catching a word and intonation that Septimus had recently

begun using. “Now, I have an appointment for the Vaults.”

Marcia waited, tapping her feet impatiently. Jillie Djinn sighed. She looked around

for the daybook and finally extracted it from under the pile of papers on the desk. She

turned the thick cream pages with great deliberation.

“Now, let me see...ah yes, well, you have missed that appointment by two minutes

and”—the Chief Hermetic Scribe consulted her timepiece that hung from her rotund

waist—“fifty-two seconds.”

An exasperated noise escaped Marcia.

Jillie Djinn ignored it. “However, I can give you an appointment in seventeen days’

time at...let me see...three-thirty-one *precisely*,” she said.

“Now,” snapped Marcia.

“Not possible,” retorted Jillie Djinn.

“If Beetle were here—”

“Mr. Beetle has left our employment,” Jillie Djinn said frostily.

“Where’s your new clerk?” asked Marcia.

Jillie Djinn looked uncomfortable. Merrin had not shown up for the second day

running. Even she was beginning to doubt the wisdom of her latest appointment. “He is

um...engaged elsewhere.”

“Indeed? *What* a surprise. Well, as you are so *short staffed* it seems I shall have to go

down to the Vaults unaccompanied.”

“No. That is not possible.” The Chief Hermetic Scribe folded her arms and stared up

at the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, daring her to disagree.

Marcia met her dare. “Miss Djinn, as you well know, I have the right to inspect the

Vaults at any time, and it is only as a matter of courtesy that I make an appointment.

However, courtesy seems sadly lacking here. I intend to go to the Vaults *right now.*”

“But you went there only last week,” Jillie Djinn protested.

“How true. And I intend to do it every week, every day and every hour that I

consider it to be necessary. Stand aside.”

With that Marcia swept by and threw open the door in the thin partition that led into

the Manuscriptorium. Twenty-one scribes looked up. Marcia stopped, thought for a

moment, then threw a large gold coin—a double crown—on the front office desk. “*That*

should fix your window, Miss Djinn. Get a decent haircut with the change.”

The scribes exchanged glances and suppressed smiles. Marcia strode through the

lines of tall desks, well aware that twenty-one pairs of eyes were following her every

move. She pushed open the secret door in the bookshelves and disappeared into the

passageway that led to the Vaults. The door closed behind her, and Partridge said,

“*Meooooow!*”

To Partridge’s delight the newly appointed Inspection Clerk, Romilly Badger,

giggled.

Down in the Vaults, Marcia discovered two things, one pleasant, the other much less so.

The pleasant surprise was that Tertius Fume, the rude and overbearing Ghost of the

Vaults, was not at his post. For once Marcia was able to go into the Vaults without being

harassed about passwords. Marcia enjoyed being alone in the Vaults. She lit the lamps,

left one on the table by the entrance to guide her back and took the other deep into the

musty vaulted chambers that ran under Wizard Way. As a matter of courtesy, a scribe

was normally sent to the Vaults with the ExtraOrdinary Wizard to fetch whatever she

wanted, but today, as Marcia had noticed, courtesy was in short supply at the

Manuscriptorium. However, like all ExtraOrdinary Wizards, Marcia had a copy of the

Vault Plan, and she was quite content finding her way through the maze of boxes, trunks

and metal storage tubes, all neatly stacked and labeled over thousands of years.

The Vaults contained the archives of the Castle, and the Wizard Tower had nothing

to rival them. This had always been a matter for smugness among Chief Hermetic Scribes

but also a matter of annoyance, as ExtraOrdinary Wizards did indeed have a right of entry

to the Vaults at any time—and on some of the ancient maps (secreted in the Chief

Hermetic Scribe's upstairs office), the Vaults were actually shown as belonging to the

Wizard Tower.

Marcia found what she was looking for—the ebony box containing the *Live Plan of*

What Lies Beneath. There had recently been some trouble with ice hatches becoming

UnSealed, and Marcia had been keeping an eye on things. In the light of the lamp she cut

the wax seal, drew out the huge sheet of paper and carefully unrolled the Plan. The Plan

showed all the Ice Tunnel Sealed hatches—including tunnels that were not shown on the

basic map given to the Inspection Clerk. Marcia stared at the Plan, not quite able to

believe what she was seeing—the major tunnel out of the Castle was UnSealed *at both*

ends.

Minutes later the secret door in the bookshelves banged open, and Marcia burst into

the Manuscriptorium. All the scribes looked up. Pens poised, ink dripping unheeded onto

their work, they watched the ExtraOrdinary Wizard speed between the desks and

disappear into the narrow, seven-cornered passageway that led to the Hermetic Chamber.

A murmur of excitement spread through the room—what would their Chief Hermetic

Scribe have to say about *that*? No one, not even the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, entered the

Hermetic Chamber without permission. The scribes waited for the inevitable explosion.

To their amazement it did not come. Instead Jillie Djinn appeared at the entrance of

the passageway looking a little flustered and said, “Miss Badger, would you come into

the Chamber, please?”

With the accompaniment of sympathetic glances, Romilly Badger slipped down from

her seat and followed Jillie Djinn into the passageway.

“Ah, Miss Badger,” said Marcia as Romilly entered the Hermetic Chamber in the

wake of Jillie Djinn.

The Chamber was a small, round, whitewashed room simply furnished with an

ancient-looking glass propped against the wall and a bare table in the middle. Jillie Djinn

took refuge behind the table while Marcia paced like a caged panther—one of the

dangerous purple ones.

“Yes, Madam Overstrand?” said Romilly, convinced that she was about to follow in

her predecessor’s footsteps and be summarily dismissed.

“Miss Badger, Miss Djinn informs me that the Keye to Seal the Ice Tunnel hatches is

not at present available. In other words, it is *lost*. Is that correct?”

“I, er...” Romilly was not sure what to say. All she knew was that she had only been

Inspection Clerk for four days, and she had yet to set foot in the Ice Tunnels due to what

her Chief Hermetic Scribe called “a technical difficulty.”

“Miss Badger, have you actually *seen* the Keye since you took up your appointment?” asked Marcia.

“No, Madam Overstrand, I haven’t.”

“Does this not strike you as odd?”

“Well, I...” Romilly caught sight of Jillie Djinn’s gimlet glare and

faltered.

“Miss Badger,” said Marcia, “this is a matter of extreme urgency, and I would appreciate any information at all, however insignificant you may think it is.”

Romilly took a deep breath. This was it. In half an hour she would be out on the street, clutching her Manuscriptorium pen and looking for another job, but she had to

answer truthfully. “It’s the new scribe—the pimply one who some people say is called

Merrin Meredith, although *he* says he’s Daniel Hunter. Well, the day after Beetle

left—the day I got appointed Inspection Clerk—I went to have a look at the Keye

Safe—that’s the box where the Keye is kept when we’re not in the tunnels—and *he* was

there. When he saw me he shoved something in his pocket and scuttled away. I told Miss

Djinn, but she said it was fine. So I supposed it was, even though I thought he looked

really guilty....” Romilly faltered again. She knew she had done an unforgivable thing in

the eyes of Jillie Djinn.

Jillie Djinn glared at Romilly. “If you are implying that Mr. Hunter took the Keye, I

can assure you that that is not possible,” she snapped. “There is a Lock on the Keye Safe

that only a Chief Hermetic Scribe can UnDo.”

“Except...” said Romilly.

“Yes, Miss Badger?” said Marcia.

“I think that Mr.... er, Hunter, might well know the UnDo.”

“Nonsense!” said Jillie Djinn.

“I think the Ghost of the Vaults might have told him,” said Romilly tentatively.

“Don’t be *ridiculous!*” spluttered Jillie Djinn.

Romilly did not like being called ridiculous. “Well, actually, Miss Djinn, I think the

Ghost of the Vaults *did* tell him. I heard Mr. Hunter boasting that he and, er...”

“Tertius Fume,” Marcia supplied.

“Yes, that’s it. He and Tertius Fume are like *that.*” Romilly intertwined

her two

index fingers. “He said that the ghost had told him all the arcane codes. Foxy—I mean,

Mr. Fox—didn’t believe him. He’s in charge of the Rare Charm Cupboards, so he asked

Mr. Hunter what the UnLock was, and Mr. Hunter knew it. Mr. Fox was furious, and he

told Miss Djinn.”

“And what, pray, did Miss Djinn say?” asked Marcia, sidelining Jillie Djinn.

“I believe Miss Djinn told Mr. Fox to change the Lock,” Romilly replied. “Mr.

Hunter spent the rest of the day telling us that if we needed to know anything we should

ask *him* because he knows even more than the Chief Hermetic Scribe.”

Jillie Djinn made a noise of which an angry camel would not have been ashamed.

Marcia was more lucid. “Thank you very much, Miss Badger,” she said.

“I

appreciate your honesty. I realize this may have put you in a difficult position here, but I

trust you will not have any trouble.” Marcia glared at Jillie Djinn. “However, if you do, there is always a place for you at the Wizard Tower. Good day to you, Miss Djinn. I have urgent matters to attend to.” Marcia swept out of the Manuscriptorium and hurried up Wizard Way. As she rushed through the Great Arch, a bulky figure stepped in front of her. “Zelda, for heaven’s sake get out of—” Marcia stopped, suddenly realizing that it was not Zelda Heap standing in the shadows of the Arch. Swathed in a multicolored blanket stood Zelda Heap’s great-nephew Simon Heap.



26

WITCHY WAYS

Merrin Meredith had made the mistake of hiding in the doorway of Larry’s Dead

Languages. Larry didn’t like loiterers and was out the door like a spider that has felt the

twitch of a tasty fly in its web. He was nonplussed at finding a Manuscriptorium scribe in his doorway.

“You come for a translation?” he growled.

“Uh?” squeaked Merrin, wheeling around.

Larry was a beefy, red-headed man with a wild look in his eye brought on by

studying too many violent dead-language texts. “Translation?” he repeated. “Or what?”

In his jumpy state Merrin took this as a threat. He began to back out of

the doorway.

“*There he is!*” Barney’s high voice squealed in excitement. “He’s at Mr. Larry’s!”

Merrin briefly considered making a dash for it into Larry’s shop, but Larry was

pretty much blocking the entire doorway, so he scooted out into the wilds of Wizard Way

and took his chances.

A few seconds later Barney Pot was clinging to Merrin’s robes like a little terrier.

Merrin struggled to pry Barney off, but Barney hung on even tighter, until a large

rottweiler in patchwork bustled up and grabbed him. Merrin said a very rude word.

“Merrin Meredith, *not* in front of little children!”

Merrin scowled.

Aunt Zelda looked Merrin in the eye, something she knew he did not like. He looked

away. “Now, Merrin,” she said sternly, “I don’t want any lies from you. I *know* what

you’ve done.”

“I haven’t done anything,” muttered Merrin, looking anywhere but at Aunt Zelda.

“What are you fish faces staring at?” he yelled. “Go *away!*” This he addressed to a

gathering group of onlookers, most of whom had followed Aunt Zelda down Wizard Way

after her argument with Marcia. They took no notice whatsoever; they were having a

good day out and were not about to let Merrin spoil it. One or two of them sat down on a

nearby bench to watch in comfort.

“Now listen to me, Merrin Meredith—”

“Not my name,” Merrin muttered sullenly.

“Of course it’s your name.”

“*Not.*”

“Well, whatever you call yourself, you listen to me. There are two things you are

going to do before I let you go—”

Merrin perked up. So the old witch was going to let him go, was she? His fear of

being taken back to that smelly old island in the middle of the Marshes

and being forced

to eat cabbage sandwiches for the rest of his life began to subside. “What *things?*” he

demanded sulkily.

“First, you will apologize to Barney for what you did to him.”

“Didn’t do anything to him.” Merrin looked at his feet.

“Oh, do stop playing games, Merrin. You know you did. You mugged him, for

heaven’s sake. And you took his—or rather my—SafeCharm.”

“Some SafeCharm,” he muttered.

“So you admit it. Now apologize.”

The crowd was growing larger, and all Merrin wanted to do was to get out of there.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Properly,” Aunt Zelda demanded.

“Huh?”

“I suggest: ‘Barney, I am very sorry that I did such a horrible thing, and I hope you

will forgive me.’”

Very reluctantly Merrin repeated Aunt Zelda’s words.

“That’s all right, Merrin,” said Barney happily. “I forgive you.”

“So, can I go now?” asked Merrin petulantly.

“I said *two* things, Merrin Meredith.” Aunt Zelda turned to the onlookers. “If you

will excuse me, good people, I would like to have a confidential word with this young

man. Perhaps you would allow us a few moments?”

The onlookers looked disappointed.

Merrin rallied. “Important Manuscriptorium business,” he told them.

“Top secret and

all that. Good- *bye.*”

Reluctantly the onlookers drifted away.

Aunt Zelda shook her head in exasperation—that boy had nerve. Before Merrin

could make a break for it, Aunt Zelda put a hefty boot on the hem of his trailing robes.

“*What?*” demanded Merrin.

Aunt Zelda lowered her voice. “Now give me the bottle back.”

Merrin looked at his boots once more.

“Give it to me, Merrin.”

Very reluctantly Merrin pulled the little gold bottle from his pocket and handed it

over. Aunt Zelda inspected it and saw with dismay that the seal had been broken. “You

opened it,” she said angrily.

For once Merrin looked guilty. “I thought it was scent,” he said. “But it was horrible.

I could have *died*.”

“True,” Aunt Zelda agreed, turning the empty—and much lighter—little gold bottle

over and over in her hand. “Now, Merrin. This is important, and I do not want any lies,

understand?”

Sulkily Merrin nodded.

“Did you tell the jinnee you were Septimus Heap?”

“Yeah, ’course I did. That *is* my name.”

Aunt Zelda sighed. This was bad. “It is not your *real* name, Merrin,” she said

patiently. “It is not the name your mother gave you.”

“It was the name I was called for ten years,” he said. “I’ve had it longer than *he* has.”

Despite her anger with him, Aunt Zelda had some sympathy for Merrin. What he

said was true, he *had* been called Septimus Heap for the first ten years of his life. Aunt

Zelda knew that Merrin had had a rough time, but it didn’t give him license to terrorize

little children and steal from them.

“That’s enough of that, Merrin,” she said sternly. “Now, I want you to tell me what

you said when the jinnee asked you, ‘What Do You Will, Oh Master?’”

“Yeah, well...”

“Well what?” Aunt Zelda tried not to imagine the kind of things that Merrin might

have asked the jinnee to do.

“I told it to go away.”

Aunt Zelda felt a surge of relief. “You did?”

“Yeah. It called me stupid, so I told it to go away.”

“And did it?”

“Yeah. Then it locked me in, and I only just got out. It was *horrible*.”

“Serves you right,” Aunt Zelda said briskly. “Now, one last thing and then you can

go.”

“What *now*?”

“What does the jinnee look like?”

“Like a banana.” Merrin laughed. “Like a *stupid giant banana!*” With that, he pulled

free of Aunt Zelda and raced toward the Manuscriptorium.

Aunt Zelda let him go. “Well, I think that narrows the field,” she muttered. She took

hold of Barney Pot’s hand. “Barney,” she said, “would you like to help me look for a

stupid giant banana?”

Barney grinned. “Ooh, yes *please*,” he said.

Back at the Great Arch, Marcia was as near to speechless as she ever got.

“Simon Heap,” she said icily. “Get out of here at *once* before I—”

“Marcia, *please* listen,” said Simon. “This is important.”

Whether it was because of the shock of the UnSealed Ice Tunnels and the lost Key

or a kind of desperate determination in Simon’s eyes, Marcia said, “Very well. Tell me

and *then* get out of here.”

Simon hesitated. He desperately wanted to ask Marcia to give him back his Tracker

Ball, Sleuth, so that he could send it after Lucy, but now that he was actually here, he

knew that was an impossibility. If he wanted Marcia to listen to him he had to forget

Sleuth.

“I heard something in the Port that I think you should know about,” he began.

“Well?” Marcia tapped her foot impatiently.

“There’s something going on at the CattRokk Light.”

Marcia looked at Simon with sudden interest. “*CattRokk Light?*”

“Yes—”

“Come away from the Arch,” said Marcia. “Sound travels. We can walk down

Wizard Way. You are leaving by the ferry at the South Gate, I take it—you can tell me as

we go.”

And so Simon found himself walking next to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard in full view

of anyone in the Castle who might be passing—something that he had never dreamed

would happen, *ever*.

“You know the Ghost of the Vaults—Tertius Fume—I think he has

something to do
with it....”

Marcia was now extremely interested. “Go on,” she said.

“Well, you know I...um...used to come to the Manuscriptorium every week....”

Simon blushed and found a sudden interest in the configuration of the paving stones of Wizard Way.

“Yes,” said Marcia sharply. “I am indeed aware of that fact. Delivering bones, was it not?”

“Yes, it was. I—I am truly, *truly* sorry for that. I don’t know why I—”

“I don’t want your apologies. I take account of what people *do*, Simon, not what they say.”

“Yes, of course. Well, when I was there, Tertius Fume asked if I wanted to be his

BondsMan. He wanted someone to do the running for him, as he put it. I turned him down.”

“Beneath you, was it?” asked Marcia.

Simon felt even more uncomfortable. Marcia was absolutely right. He had loftily informed Tertius Fume that he had far more important matters to attend to.

“Um. Well, the thing is, a few weeks later I saw Tertius Fume down on the old

Manuscriptorium landing stage. He was talking to someone who looked to me like a

pirate. You know, gold ring in his ear, parrot tattooed on his neck, that kind of thing. I

thought then, old Goat Face—sorry, Tertius Fume—has found his BondsMan.”

“Old Goat Face is just fine by me,” said Marcia. “So tell me, Simon, what do you know about CattRokk?”

“Well, er, I know what shines above...and what lies beneath.”

Marcia raised her eyebrows. “You do?”

Simon looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but because of where I ended up

when I went a little bit, well, crazy, I do know lots of *stuff*. There are things that I know I

shouldn't know, but I do. And I can't un-know them, if you see what I mean. But if I can

put any of it to good use now, then maybe...well, maybe I can make things right.

Maybe." Simon stole a glance at Marcia but got no response.

"So I do know about the Isles of Syren, and about the Deeps and, er, things."

"Really?" Marcia's tone was icy. "So why have you come to tell me? Why *now*?"

"And—oh, it's *awful*," Simon babbled. "Lucy has run off with some kid—and I

remember who he is now, he's a friend of...of my brother, your Apprentice. He got me in

the eye once with a catapult. Not your Apprentice, the friend. Anyway, he—the friend,

not my brother—has run off with my Lucy, and they are on a boat belonging to Skipper

Fry, who has a parrot on his neck and whose initials are T.F.F. and who takes the supplies

out to CattRokk."

Marcia took a moment to digest this. "So...let me get this straight. You are telling

me that Tertius Fume has a BondsMan who has gone to CattRokk Light?"

"Yes. And before he left, I saw the BondsMan talking to Una Brakket. She gave him

a package."

"*Una Brakket*?" Distaste flooded Marcia's face.

"Yes. I'm sure you know this too—neither she nor Tertius Fume is a friend of the

Castle."

"Hmm.... So how long ago did this Skipper Fry—this BondsMan—leave?"

"Two days ago. I came as soon as I could. There was an awful storm and —"

"Well, thank you," said Marcia, cutting in. "That was very interesting."

"Oh. Right. Well, if there's anything I can do..."

"No, thank you, Simon. You'll just catch the next ferry to the Port if you hurry.

Good-bye." With that, Marcia turned on her heel and strode back up Wizard Way.

Simon hurried off to the ferry feeling deflated. He knew he shouldn't

have expected

anything, but he had hoped that, just possibly, Marcia might have involved him, asked his

opinion—even allowed him to stay in the Castle for the night. But she hadn't—and he

didn't blame her.

Marcia walked up Wizard Way, lost in thought. Her visit to the Manuscriptorium,

combined with her surprise meeting with Simon Heap, had left her with a lot to think

about. Marcia was convinced that Tertius Fume had something to do with the secret Ice

Tunnel becoming UnSealed, and she was sure it was not a coincidence that his

BondsMan was at that very moment on his way to CattRokk Light. Tertius Fume was up

to something. "Evil old goat," she muttered to herself.

Marcia was so deep in thought that when a tall, thin man wearing a ridiculous yellow

hat ran in front of her, she walked right into him. They both went flying. Before Marcia

could struggle to her feet she found herself surrounded by a group of concerned—and

rather excited—onlookers who, too amazed to offer any help, stood gazing at the sight of

their ExtraOrdinary Wizard lying flat out on Wizard Way. For once Marcia was glad to

hear Aunt Zelda's voice.

"Upsadaisy!" Aunt Zelda said, helping Marcia to her feet.

"Thank you, Zelda," said Marcia. She brushed the dust off her new cloak and glared

at the onlookers. "Don't you have homes to go to?" she snapped. Sheepishly they drifted

away, saving their stories to tell to their families and friends. (These tales were the

origins of the legend of the mysterious and powerful Yellow Wizard who, after an epic

battle, laid the ExtraOrdinary Wizard out cold on Wizard Way, only to be captured by a

tiny, heroic boy.)

The crowd having dispersed, Marcia now saw a strange sight. An odd-looking man

wearing one of the most bizarre hats she had ever seen—and Marcia had seen some hats

in her time—was lying on the ground trying to get up. He was having some difficulty due

to the fact that Barney Pot was kneeling on both his ankles.

“Got him!” said Aunt Zelda triumphantly. “Well done, Barney!”

Barney grinned. He loved the lady in the tent. He had never had such fun—never

ever. Together they had chased the banana man through alleyways and shops, and Barney

had never lost sight of him once. And now they had caught him—and saved the

ExtraOrdinary Wizard, too.

“Right, Marcia,” said Aunt Zelda, who knew how to control a jinnee. “You grab one

arm, I’ll take the other—he won’t like *that*. You do still have a Sealed cell in the Wizard

Tower, don’t you?”

“Yes, we do. Goodness, Zelda, what on earth is this all about?”

“Marcia, just grab him, will you? This is Septimus’s escaped jinnee.”

“What?” Marcia stared down at Jim Knee, who flashed her a beguiling smile.

“A case of mistaken identity, madam, I can assure you,” he said. “I am but a poor

traveler from distant shores. I was indulging in a little window-shopping along your

wonderful avenue in this *enchanted* Castle when this madwoman in a tent accosted me

and set her hooligan child upon me. Get *off*, will you?” Jim Knee desperately waggled his

feet, but Barney Pot was not to be dislodged.

“Zelda, are you sure?” asked Marcia, looking down at Aunt Zelda, who now had Jim

Knee in an armlock.

“Of course I’m sure, Marcia. But if you want proof, you can have it.” Aunt Zelda

very deliberately took out Jim Knee’s gold bottle and unstopped it. The jinnee went

white.

“No, no, have mercy. I pray you, don’t put me back in there!” he wailed.

In a moment Marcia was on the ground beside Aunt Zelda, and Septimus’s jinnee

was in what Marcia called “protective custody.”

As Jim Knee was marched along Wizard Way, firmly sandwiched between Marcia

and Aunt Zelda, with Barney Pot proudly leading the way, people stopped what they

were doing and stared. The crowd of onlookers regrouped and followed them all the way

to the Great Arch, but Marcia did not notice. She was too busy with her plan for the

jinnee—and as plans went, Marcia knew it was a good one. She just needed to sell it to

Aunt Zelda, who, as the Awakener, needed to agree.

As they passed into the cool shadows of the lapis-lazuli-lined archway, Marcia said,

“Zelda, would you and Barney like to come up for tea in my rooms?”

Aunt Zelda looked suspicious. “Why?”

“It has been so long since we’ve had a proper chat, and I would like to go some way

toward repaying your kind hospitality on the Marshes a few years ago. Happy times.”

Aunt Zelda did not remember Marcia’s stay with such a rosy hue. She was tempted

to refuse but felt she should ask Barney first. “Well, Barney, what do you say?”

Barney nodded, his face shining with wonder. “Oh, yes *please*,” he said.

“Thank you, Marcia,” said Aunt Zelda, feeling sure she would regret it. “That is

most kind.”

While Jim Knee languished in the Wizard Tower’s Sealed cell, Marcia sat Barney

down with a miniature set of Counter-Feet and his favorite chocolate cake. Then she

explained her plan to Aunt Zelda. Marcia had to be almost more polite than she could

bear, but in the end it was worth it—she got what she wanted.

But Marcia usually got what she wanted when she put her mind to it.



[27](#)

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

The following morning a long way from the Wizard Tower a black boat with dark red

sails approached the CattRokk Lighthouse. It went unnoticed by anyone except the lighthouse keeper, who watched it with a sense of dread.

“We’re nearly there. You can come out now.” Jakey Fry’s head appeared like a

bizarre lightbulb dangling from the hatch above. A brilliant strip of sunlight glanced

down like a dagger, and Lucy Gringe and Wolf Boy blinked. They had not seen sunlight

for what felt like years, though it was actually a little over three days. They had, it is true,

seen some light in the form of the candle that Jakey Fry had brought down each evening

when he came to give them their meager supper of fish—oh, how Lucy *hated* fish—and

to play cards with them, but only according to the Jakey Fry Rule Book, which basically

meant that whatever happened, Jakey Fry won.

“Hurry up! Pa says *now*,” hissed Jakey. “Get yer stuff together and make it sharp.”

“We don’t *have* any stuff,” said Lucy, who had a tendency to get picky when

irritable.

“Well, make it sharp then.”

A bellow came from the deck, and Jakey’s head disappeared. Lucy and Wolf Boy

heard him call, “Aye, Pa, they’re coming. Aye, right now. Pronto!” He stuck his head

down once more. He looked scared. “Get up that ladder or we’ll all be fer it.”

As the *Marauder* pitched and rolled in the waves, Lucy and Wolf Boy stumbled up

the ladder and crawled onto the deck. They breathed in the fresh sea air in wonder—how

was it possible that air could smell so *good*? And the light—how could it possibly be so

bright? Lucy shaded her eyes and looked around, trying to get her bearings. She gasped.

Rearing into the brilliant blue sky was a massive black column of a lighthouse, which

seemed to grow from the rocks like an enormous tree trunk. Its foundation was rock,

which gradually gave way to huge chunks of pitted granite covered in thick tar and

encrusted with barnacles. As the lighthouse rose toward the sky, the granite was replaced

by tar-covered bricks. Lucy, who was always fascinated by how things were made,

wondered how anyone could possibly have built such a huge tower with the sea forever

crashing about them. But it was the very top of the lighthouse that fascinated Lucy the

most: *It looked like the head of a cat.* There were two brick-built triangles that looked to

Lucy like ears and, strangest of all, there were two almond-shaped windows for eyes;

from these came two beams of light so bright that Lucy could actually see them in the

sunlight.

With a stomach-churning lurch, the *Marauder* dropped into a trough of a wave, the

sun was blotted out by the lighthouse and a chill shadow fell across them. Next the swell

took them so high that Lucy was looking straight at the seaweed-covered base of the

lighthouse. Then the *Marauder* dropped like a stone into a trough of boiling water—and

all the time the boat was rolling from side to side. Suddenly Lucy felt very, very sick. Just

in time she rushed to the edge of the boat and threw up over the side. A bellow of

laughter came from Skipper Fry, who was standing nonchalantly holding on to the tiller.

“Women an’ boats,” he chortled. “Useless!”

Lucy spat into the sea, then spun around, eyes blazing, “*What* did you—”

Wolf Boy had spent enough time in Lucy’s company to know when she was about to

explode. He grabbed her shoulder and hissed, “Stop it, Lucy.”

Lucy glared at Wolf Boy. She did her angry-pony headshake, broke away from Wolf

Boy’s grasp and set off toward the skipper. Wolf Boy’s heart sank. This was it. Lucy was

about to get thrown overboard.

Jakey Fry liked Lucy even though she was rude to him and called him weevil-brain

and bug-features. He saw what was coming and jumped in front of her.

“Lucy, I need yer help,” he said urgently. “Yer strong. Throw us the rope, yeah?”

Lucy stopped impatiently. There was a desperate look in Jakey’s eyes. “Please, Miss

Lucy,” Jakey whispered. “Don’t make ’im uppity. *Please.*”

Ten minutes later, with the help of Lucy—who turned out to be an accomplished rope

thrower—the *Marauder* was tied up to two massive iron posts set into the rocks above a

small harbor hewn from the rock at the foot of the lighthouse. Jakey Fry peered down at

the boat, anxiously wondering if he had allowed enough rope. It was difficult to tell. Too

much rope and the *Marauder* would drift onto the rocks, too little and she would be left

dangling in the fall of the tide—and if he got it wrong either way, there would be trouble.

“Gettup that ladder,” the skipper yelled at Lucy.

“*What?*” gasped Lucy, staring at the rusting iron ladder festooned in slime and

seaweed, at the top of which Jakey Fry was anxiously hovering.

“You ’eard. Get up that ladder. *Now!* ”

“Go on, Lucy,” said Wolf Boy, who was desperate to set foot on land once more,

even if it was only a slimy rock in the middle of the sea.

Showered by spray from the crashing waves below, Lucy scrambled up the ladder,

closely followed by Wolf Boy and Skipper Fry. Thin Crowe was left to battle with four

huge coils of rope, which he eventually succeeded in hauling up the ladder with the help

of Jakey and Wolf Boy.

Led by Skipper Fry, they stumbled up a narrow path worn deep into the rock that

wound toward the lighthouse. Wolf Boy’s relief at being on solid ground was evaporating

fast. At the end of the path he could see a rusty iron door set into the foot of the

lighthouse and, as he stepped into the cold shadow cast by the lighthouse, his arms

hurting from the weight of the rope he was being forced to carry, he felt as though he and

Lucy were being marched into prison.

Skipper Fry reached the door first and beckoned to Thin Crowe impatiently. Thin

Crowe dumped the rope and seized the small iron wheel set into the center of the door.

He gave the wheel a vicious twist. For a few seconds nothing shifted except Thin

Crowe’s eyes, which bulged so much that Wolf Boy thought they might, with any luck,

spring out of their sockets. And then, with a deep grinding sound from within the door,

the wheel began to turn. Thin Crowe put his bony shoulder to the door and shoved. Inch

by inch the rusty door screamed open slowly, and a breath of musty air flowed out to

meet them.

“Get in,” growled Skipper Fry. “Make it snappy.” He gave Wolf Boy a shove but

wisely left Lucy to go in under her own steam.

The inside of the lighthouse felt like an underground cavern. Rivulets ran down the

slimy walls, and from somewhere came a hollow *plink-plink* of dripping water. High

above them reared an immense void in which a fragile helix of metal steps clung

nervously to the curved brick walls. The only light came from the half-open door, and

even that was fast disappearing as Thin Crowe shoved it closed. With a hollow *clang* the

door banged back into its metal frame, and they were plunged into darkness.

Skipper Fry cursed and dropped his coil of rope with a *thud*. “How many times do I

have to tell yer not to close the door until I lit the lamp, dung brain?” he demanded,

noisily getting out his tinderbox and scraping at his flint, with little success.

“I’ll do it, Pa,” Jakey Fry offered anxiously.

“No yer *won’t*. D’yer think I can’t light a poxy little lamp? Get out of me way, *idiot*

boy.” The *thump* of Jakey being thrown against the wall made Lucy and Wolf Boy wince.

Under the cover of the dark, Lucy edged toward the sound. She found Jakey and put her

arm around him. Jakey tried not to snuffle.

Suddenly, from somewhere about halfway up the tower, Wolf Boy and Lucy heard

the sound of a door slamming and then the ring of steel toecaps on iron stairs. Heavy

footsteps began to *clank* their way down the steps, which reverberated and shook,

carrying the sound all the way to the ground. Wolf Boy and Lucy craned their necks

upward and watched a dim light circle high above them, growing slightly closer with

every circuit.

Five long minutes later, Thin Crowe’s twin stepped off the last step, and Skipper Fry

at last managed to light the lamp. The flame flared up and illuminated the features of Fat

Crowe, who was, despite the rolls of fat, uncannily like his brother. He shone his own

lamp at Lucy and Wolf Boy.

“What they fer?” he growled in a voice indistinguishable from that of Thin Crowe.

“Nuffin useful,” grunted his twin. “Yer ready, pig face?”

“Yeah, rat brain, more ’n ready. Drivin’ me crazy, he is,” Fat Crowe replied.

“Not fer much longer, *hey hey*.” Thin Crowe chuckled.

The glow from the lamp shone in the skipper’s face, turning it a nasty yellow.

“Well, get a blinkin’ move on then,” he said. “And mind yer *do it right*. Don’t want no *evidence*.”

Lucy and Wolf Boy flashed each other worried glances—evidence of *what*?

“Is he comin’?” asked Fat Crowe, pointing to Wolf Boy, who was longing to put his coil of rope down.

“Don’t be *stupid*,” said the skipper. “Wouldn’t trust these two with me last moldy mackerel. Take ’is rope and get going.”

“So what’s they ’ere fer, then?” asked Fat Crowe.

“Nothing. Yer two can sort ’em out later,” said Skipper Fry.

Fat Crowe grinned. “Be our pleasure, boss,” he said.

Lucy flashed Wolf Boy a glance of panic. Wolf Boy felt sick. He’d been right. The lighthouse *was* a prison.

The Crowe twins and Jakey Fry set off up the steps.

“Wait!” Skipper Fry yelled. Jakey and the Crowes stopped. “Yer’ll forget yer heads

next,” growled the skipper. “Take these.” From his pocket he took a tangle of black

ribbon and dark blue glass ovals. “Crowes—one each,” he grunted. “Put ’em on yer know

when. Don’t want yer going blind on me just when we’ve got a job to do.”

Thin Crowe stuck out a bony arm and took what in fact were two pairs of eye shields.

Jakey Fry looked worried. “Don’t I have one, Pa?” he asked.

“No, that’s man’s work. Yer to carry the rope and do as yer told, got that?”

“Yes, Pa. But what are they for?”

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell yer no lies. Get up them steps, boy.

Now!”

Jakey staggered off under his pile of rope, leaving Skipper Fry in the well of the

lighthouse guarding Wolf Boy and Lucy.

After a few minutes of strained silence, listening to the dripping water and the

echoing *clang* s of the receding footsteps, an unpleasant thought occurred to Skipper

Fry—he was outnumbered. Normally Theodophilus Fortitude Fry would not have even

considered a *girl* when counting the opposition, but this time he felt it was wise to count

Lucy Gringe. And there was something odd about the boy too, something feral. A line of

goose bumps ran up the back of the skipper’s neck and made his tattooed parrot twitch.

Suddenly he didn’t want to spend another second alone with Wolf Boy and Lucy Gringe.

“Right, yer two, yer can get up them steps an’ all,” he growled, and gave Wolf Boy a

shove in the back.

Wolf Boy made sure that Lucy went first and then followed. Theodophilus Fortitude

Fry came close behind, the sound of his labored breath soon cutting out the *clang* ing

steps circling far above. It was a long, long way up, and the climb took its toll on the

wheezing Fry. Lucy and Wolf Boy kept on going and drew steadily ahead.

The seemingly endless steps were punctuated by landings every seven spirals. Each

landing had a door leading off. Lucy and Wolf Boy had stopped briefly on the fourth

landing to catch their breath when a shaft of blinding light shot down from the very top of

the lighthouse, followed a few seconds later by a terrifying—or was it terrified?—yowl.

In the brilliant blue-white light, Lucy and Wolf Boy exchange horrified glances.

“What was *that*?” mouthed Wolf Boy.

“Cat scream,” mouthed Lucy.

“Human scream,” whispered Wolf Boy.

“Or *both?*” whispered Lucy.



28

PINCER- SPLAT

It was both. Miarr, human but CatConnected many generations from the past, was

fighting for his life.

Miarr was a small, slight man who weighed little—five Miarrs equaled the weight of

Fat Crowe, and two Miarrs equaled the weight of Thin Crowe.

Which meant that against the Crowe twins, Miarr was effectively outnumbered seven

to one.

Miarr had been on the Watching platform when the Crowes and Jakey Fry had

staggered in with their ropes and thrown them to the floor. Miarr had asked what the

ropes were for and was told, “Nothin’ fer yer to bother about—not where yer going.”

One look at Jakey Fry’s terrified face told Miarr all he needed to know. He had

scuttled up the foot-pole (a pole with footrests placed on either side), thrown open a

trapdoor and taken refuge in a place that normally no one would have dared to

follow—the Arena of the Light.

The Arena of the Light was the circular space at the very top of the lighthouse. In the

center of the circle burned the Sphere of Light—a large, round sphere of brilliant white

light. The Light was encircled by a narrow white marble walkway. Behind the Light, on

the island side of the lighthouse, was a huge, curved plate of gleaming silver, which

Miarr polished every day. On the seaward side were two enormous glass lenses, which

Miarr also polished every day. The lenses were set a few feet back from the two

almond-shaped openings—the eyes—through which the Light was focused. The eyes

were four times the height of Miarr and six times as long. They were open to the sky and,

as Miarr slammed the trapdoor shut and fastened it down, a fresh summer breeze scented

with sea blew in and made the cat-man feel sad. He wondered if this would be the very

last morning he would ever smell the sea air.

The only hope that Miarr had was that the Crowes would be too scared to come up to

the Arena of the Light. After many generations Miarr's family had adapted to the Light

by growing secondary dark eyelids—LightLids—through which they could see without

being blinded by the Light. But anyone without that protection who looked straight at the

Light would find that its brilliance seared the eyes and left scars in the center of vision so

that, forevermore, they would see the shape of the Sphere of Light in a black absence of

vision.

But when a battering began on the underside of the trapdoor, Miarr knew his hope

was in vain. He crouched beside the Light and listened to the *thud* s of Thin Crowe's fists

on the flimsy metal of the trapdoor, which was made only to be Light-tight, not

Crowe-proof. He knew it would not last long.

Suddenly the trapdoor flew off its hinges, and Miarr saw Thin Crowe's shaven head

sticking through the hole in the walkway, wearing two dark blue ovals of

glass over his

eyes, looking like one of the giant insects that invaded his worst nightmares. Miarr was

terrified—he realized that whatever it was the Crowes were about to do had been

carefully planned. Thin Crowe pulled himself onto the walkway, and Miarr waited,

determined that whichever way Thin Crowe came at him, he would go the other. They

could go on a long time like that, he thought. But Miarr's hopes were suddenly dashed.

Fat Crowe's head, complete with insect eyes, appeared through the trapdoor. With utter

horror—and amazement—Miarr watched Thin Crowe heave his brother through the tiny

hole and pull him out onto the walkway where he lay, winded, like a blubbery fish on a

slab.

Miarr closed his eyes. This, he thought, is the end of Miarr.

Now the Crowes began their party piece—the Pincer- *Splat*. It was something that

they had practiced down many a dark alley in the Port. The Pincer began when, very

slowly, they would approach a terrified victim from either side. The victim would watch

one, then the other, trying desperately to figure out which way to run—then, at the very

moment of decision, the Crowes would pounce. *Splat*.

And so it was with Miarr. He shrank back against the wall opposite the trapdoor and,

through his LightLids, he watched his nightmares come true: slowly, slowly, stepping

carefully along the marble walkway, with tight little smiles and fingers flexing, the

Crowes came at him from both sides, inexorably drawing closer.

The Crowes herded Miarr toward the eyes of the lighthouse, as he had known they

would. Finally he stood in the space between the eyes, his back to the wall, and he

wondered which eye they would throw him out of. He cast a glance at the rocks far

below. It was a long way down, he thought—a very long way down. He

said a silent

good-bye to his Light.

Splat! The Crowes pounced. Working in harmony—the only time they ever

did—they grabbed Miarr and lifted him high. Miarr let out a yowl of terror and, way

down the lighthouse, on the fourth platform, Lucy and Wolf Boy heard it and got goose

bumps. The Crowes, surprised at the lightness of the cat-man, were caught off-balance.

Twisting and spitting—more like a snake than a cat—Miarr flew out of their grasp, up in

the air, out through the left eye and into the empty sky. For a fraction of a second—which

felt like an eternity to Miarr—he hung poised between the Crowes' throw and gravity's

pull. He saw four bizarre images of himself reflected in the Crowes' insect eyes: he was

apparently flying and screaming at the same time. He saw his precious Sphere of Light

for what he was sure would be the last time, and then he saw the rush of black as the wall

of the lighthouse flashed past him at—literally—breakneck speed.

Catlike, Miarr automatically turned so that he faced the ground and, as he fell, the

rush of wind forced his arms and legs into a star shape, causing his sealskin cloak to

spread out like a pair of bat's wings. Miarr's plummet turned to a gentle glide and—had a

gust of wind not knocked him against the side of the lighthouse—he would very likely

have landed on the *Marauder*, directly below.

And so it was that Miarr used up one more of his original nine lives—leaving six

remaining (he had used one when he was a baby and had fallen in the harbor and another

when his cousin had disappeared).

Lucy and Wolf Boy did not hear the sickening *thud* of Miarr hitting the lighthouse wall.

It was masked by the *clang* of Theodophilus Fortitude Fry's approaching footsteps. Lucy

and Wolf Boy had not moved from the landing. The terrible yowl from

above had sent a

chill through both of them and, as Skipper Fry's steps neared the final turn up to the

landing, Wolf Boy whispered, "It will be us next."

Wide-eyed, Lucy nodded.

Wolf Boy pushed against the door behind them and, to his surprise, it opened.

Quickly he and Lucy slipped inside and found themselves in a small room furnished with

three sets of bare bunks and a locker-like cupboard. Silently Wolf Boy closed the door

and began to bolt it, but once again Lucy stopped him.

"He'll know for sure that we're in here if you do that," she whispered. "Our only

chance is for him to look and not find us. That way he'll think we've gone on ahead."

The footsteps drew nearer.

Wolf Boy thought fast. He knew that Lucy was right. He also knew that Theodophilus Fortitude Fry was bound to search every inch of the bunkroom, and he

didn't see where Lucy thought they could hide. The tiers of metal bunks were devoid of

any covering—including mattresses—and the only place that offered any concealment

was the locker, where the skipper was sure to look.

The footsteps stopped on the landing.

Wolf Boy grabbed hold of Lucy, pushed her into the locker, squeezed in behind her

and closed the door. Lucy looked aghast. *What did you do that for?* she mouthed. *He's*

bound to look in here.

"Did you have any better ideas?" hissed Wolf Boy.

"Jump him," said Lucy. "Hit him on the head."

"*Shh.*" Wolf Boy put his finger to his lips. "Trust me."

Lucy thought that she didn't have a lot of choice. She heard the door to the

bunkroom open and the heavy footsteps of the skipper clump inside. They stopped right

outside the locker, and the sound of labored wheezing came through the flimsy door.

"Yer can come right outta there," came the skipper's rasp. "I got better things a do

than play drattin' hide-an'-seek."

There was no response.

"I'm telling yer both. Yer've had it easy up till now. But it'll be the worse for yer if

yer don't come out."

The door handle rattled angrily.

"Yer've had yer chance. Don't say I didn't tell yer."

The door was thrown open.

Lucy opened her mouth to scream.



29

UnSeen

Theophilus Fortitude Fry threw open the locker door. He was met by a strangled squeak.

"Got ya!" he crowed triumphantly. And then, "Oh, ratbutts, where *are* they?"

Puzzled, the skipper stared into the oddly shifting gloom of the locker—he could have

sworn those kids were in there.

Peering over Wolf Boy's shoulder, Lucy saw the skipper's confused expression and

realized that *he could not see them*. Amazed, she quickly stifled another strangled squawk

and took care not to move a muscle. She noticed now that Wolf Boy was incredibly still.

She could almost feel the waves of concentration coming from him, and she was sure that

he was the reason that the skipper couldn't see them. There was more to Wolf Boy than

met the eye, Lucy decided. In fact, right then there was apparently nothing of Wolf Boy

that met the eye of the skipper—and nothing of her, either. It was the oddest thing. Just to

make sure, she stuck out her tongue at Theodophilus Fortitude Fry. There was not a

flicker of reaction, except— *his left eyebrow began to twitch.*

Lucy stifled a giggle. Skipper Fry's eyebrow looked like a big, furry caterpillar and

the parrot on his neck twitched as though it was about to eat it.

Wolf Boy had not noticed the eyebrow or the parrot. He was concentrating hard. Just

as Aunt Zelda had taught Jenna, Septimus and Nicko a small Basyk Magyk range of

protective Spells, she had recently done the same for Wolf Boy. Wolf Boy had not found

them easy, but he had listened carefully and practiced every day. And now, for the very

first time, he was using his UnSeen Shield for real—and it worked.

And so, when Theodophilus Fortitude Fry peered into the locker, he saw nothing

more than a slight eddy in the darkness—but he knew there was Magyk in there. Skipper

Fry had come up against a fair bit of Magyk in his eventful life, and it did a strange

thing—it made his left eyebrow twitch.

Skipper Fry was a great believer in solving problems in a practical manner, and so

now he took the practical route: he went to put his hand inside the locker and check that it

was indeed as empty as it appeared. As he reached in, an unaccountable terror suddenly

overwhelmed him—a terror of getting his hand bitten off by a wolverine. A rash of goose

bumps ran down his neck, and Theodophilus Fortitude Fry quickly pulled back his hand.

Then he stopped. He *knew* he had heard a squeak inside the locker. Too scared to put his

hand back inside, Skipper Fry hoped that maybe it was the locker door. He began to push

the door back and forth, back and forth. The first time it made no noise, but suddenly

Lucy Gringe realized what was going on, and the door squeaked obligingly in all the right places.

Theodophilus Fortitude Fry gave up. He had more important business to think about

than the whereabouts of a couple of scruffy kids. They could stay in the wretched

lighthouse and rot for all he cared. Angrily he slammed the door, stomped out of the

bunkroom and continued the long climb to the top of the lighthouse.

Wolf Boy and Lucy fell out of the locker in a fit of silent giggles.

“How did you *do* that?” gasped Lucy. “It was *amazing*. He didn’t see a *thing!*”

“I couldn’t believe it when you started squeaking,” whispered Wolf Boy. “That was

so good!”

“Yep, that was fun— *oh, oh, oooooooh...*”

“*Shh*, you don’t have to show me how you did it. He’ll hear. Ouch! Let go of my arm.”

“There’s something coming in the window,” hissed Lucy. “*Look!*”

“Oh!”

Wolf Boy and Lucy shrank back. A pair of delicate hands, bloodied and bruised,

with once-long, curved nails now broken and bent were clutching onto the bunkhouse’s

tiny windowsill. As Lucy and Wolf Boy watched, the battered hands edged forward, little

by little, until the fingers found the inside ledge and curled themselves around it. Seconds

later Miarr’s neat sealskin-clad head appeared framed in the oval window, his face grim

with fear. He pulled himself up and, like a bat squeezing in under the eaves, he swarmed

through the window and fell into an exhausted heap on the floor.

Lucy Gringe was at Miarr’s side in a moment. She looked at the slightly

furred face,

the closed almond-shaped eyes and the odd little pointy ears that protruded from the

sealskin cap and was not sure whether the cap was part of him or not. She glanced up at

Wolf Boy. "What is it?" she whispered.

Wolf Boy's hair bristled. There was the smell of cat about the man, but the collapsed

form on the floor reminded him of a bat more than anything. "Dunno," he whispered. "I

think it's probably human."

Miarr's yellow eyes flicked open like a pair of shutters, and he put a finger to his

lips. "Shhh..." he shushed them. Lucy and Wolf Boy fell back in surprise.

"What?" whispered Lucy.

"Shhhhhh," repeated Miarr urgently. Miarr knew that sounds in the lighthouse

traveled in the strangest ways. You could have a conversation on the Watching platform

with someone at the foot of the lighthouse and feel as if they were right next to you. He

also knew that as soon as the sound of the skipper's clanging footsteps ceased, the

Crowes would easily hear the whispers from the bunkroom. And something told him that

these two bedraggled creatures in the bunkroom (Lucy and Wolf Boy did not look their

best) did not wish to be discovered either. But he had to make certain. Miarr struggled to

sit up.

"You...with them?" He pointed upward.

Lucy shook her head. "No way."

Miarr smiled, which had the odd effect of wagging his pointy little ears and showing

two long lower canine teeth, which edged up over his top lip. Lucy looked at Miarr, and a

horrible thought crossed her mind.

"Did they throw you off the top?" she asked.

Miarr nodded.

"Murderers," muttered Wolf Boy.

"We'll help you," Lucy told Miarr. "If we hurry we can get down and

take their boat

and leave them all up there. Then they can chuck each other off and do us all a favor.”

Miarr shook his head. “No. I will never leave my Light,” came his faint, whispery

voice. “But you—you must go.”

Lucy looked uncertain. She knew that precious minutes were ticking away, that at

any moment they might hear four pairs of boots clanging back down the steps to find

them, but she was loath to leave the battered little man on his own to face—who knew

what?

“If he wants to stay, then that’s up to him,” whispered Wolf Boy. “You heard what

he said, we *must* go. Come on, Lucy, it’s our only chance.”

Regretfully Lucy turned to go.

A low hiss came from the little man huddled on the floor. “Miarr says fare-you-well,” he whispered.

“Miarr?” asked Lucy.

“Miarr,” whispered the cat-man, sounding more cat than man.

“Oh,” said Lucy, hanging back. “Oh, you sound just like my lovely old cat.”

“Come on, Lucy,” Wolf Boy whispered urgently from the landing. With a regretful

backward glance, Lucy ran after him, but as she joined him a loud clanging from above

heralded the descent of Theodophilus Fortitude and Jakey Fry. Wolf Boy swore under his

breath. They were too late.

Wolf Boy pulled Lucy back into the shadows of the bunkroom. Very quietly he

pushed the door so that the collapsed figure of the cat-man could not be glimpsed if—by

any stroke of luck—Jakey and the skipper went straight by. With their hearts pounding,

Lucy and Wolf Boy waited as the footsteps clattered around and around the metal stairs,

drawing ever nearer. Theodophilus Fortitude Fry was obviously a lot better at coming

down stairs than going up—in less than a minute, Lucy and Wolf Boy heard his heavy

footsteps reach the landing. Everyone in the bunkroom froze.

Theodophilus Fortitude Fry did not even break his pace. He thudded past the

bunkroom door, closely followed by Jakey, and headed down the next flight of steps.

Lucy and Wolf Boy broke into smiles of relief, and even Miarr allowed a couple of

canines to show. They waited until the *clang* of the door far below told them that the

skipper and his son had left the lighthouse.

Then, far above, at the top of the lighthouse, a series of loud, rhythmic *thud s* began.

Miarr glanced up, his yellow eyes worried. The sounds were coming through the open

window—something was banging against the outside wall.

Painfully, Miarr sat up. He drew out a key from the depths of his cloak and handed it

to Lucy. “You can still escape,” he whispered. “Use the rescue boat. There are two doors

under the stairs where you came in. One black, one red. Use the red; it will take you to

the launching platform. There are instructions on the wall. Read them carefully. Good

luck.”

Thud... thump. The sounds were getting closer.

Lucy took the key. “Thank you. Thank you very much,” she whispered.

Ther... ump.

Miarr nodded. “Fare-you-well,” he said.

Thud... thump... clang. The sounds drew ever closer.

“Come with us, Mr. Miarr. *Please,*” said Lucy.

Miarr shook his head. A particularly loud *clang* shook the wall of the bunkroom. A

shaft of blinding white light flooded through the window, and Miarr let out a yell.

“My Light! Look away, look away!”

Lucy and Wolf Boy shielded their eyes, and Miarr lowered his LightLids. Like an

enormous pendulum, the dazzling Sphere of Light, encased in a harness of ropes tied with

knots that only sailors know, swung into view.

“They are taking my Light,” Miarr said, gasping in disbelief.

Slowly the Light was lowered past, swinging in and out of view, banging

against the

sides of the lighthouse as it went. With each thud Miarr winced as if in pain. Finally he

could not bear it. He threw himself to the floor, drew his sealskin cloak up over his eyes

and curled into a ball.

Lucy and Wolf Boy were made of sterner stuff. They ran to the window, but Miarr

raised his head and let out a warning hiss. "Ssss! Wait until the Light is farther away," he

whispered. "Then cover your eyes and look through your fingers. Do not look directly at

it. And then...oh, please tell me what they are doing with my Light." He curled back into

a ball and pulled his cloak over his head.

Impatiently Lucy and Wolf Boy waited until the bumping against the side of the

lighthouse wall grew fainter and then, covering their eyes with their hands and peering

between their fingers, they looked out. Above them, dark against the bright sky, they saw

the bizarre sight of the Crowe twins' insect-eyed heads sticking out from each of the

lighthouse's eyes as they carefully played out the ropes, lowering Miarr's precious

Sphere of Light to the ground.

Carefully, Lucy and Wolf Boy looked down. Far below they saw Skipper Fry and

Jakey. Skipper Fry was waving his arms like a demented windmill, directing the final few

feet of the Sphere of Light's descent so that it came to rest on the rocks just above the

Marauder.

Lucy and Wolf Boy suddenly ducked back inside, and the swish of ropes falling

from the top of the lighthouse filled the bunkroom. The metallic *clank* of the steps began

once more. An angry hiss from Miarr was lost in the ring of steel-tipped boots as the

Crowes passed by without a glance.

For the next half hour, Lucy and Wolf Boy gave Miarr a running commentary on

what they saw. Each comment was greeted by a low moan. They watched the Sphere of

Light, still encircled with ropes, being rolled to the edge of the rocks and thrown into the

water. It landed with a *splash*, then bobbed up like a fisherman's float, the bright light

turning the water around it a beautiful translucent green. They saw the Crowes set to

work securing the ropes running from the Light to the stern of the *Marauder*, and when

Skipper Fry was satisfied with the result, clamber aboard. Lastly they watched Jakey Fry

loose the mooring rope and jump aboard. Jakey raised the sails, and the *Marauder* set off,

its bizarre prize bobbing along behind it like a giant beach ball.

Lucy and Wolf Boy watched it go. "It looks like they have stolen the moon,"

whispered Lucy.

Miarr heard. "They have stolen the *sun*," he wailed. "My sun." He let out a desperate

howl, which sent goose bumps down their spines.

"*Aieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!*" he shrieked. "I would rather die than see them take my

Light."

Lucy left the window. She kneeled beside Miarr, who was still curled up in a little

sealskin ball looking, she thought, like a large hedgehog that had shed its prickles.

"Don't be so silly," she told him. "Of course you wouldn't. Anyway, you *didn't* see

it. You've been lying there with your eyes closed."

"I do not need to see. I feel it. Here." Miarr's fist clenched over his chest. "They

have ripped out my heart and sailed it away. Oh, I wish I were dead. *Dead!*"

"Well, you're not dead," said Lucy. "Anyway, if you *were* dead you wouldn't be

able to get it back, would you? But now you can, can't you?"

"But how?" Miarr wailed. "*How?*"

"We can help, can't we?" Lucy looked at Wolf Boy.

Wolf Boy opened his eyes wide as if to say, *Are you crazy?*

"*Aieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!*" howled Miarr.

Lucy recognized a kindred screamer, and she knew exactly what to do. She stepped

smoothly into the shoes usually occupied by Mrs. Gringe: “Now, just *stop* it, Mr. Miarr.

Stop it right now. No one is listening,” she said sternly. Miarr stopped in surprise. No one

had talked to him like that since his old granny had died.

“That’s better,” said Lucy, well into Mrs. Gringe mode. “Now sit up, wipe your nose

and behave. Then we can figure something out.”

Like an obedient child, Miarr sat up, rubbed the sleeve of his sealskin cloak across

his nose and looked expectantly at Lucy. “How shall you get my Light back?” he asked,

his big yellow eyes gazing earnestly at her.

“Well, um...first we will need the rescue boat, obviously, and then we’ll need a...”

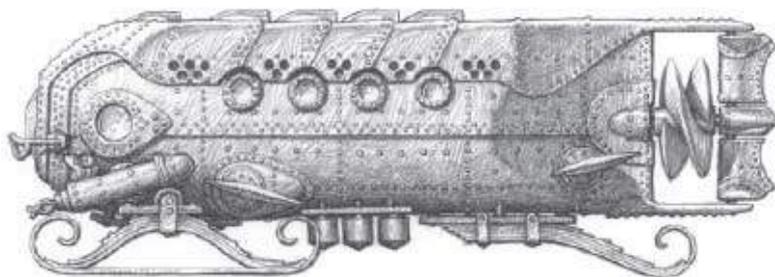
She glanced at Wolf Boy for help.

“A plan,” he said with a grin. “*Obviously.*”

Lucy stuck out her tongue. A smarty-pants boy and a tantrum-prone cat-man were

not going to stop her from getting even with two murderous thugs and their insulting

skipper. No way.



30

THE RED TUBE

Miarr staggered to his feet, but his legs gave way. He sat on the floor of the bunkhouse

shaking. “Leave me alone,” he whimpered. “I am doomed.”

“Now, Mr. Miarr,” said Lucy sternly, “this kind of behavior won’t get your Light

rescued, will it? Wolf Boy and I will carry you.”

“*We will?*” asked Wolf Boy.

“Yes, we will,” said Lucy.

So they did. They carried Miarr—who, happily, was even lighter than he

looked—down the scarily shaking steps until at last they reached firm ground in the well

of the lighthouse. Gently they set him down on the earthen floor and got their breath

back.

“Through there,” said Miarr, pointing to two narrow doors—one black, one

red—hidden in the shadows under the last turn of the steps. “Open the red one, then come

back for me. I must rest for a few moments.”

Wolf Boy took the lamp from its holder on the wall and held it up for Lucy so that

she could see to unlock the door. The key turned easily, and Lucy pushed the door open.

The smell of the sea hit them, and far below they heard the wash of the waves. Lucy

caught her breath in amazement. Wolf Boy, who was usually not impressed by much,

whistled in surprise.

“What is that?” he muttered.

“That is the *Red Tube*,” came Miarr’s voice from the lighthouse. He sounded

amused. “It is the rescue boat.”

“That’s not a *boat*,” said Lucy. “That’s...” She trailed off, unable to find the words

to describe the huge red capsule in front of her.

Wolf Boy stepped up to the *Red Tube*—and gingerly gave it a poke. “It’s metal,” he

said.

“But how can it be metal if it’s a boat?” said Lucy.

Wolf Boy scraped a spot of rust off with his fingernail. “But it is. You know,” he

said, “it reminds me of those stories about people in olden times who used to fly to the

moon in things like that.”

“Everyone knows they’re not true,” said Lucy. “How could you possibly fly all the

way up to the moon?”

“Yeah...well, of course they’re not true. *Obviously*.”

Lucy stuck out her tongue.

“But I used to like the old stories all the same,” said Wolf Boy, tapping the side of

Miarr's boat. It rang like a bell. "We had a nice Chief Cadet for a while—before they

found out that he *was* nice and put him in a Wolverine pit for a week. Anyway, he used to

tell us moon stories, and they were all about things like this."

The *Red Tube* lay cradled between two metal lattice platforms that came halfway up

its sides. It was, Wolf Boy guessed, about fifteen feet long, and had a line of tiny, thick

green glass windows punctuating the sides and a larger one in the front. Through the

glass Wolf Boy could just about make out the shapes of high-backed seats that were

unlike any seats he had ever seen before.

The *Red Tube* rested on two sets of parallel metal rails. The rails extended for about

twenty feet and then took a steep turn downward and descended into the dark, toward the

sound of the waves. Wolf Boy and Lucy peered down, and the lamplight caught the glint

of metal rails disappearing into black water.

"We can't possibly go in that thing," said Lucy, her voice echoing in the cavern.

"But how else are we ever going to get off this lighthouse?" asked Wolf Boy.

"Swim?"

"Crumbs," Lucy said before falling uncharacteristically silent.

Miarr walked shakily through the red door and joined them on the metal platform beside

the *Red Tube*.

"Please open the pilot hatch," he said, pointing to the smallest and farthest of four

hatches ranged in a line along the roof. "Push on the black button in front of it and it will

open."

Feeling as if he were in one of the Chief Cadet's stories, Wolf Boy leaned over the

rescue boat and pushed a black circle of some rubbery kind of material that was set flush

with the metal of the roof. With a faint *whir*, the oval hatch flipped open smoothly, and a

smell of iron and damp leather came from inside of the capsule.

Catlike, Miarr jumped onto the *Red Tube* and disappeared down through the hatch.

Lucy and Wolf Boy watched through the thick green windows as the fuzzy shape of

Miarr strapped itself into the tiny seat in the nose of the *Red Tube* and then, in what

seemed to be a well-practiced maneuver, began turning an array of dials in front of him.

Slowly Miarr's hatch closed, and Lucy wondered if he was going without them. Looking

down at the stomach-churning drop, she thought that she really wouldn't mind if he *did*

go without them. But no such luck; suddenly Miarr's oddly distorted voice came

crackling into the air—how, Lucy and Wolf Boy had no idea.

"Embark *now*, please." Miarr's disembodied voice filled the cavern. The larger hatch

behind the pilot's swung open. "Make haste. The capsule will release in one minute."

"One *minute*?" Lucy gasped.

"*Fifty-nine seconds, fifty-eight, fifty-seven...*" Miarr's countdown began, but Wolf

Boy and Lucy hung back.

"*Fifty, forty-nine, forty-eight...*"

"Oh, crumbs, we're stuck here if we don't," said Lucy, looking panicky.

"Yeah."

"*Forty-one, forty, thirty-nine...*"

"We might never get off the lighthouse. *Ever.*"

"Yeah."

"*Thirty-three, thirty-two, thirty-one...*"

"And we said we'd rescue the Light."

"You said, you mean."

"*Twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three...*"

"Well, get in then."

"You first."

"*Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen...*"

"Ohcrumbshurry *up!*" Lucy clambered onto the rounded metal top of the rescue boat,

took a deep breath and dropped through the hatch. She landed on the seat behind Miarr's,

though she could see nothing of its occupant, as the wide, padded headrest concealed his

neat, sealskin-clad head from view. Lucy looked out the thick green window and saw

Wolf Boy hesitating on the platform.

“*Eleven, ten, nine...*” Miarr’s voice was loud and clear inside the rescue boat.

“Get *in!*” Lucy yelled at the top of her voice and rapped sharply on the glass.

“*Seven, six...*”

“For goodness sake, get in *now!*”

Wolf Boy knew he had to do it. He suspended all hope of surviving for more than

another minute and jumped in. He landed with a *bump* next to Lucy and felt as if he had

landed in his coffin. The hatch closed above him and nailed his coffin lid shut.

“*Five, four...*fasten seat belts, please,” said Miarr. “All crew must wear their seat belts.”

Lucy and Wolf Boy fumbled with two thick leather straps and buckled them across

their laps. Lucy realized that something must have told Miarr that they were fastened, as

the cat-man did not look around but continued his countdown.

“*Three, two, one—release!*”

The *Red Tube* set off deceptively slowly along the first twenty feet of rail, then it

tipped forward. Lucy felt sick. Wolf Boy screwed his eyes shut tight. There was a jarring

clang as the boat’s nose hit the rails—and they were off.

The *Red Tube* was down the rails in less than two seconds. They hit the water with a

deafening *bang* and then—to Wolf Boy’s horror—they kept right on going, down, down,

down into the blackness, just as he had done so many years ago that night in the river

when he had fallen from the Young Army boat.

And then—just as had happened on that night in the middle of the river—the

terrifying dive leveled off, the water loosened its hold and, like a cork, they began to rise

to the surface. Beautiful green light began to shine through the tiny windows and, a

moment later, in a fountain of dancing white bubbles, they broke the surface and sunlight flooded in.

Wolf Boy opened his eyes in amazement— *he was still alive.*

He looked at Lucy. White-faced, she managed a flicker of a smile.

“Launch complete,” said Miarr, his voice still eerily crackly. “Surface successful.

Hatches secure. Commence controlled dive.”

And to Lucy and Wolf Boy’s dismay, the *Red Tube* began to sink once more. The

sunlight changed to green, the green to indigo and the indigo transformed to black. Inside

the capsule a dim red light began to glow, giving a contradictory warmth to the chill that

was seeping in from the cold depths of the sea.

Miarr twisted around to speak to his passengers. His sealskin cap blended into the

shadowy background and his flat, white face shone like a small moon.

His big, yellow

eyes were bright with excitement. Miarr smiled and once again his two lower canine teeth

edged over his top lip. Lucy shivered. He looked very different from the pathetic creature

collapsed on the bunkroom floor whom she had so much wanted to help. She began to

wonder if she had made a terrible mistake.

“Why have we...sunk?” she asked, trying to keep a tremor out of her voice and not

entirely succeeding.

Miarr was obscure. “To find the Light, first we must enter the dark,” he replied, and

turned back to his control panel.

“He’s gone bonkers,” Lucy whispered to Wolf Boy.

“Nuts,” agreed Wolf Boy, who knew he had been right all along about the coffin.

“Totally raving, screaming *nuts.*”



31

SYRAH SYARA

Neither Jenna, Beetle nor Septimus saw the arrival of the *Marauder* that morning—they were all fast asleep in the hideout. The thick layer of grass that Septimus

had laid over the canvas had protected them from being woken by the heat of the sun, and

they had finally emerged close to midday.

Beetle had waded out through the retreating tide to a large rock with a flat top that he

already thought of as his fishing rock, and within half an hour landed three of the black

and silver fish they had enjoyed so much the previous day. While Beetle fished, Septimus

had rebuilt the fire on the beach, and now he was slowly turning the fish over the glowing

embers of driftwood. Beetle was idly drawing in the sand with the WaterGnome, while

Jenna stood, gazing out to sea with a frown.

“That’s odd,” she said.

“It’s meant to be the Wizard Tower sled,” said Beetle, “only the water keeps

splashing and making the lines go funny.”

“No, not your drawing, Beetle. Out there.” Jenna pointed out to sea.

“Look...”

“What?” said Beetle, who was a little shortsighted.

“The lighthouse,” she said. “It’s dark.”

“Yeah,” said Beetle, trying to get the sled runners right in the sand.

“They cover

them with tar. Helps stop the seawater getting into the bricks.”

Septimus stood up and shaded his eyes. “The light’s gone out,” he said.

“That’s what I thought,” said Jenna.

“I wonder why?”

“Maybe the sun’s too bright...”

“Maybe...”

They ate the fish with more of Marcia’s StayFresh bread and some of Jenna’s hot

chocolate. Beetle decided that he wanted to catch some bigger fish.

“There’s some really deep water over there,” he said, pointing to the Pinnacle. “I bet

there are some big fish. I wouldn’t mind seeing what I can catch out there. Would anyone

like to come?”

“I’ll come,” said Jenna.

“Sep?”

Septimus shook his head. “No, I’d better not.”

“Come on, Sep,” said Jenna. “You haven’t been anywhere yet.”

“No, Jen,” said Septimus a little regrettably. “I think I should stay with Spit Fyre. He

doesn’t seem too good, and he hasn’t even drunk any water this morning. You and Beetle

go.”

“Well...okay, Sep,” said Jenna. “If you’re sure...”

Septimus was sure that he should not leave Spit Fyre, though he was not so sure that

he wanted to be left alone once more. But that, he told himself, was just being silly. “Yep,

I’m sure. I’ll be fine with Spit Fyre.”

Septimus watched Jenna and Beetle set off briskly along the beach. At the end of the

bay they clambered up the line of rocks and waved. Septimus returned their waves; he

watched them jump down onto the other side and disappear from sight. Then he turned to

attend to Spit Fyre.

First he checked the dragon’s tail. The HeatCloaks were dark and, when

he touched

them, were stiff and stuck fast to the scales. Septimus was not sure what to do. He was

afraid that pulling them off would do more harm than good, so he decided to leave them

be. He sniffed. Something did not smell too great, but he told himself it was probably the

seaweed that he had packed over the wound. He decided that if the smell got worse by the

afternoon, he would have to investigate.

Back at the bucket end of the dragon, things did not look a lot better. Spit Fyre's eyes

were firmly closed, and however much Septimus prodded him and told him, "Spit Fyre,

wake up and drink," the dragon would not respond. Septimus hoped that maybe Spit Fyre

was sulking because of the bucket on his head, but he was not entirely sure. He thought

the dragon's breathing seemed a little labored and wondered if he was hot, but the rocks

provided almost complete shade and his scales felt quite cool. Septimus picked up the

WaterGnome. He pulled Spit Fyre's lower lip out a little and drizzled some water into his

mouth, but he was not sure whether the dragon actually swallowed it, as much of it

seemed to dribble back out and land in dark patches on the rocks. Disconsolate, Septimus

sat down. He stroked Spit Fyre's nose and murmured, "You are going to be all right, Spit

Fyre, I *know* you are. And I won't leave you until you're better, I promise."

Suddenly Septimus heard a movement in the sand dunes behind him. He jumped up.

"Come out, wherever you are," he said with as much confidence as he could muster,

scanning the apparently empty dunes. He half-closed his eyes—all the better for Seeing

things, as Marcia often said—and there, in the dunes not far away, he did indeed See

something. A girl—he was sure it was a girl—in green.

As if she knew she had been Seen, the girl began walking toward him.

He watched

her head bob through the sand dunes, and as she stepped from the cover of the last dune

onto the beach below, Septimus saw a tall, thin, barefoot girl wearing a tattered green tunic.

Septimus skirted Spit Fyre's bucket and jumped down onto the sand. The girl walked

slowly toward him and, as she drew closer, Septimus could see that she was wearing

what looked like a very old-fashioned Apprentice tunic from the time when they still

embroidered them with Magykal symbols. Two faded purple stripes on the hem of each

sleeve proclaimed that she too was a Senior Apprentice. Her thin, straggly dark hair

framed a careworn face covered in freckles. Septimus had the distinct feeling he had seen

her before—but *where*?

The girl stopped in front of him. Her green eyes regarded him a little anxiously and

then she gave a small formal bow with which, he suddenly remembered, Apprentices in

Marcellus's Time would greet each other. "Septimus Heap," she stated.

"Yes?" Septimus replied warily.

"We have...met before. It is...good...to see you again." The girl spoke, Septimus

thought, as though she were unused to speech.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I...am Syrah. Syrah Syara."

The name was familiar too. But from where?

"You don't remember me, do you?" asked the girl.

"I think I do, but..."

"The Wizard Tower?" the girl prompted.

That was it! Septimus remembered the pictures he had seen on the walls of the

Wizard Tower just before he escaped the Siege—especially the one of the girl aiming a

punch at Tertius Fume. He shook his head in disbelief. Surely this could not be her—that

had happened hundreds of years ago.

"I said hello to you," said the girl.

“*You said hello?*” Now Septimus was completely lost.

“Yes. That is why I know who you are. You are...the Alchemie Apprentice, the one

who mysteriously disappeared. But I congratulate you. You came back, I suppose, and

have taken my place with Julius.”

“Julius?” asked Septimus, puzzled.

“Julius Pike, now *your* ExtraOrdinary Wizard.” Syrah sighed wistfully.

“Oh, what I

would give to see dear Julius once more.”

Septimus felt his whole world shift. What was this girl Syrah saying—that he was

back in that Time *again*? Septimus forced himself to remain calm. He told himself that

nothing had happened to even suggest that they had gone back in Time once more,

unless...unless the storm had something to do with it...or perhaps the weird lighthouse

they had nearly crashed into...or maybe even the lightning bolt? Maybe—maybe once

you had been in a Time you could somehow get dragged back there without even

knowing? No, he told himself, that was not possible. The only explanation was that Syrah

was a ghost. A very solid-looking one, it is true, but island life was obviously good for

ghosts.

“You have a dragon,” said Syrah.

“Yes,” said Septimus.

“I have a confession to make. I have been watching you and your dragon.”

“I know you have. Why didn’t you just come and say hello?”

Syrah did not answer. “Your dragon has its head stuck in a bucket,” she said. “You

should take the bucket off.”

“No way,” said Septimus. “It was hard enough to put it on.”

“*You* put the bucket on? That is most cruel.”

Septimus sighed. “My dragon has a badly injured tail. The bucket is to stop him from

biting the bandages.”

“Oh. I see. I had a cat once and—”

“Really?” said Septimus, somewhat abruptly. He wanted Syrah to go.

Ghost or not,

her talk about Marcellus and Julius Pike unsettled him. He scanned the distant rocks,

hoping to see Jenna and Beetle to bring him back to reality—where were they?

But Syrah showed no inclination to go. She seemed fascinated by Spit Fyre. She

climbed onto the rocks and walked slowly around him. Septimus felt annoyed.

“He needs to rest,” he told her. “He shouldn’t be disturbed.”

Syrah stopped and looked at Septimus. “Your dragon is dying,” she said.

“What?” Septimus gasped.

“His tail smells of the stinking black slush.”

“I thought the smell was the seaweed.”

Syrah shook her head. “No, it is the slush. That will be the reason he has been trying

to bite it off. A dragon knows such things.”

“No...” But Septimus knew that Syrah was right.

Syrah put her hand on Septimus’s arm. Her touch was warm and friendly and it

horrified Septimus—she was *alive*. And if Syrah was alive, what Time were they in now?

He was so shaken that he did not at first take in what she was saying to him. “Septimus,”

she said, “I can save your dragon’s life.”

“You can? Oh, thank you, *thank you*.” A great feeling of hope washed over

Septimus.

“But there is a condition.”

“Ah,” said Septimus, his spirits sinking once more.

“There is something I want you to do in return. And I should tell you, it is a

dangerous thing.”

“What is it?”

“I cannot tell you.”

Septimus met Syrah’s steady stare. He didn’t know what to make of this strange girl

who was looking at him with the same mixture of hope and desperation that he himself

felt.

“And if I don’t agree to do this whatever-it-is, will you still save Spit Fyre?”

Syrah took a deep breath. “No,” she said.
Septimus gazed at Spit Fyre—his big, messy, contrary, galumphing dragon, who he had seen hatch from his egg, an egg that Jenna had given him. His daft, greedy, irritable dragon who had eaten most of the cloaks of the Ordinary Wizards in the Wizard Tower, the dragon who had saved Marcia from her Shadow and done unspeakable things to her carpet—his beautiful dragon was dying. Deep down he knew that he had known it all morning, ever since Spit Fyre had refused to drink. Septimus swallowed hard. He couldn’t let Spit Fyre die, he *couldn’t*. If there was the slightest chance that Syrah could save his dragon he would have to take it. He had no choice. “I will do whatever you want,” he said, “if you will save Spit Fyre. I don’t care what it is, I will do it. Just make Spit Fyre live. *Please.*”
Syrah was brisk and professional. She unwrapped the bandages, and as the last scrap of tattered HeatCloak fell away, Septimus reeled back. The smell of rotting meat was overpowering. The wound was swimming with slime. The bones showed as glimpses of dull yellow islands in a greenish-black sea of slush, and previously healthy scales were peeling back like dead leaves, revealing yet more ominous soft black flesh underneath.
Apart from his shock at the state of Spit Fyre’s tail, Septimus was mortified at the failure of his Physik skills.
Syrah read his expression. “I know Marcellus taught you some Physik, and I am sure you did your best, but you mustn’t blame yourself,” she said. “The stinking black slush comes, as they say, like a wolf in the night and steals people away from even the finest physicians.”
“So what can *you* do?” asked Septimus.
“I shall combine Magyk and Physik. Julius—dear Julius—taught me this. It is

powerful stuff; Julius and Marcellus worked it out together. The effect of Magyk and

Physik used together is more potent than you would expect the combination to be. It was

the very last thing I learned. Julius showed me how to combine them on the very day

before the Draw....” Syrah’s voice trailed off for a moment as she became lost in her

memories.

Ten minutes later Spit Fyre was surrounded by a Magykal cocoon. Septimus had

watched as Syrah made the stinking black slush evaporate in a stream of foul-smelling

black vapor, the stench of which had lingered in the air until Syrah was almost finished.

He had watched Syrah work like a skilled surgeon, handing her a variety of knives, forks

and spoons from Marcia’s Young Army Officer Cadet Hostile Territory Survival Pack,

which she used to scoop out all kinds of unmentionable stuff (Septimus made a mental

note not to use the utensils for supper). Then he had watched as Syrah sprinkled a few

drops of green oil from a tiny silver phial onto the wound and then Engendered a

Magykal purple haze tinged with green. The haze spread over the injured tail and covered

it with a glimmering, transparent gel—something that Septimus had never seen before.

When the gel was set, Syrah showed him how the scales were already turning back to

green and, even as he watched, the flesh was beginning to grow over the bones. A clean,

fresh smell of peppermint now hung in the air.

“Take this.” Syrah handed him the silver phial. “It has an essence that speeds

healing. I can see that his wings are torn in places. When he is stronger take him

somewhere he can spread his wings and drip one drop of oil over each tear—they will

knit together. But for now let him sleep while his tail mends.” She smiled. “Do not worry,

Septimus. He will live.”

“Oh. I...well, *thank you.*” Suddenly overcome, Septimus rushed off to find the

WaterGnome.

This time Spit Fyre drank. He drank until Septimus’s arm ached with holding the

unwieldy gnome, but Septimus did not care. Spit Fyre was going to live and that was all

that mattered.

Syrah watched Spit Fyre drinking. When at last Septimus put down the WaterGnome

she said, “Marcellus gave Julius one of those on MidWinter Feast Day, but it wasn’t quite

like that, it was rather...”

“Rude?” asked Septimus.

“Yes.” Syrah smiled for the first time.

Septimus shook his head. All his certainties were tumbling down like autumn leaves.

Marcellus had given a rude WaterGnome as a gift—if that was possible, anything was.

“I have done as I promised,” said Syrah. “Now will you do as you promised?”

“Yes,” said Septimus. “I will. What is it you want?”

“You do still have your Alchemie Keye?”

Septimus was surprised. “Yes, I do. But how did you know I had the Keye?”

“*Everyone* knew,” Syrah said, her eyes lighting up as she remembered happier days.

“After you left, most people thought you had run away, but in the Wizard Tower it was

said that Marcellus had given you his Keye in exchange for a secret pact. They talked of

nothing else for weeks.”

Septimus smiled. The Wizard Tower had not changed—it was still a hotbed of

gossip.

“But, you know, Marcellus would never speak about it, not even to Julius, who was

his closest friend. I think that upset Julius quite a lot.” Syrah looked sad as she

remembered her much-loved Julius Pike. “Would you show me the Keye, please?” she

asked. “I would love to see it.”

Septimus reached inside his tunic and took his Alchemie Keye from around his neck.

He placed the heavy gold disc in his palm so that Syrah could see it. It lay glinting in the

sunlight, its distinctive boss decorated with the Alchemical symbol for the sun—and

gold—a dot in the center of a circle.

“It is beautiful,” said Syrah.

“Yes, it is. So...what is it you want me to do?” asked Septimus, putting the Keye

back around his neck.

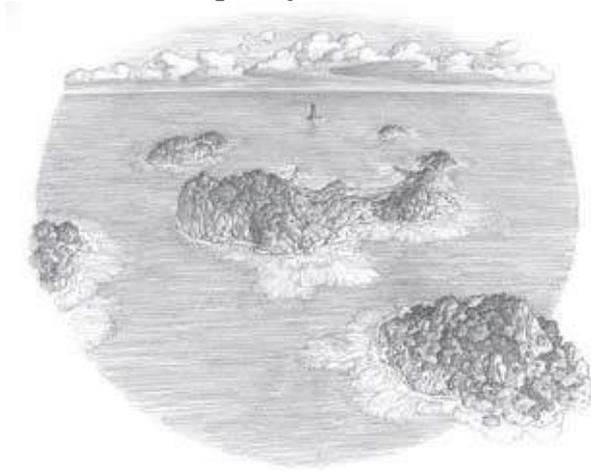
“Come with me and I will explain. Your dragon—Spit Fyre—will sleep until we

return.”

Septimus gave Spit Fyre’s nose a good-bye pat, and then he jumped down after

Syrah onto the beach and followed her into the sand dunes.

His fear for Spit Fyre had lifted—but now he began to fear for himself.



32

MindScreen

Septimus walked with Syrah through the sand dunes and up onto the rock-strewn grass.

He had a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he knew why. It wasn’t the fact that

he was headed off to an unknown danger— *that* he could handle. What he found harder to

deal with was the fact that *he no longer knew what Time he was in.*

Syrah set a fast pace over the rocky grass, heading toward the steep hill that rose up

in the center of the island. Septimus had to almost trot to keep up with

her. At the foot of
the hill was a more defined path, which wound its way up through
scattered rocks. It was
wide enough for only one person, and Syrah went ahead, leaping up the
path with the
practiced ease of a mountain goat. Septimus followed more slowly.
Halfway up the hill, Septimus stopped and turned around, hoping to see
Spit Fyre,
but the dragon was already hidden by the sand dunes. He caught his
breath and then
continued toward Syrah, who was sitting waiting for him, perched on a
rock and as still
as a rock herself.
Septimus walked on slowly, trying to figure things out—was Syrah in *his*
Time or
was he in *her* Time? He wondered if Syrah was a spirit; but she didn't
look much like
one—in fact she looked exactly how he would have expected someone
who had been
stranded on an island to appear—thin and sunburned, her clothes
threadbare.
As Septimus drew near, Syrah pushed her straggly brown hair back
behind her ears
and smiled at him just, he thought, like a real girl would. At her feet a
spring bubbled
from between some flat, mossy rocks, and Septimus got a sudden attack
of goose
bumps—this was the very spring he had so vividly imagined as he had
flown over the
islands. Syrah pulled a battered tin cup from between the rocks and
allowed the water to
trickle into it. She offered it to Septimus as he sat down on the rock
beside her. He drank
the water in one gulp. It was icy cool and tasted a hundred times better
than the warm,
slightly metallic stuff from the WaterGnome.
After three cups of water Septimus felt much more clearheaded. “When
you Called
me, you were sitting right here,” he said.
Syrah nodded. “I was. It is my favorite place on the whole island. That
morning I
looked up, I saw your dragon and I Knew it was you. And I knew if it

was you, you
would—maybe—still have the Keye.”
“But... *how* did you know it was me?” asked Septimus.
Syrah looked surprised. “All Apprentices Know one another,” she said.
She looked
at his Senior Apprentice stripes, which, after the ravages of the storm
and Spit Fyre’s tail
operations, no longer looked new and shiny. “I am surprised Julius has
not taught you
this yet, but he will. He is such a good tutor, is he not?”
Septimus did not answer. He could not bear to think that he might have
slipped back
into Syrah’s Time. He jumped up, desperately hoping to get a glimpse of
Jenna and
Beetle, telling himself that if he could see them, everything would be
fine. But there was
no sign of them, and an awful feeling of being alone on the island,
marooned once again
in a different Time, swept over him.
Syrah was gazing out to sea contentedly, unaware of Septimus’s near
panic. “I am
never tired of this,” she murmured. “I may be tired of everything else,
but not *this*.”
Septimus looked at the scene spread out below him. Four small islands
of green,
flecked with gray rocks and edged with delicate white slivers of beaches,
were strewn
carelessly through the sparkling green-blue sea. He knew from his flight
over the islands
that there were two more little islands on the other side of the hill,
making seven islands
in all. It was breathtakingly beautiful, but all he could think was, *What
Time is it?*
Syrah stood up. Shading her eyes, she looked toward the CattRokk
Light. “This
morning they took the Light,” she said. “And so I came to you. It is
beginning.”
Septimus did not reply. He was completely preoccupied trying to
pinpoint a moment
when he could have possibly slipped back into Syrah’s Time. Was it
before or after Jenna
and Beetle left to go fishing? *Were they in this Time with him or not?* The

more he

thought about it the more his head spun.

“Syrah,” he said.

“Mmm?”

“How did you get here?”

“On a dolphin.”

“On a *dolphin*?”

“It is a long story. Let me give you some advice, Septimus. If you get

Drawn to go

on the Queste, escape while you can.”

“Yes, I know. And that is what I did,” Septimus replied quietly.

“You did?”

“It is also a long story,” he replied in turn.

Syrah regarded Septimus with new respect; there was more to this young
Apprentice

than she had thought. She reached into a pocket in her tattered tunic and
took out a small,

water-stained book. The cover was made of faded blue cloth and was
decorated with

~~Syrah's~~

~~Julius Pike,~~

~~Extraordinary Wizard.~~

hand-drawn signs and symbols, most of which Septimus did not
recognize. In large gold

letters across the front was written:

Syren's Book

Dedicated to:

My Islands

“It was a ship’s logbook,” said Syrah. “I found it washed up on the shore.
It has been my

only true companion on this island, and in it I wrote my story, so that I
could remember

who I am—and who I was. It explains everything. Take it, please, and
give it to Julius

when you return. I wrote it for him, too.

Septimus looked at the names on the cover. “So...are you called Syrah or
Syren?” he

asked.

“Out here I am Syrah.”

“Out *here*?” asked Septimus.

“Read it,” said Syrah, “and you will understand. Later,” she added as
Septimus

began to lift the fragile cover. “Now we must go.”

The path widened after the spring, and Septimus walked beside Syrah toward the

wooded crest of the hill. As they neared the top, Syrah turned to him and said, “What I

am asking you to do is not for me, it is for the Castle. And I think that if you knew what it

is, you would insist on doing it anyway.” She looked at Septimus, her green eyes

squinting against the sun shining behind him, giving his hair a fuzzy golden halo. She

smiled. “Yes,” she said. “I am sure you would.”

“Well, if you’re so sure, why don’t you tell me?” asked Septimus.

“I cannot.”

Septimus began to feel annoyed. “Why not?” he said. “If you want me to do this

dangerous thing, I think the least you could do is tell me what it is and not play games

with me.”

“Because if I tell you, you will know. And if you know, then the Syren will know—”

“The Syren?” asked Septimus. He glanced down at the name on the book:

Syren—the name after Syrah’s name. Syren— *the name that had replaced Syrah’s name.*

A chill ran down his spine; he was getting a bad feeling about the island. Septimus

lowered his voice. “If you cannot tell me what I am to do, then at least I must know what

I am dealing with. Who—or what—is Syren?”

They had now reached the edge of the trees at the top of the hill. “Very well,” said

Syrah. “But before I tell you about the Syren, I must know one thing: Can you do a

MindScreen? If you cannot, then please believe me, it is better you do not know right

now.”

But Septimus could indeed do a MindScreen.

He well remembered the day that Marcia had taught him. From the moment he had

emerged from tidying the Pyramid Library the day had taken on a surreal quality.

Everything he said or did, Marcia had anticipated. She had finished his sentences for him,
answered his unasked questions, fetched a book for him that he was about to go and find
and had played countless other little tricks. By the end of the morning Septimus had felt
as if he were going crazy— *how* did Marcia know what he was thinking and what he
intended to do?
Marcia then insisted they eat lunch together, rather than Septimus going down to the
Wizard Tower canteen as he usually did. Septimus had sat in the little kitchen and eaten
in silence, refusing to be drawn into conversation. He had concentrated hard on
everything on the table and had focused totally on every morsel of the rather good
Wizard Tower Hotpot-of-the-Day that Marcia had had sent up. When he saw Marcia
looking at him with a faintly amused smile, he did not look away but tried to put up a
mental screen between his eyes and hers, thinking only of mundane things. By the end of
dessert—Wizard Tower Chocolate Pie with Sparkles—Marcia was beaming. She put
down her spoon and clapped her hands. “Well *done*, Septimus,” she had said. “I used all
my powers of Reading, and not only did you work out what I was doing, but you also
worked out how to Screen me. Very good! You have mastered MindScreen Stage One all
on your own. We will spend the afternoon on Stage Two—making your MindScreen
undetected. If you manage that we will do Stage Three—allowing you to use decoy
thoughts, which will always give you the upper hand.” She had smiled. “Then you will be
protected against any nosy Being or Wizard—including me.” The afternoon had
progressed well and Septimus had reached Stage Three, although at times his decoy
thoughts had made his Stage Two break down, which Marcia had said

was always a
problem with a beginner but would improve with practice.
“Yes.” Septimus smiled. “I can do a MindScreen.”
“Good,” said Syrah, then like an animal diving into its burrow, she
plunged into the
trees and disappeared. Septimus followed and found himself
momentarily blinded by the
shadows after the bright sunlight. He set off after Syrah with some
difficulty. Despite
being windblown and stunted, the little trees grew close together and
were covered with
tiny, tough, fleshy leaves that snagged and cut at him as he pushed
through. The trees
grew in twisted corkscrew shapes, which reached out in unexpected
directions as though
to deliberately trip him up, but Syrah deftly zigzagged through, dappled
shadows falling
on her threadbare green tunic. She seemed to Septimus like a small
woodland deer,
jumping here, leaping there as she followed a path that only she knew.
Syrah stopped at the far edge of the copse and waited for Septimus to
catch up. As
she stood silhouetted against the bright sunlight, Septimus noticed how
extremely thin
she was. Her threadbare tunic hung from her like a rag on a scarecrow,
and her thin
brown wrists and ankles emerged from the ragged hems like knobby
sticks. She reminded
him of the Young Army boys who would not eat—there had always been
one or two in
each platoon, and they had never lasted long. What, he wondered, had
Syrah’s life been
like on this island?
Septimus joined Syrah at the edge of the trees. In front of them in the
bright sunlight
was a wide, open cliff top jutting out to sea like the prow of a ship. A
great panorama of
sea was stretched beyond, interrupted only by a squat, round brick tower
that had a ring
of tiny windows right at the very top. Syrah put her arm out to prevent
Septimus from
stepping out of the cover of the trees. She pointed to the tower and

whispered, “This is

the Peepe. It is the Dwelling Place of the Syren.” Syrah paused. She took a deep breath

and said, “The Syren is a Possessive spirit. I am Possessed by her.”

At once Septimus understood the cover of the book. Guiltily he felt a surge of

happiness wash over him— *he was still in his own Time*. He remembered the words from

Dan Forrest’s *Basyk Treatise on Possession*: “The curse of the Possessed is to exist for

many hundreds of lifetimes without the knowing of it. It is a form of immortality that

none desire.”

Instinctively Septimus stepped away from Syrah—Marcia had always said that it was

not good to be close to someone who was Possessed.

Syrah looked upset. “It is all right,” she said. “You can’t catch anything. I am only

Possessed inside the Peepe. As I said, outside I am Syrah.”

“So why go into the Peepe at all?”

Syrah shook her head. “When the Syren Calls me, I must come. Besides...” She

yawned. “Oh, excuse me, I am so tired. I stay awake outside for as long as I can, but the

only place I may sleep is inside the Peepe.”

Now Septimus remembered something that Dan Forrest’s *Basyk Treatise* had not

covered—something that he had found in a crumpled scroll at the back of the drawer in

the Pyramid Library desk. It was written by a young ExtraOrdinary Wizard who had

become Possessed by a malevolent spirit Dwelling in a cottage alongside Bleak Creek.

The Wizard had made it back to the Wizard Tower and had been writing his will, at the

beginning of which were the words: “It has been four long days since I walked away

from my Possessor. I choose not to return, and I know I must soon face the final Sleep.”

There followed a description of what had happened to him, along with detailed

instructions to his successor, a list of bequests and a last message to

someone he

described as “his one true love,” which ended in a long trail of ink where the pen had

fallen from his hand as he had finally given way to sleep.

Upset, Septimus had shown the scroll to Marcia. She had explained that if someone

who is Possessed by a Dwelling spirit falls asleep outside the Dwelling Place, they fall

asleep forever.

“But how can people sleep forever?” Septimus had asked, puzzled.

“Well, actually, Septimus,” Marcia had said, “they die. Generally about three

minutes into their sleep.”

That, thought Septimus, explained the dark hollows from which Syrah’s eyes shone

like feverish beacons. “Oh, Syrah,” he said. “I am so sorry.”

Syrah looked surprised. Sympathy was not something she had expected from

Septimus. Suddenly, she was overcome by the enormity of what she had forced him to

agree to do. She stepped over to him and placed her hand on his arm, noticing gratefully

that he did not flinch. “I am sorry that I said I would only save your dragon in return

for...this. That was not right. I release you from your promise.”

“Oh!” Septimus smiled with relief—things were looking better and better. Then he

remembered something. “But you said that if I knew what it was, I would insist on doing

it anyway?”

“I believe you would. The Castle is in grave danger.”

“In *danger*? How?”

Syrah did not answer. “If you give me the Key, I will try to do what needs to be

done.”

Septimus saw the frown lines etched deep in Syrah’s face and her green eyes clouded

with worry. Her thin hands were clasped together, her knuckles white with tension. If

anyone needed his help, she did. “No,” he said. “Whatever it is, I will do it.”

“Thank you,” said Syrah. “*Thank* you. We will do it together.”



33

THE PINNACLE

While *Septimus* was walking into the unknown with Syrah, far below the sea Wolf Boy

and Lucy were deep in their own unknown. Breathing in stale air that smelled of leather,

the cold of the sea numbing their feet, they sat behind Miarr as the *Red Tube* purred

through the depths. Each stared out of a thick glass window, seeing a strange combination

of their wide-eyed, pale reflections and the darkness of the sea beyond. Far above

them—so far that it made them feel a weird inverse vertigo—they could see the Light

moving slowly across the surface of the water, like the moon sailing across a starless sky.

“Mr. Miarr,” said Lucy. “*Mr. Miarr.*”

Miarr’s neat head appeared around the edge of his tall seat, his yellow eyes glinting

in the red glow.

“Yes, Lucy Gringe?” His oddly crackly voice gave Lucy goose bumps.

“Why is your voice funny?” asked Lucy. “It’s weird.”

Miarr pointed to a circlet of wire around his neck. “This makes it so. It is what the

pilot must wear. It is to make it easy to speak to many people in the *Tube* after a rescue. If

it is necessary to be heard in a storm and to inform ships of the danger of the Isles, it will

also carry sound to the outside. My voice is not strong, but with this it is.” Miarr’s head

disappeared back behind his seat.

Now that she knew the reason Miarr sounded so odd, Lucy relaxed a little.

“Mr. Miarr?”

“Yes, Lucy Gringe?” There was a smile in Miarr’s voice as he spoke.

“Why are we so far down? It’s creepy.”

“I wish to follow the Light without being seen. These marauders are bad people.”

“I know,” said Lucy. “But couldn’t we go just a *little* nearer to the surface? They

wouldn’t notice us, surely.”

“It is safer here,” crackled Miarr.

Lucy gazed out, watching the beam of light from the *Red Tube* cut through the

indigo water, illuminating forests of seaweed waving like tentacles, waiting to drag

people into their clutches. Lucy shuddered. She had had enough of tentacles to last her a

very long time. Suddenly something with a big, triangular, spotty head and two huge

white eyes shot out of the weeds, swam up to the window and head-butted it hard. The

Red Tube shook.

Lucy screamed.

“What is *that*?” Wolf Boy gasped.

“It is a cowfish,” said Miarr. “They taste horrible.”

The cowfish’s googly eyes peered in wistfully.

“Oh, it’s *revolting*.” Lucy shuddered. “I bet tons of them live in that weed.”

But it was the sight of real tentacles—thick, white ones with big pink suckers—emerging from the forest of weeds and curling toward the *Red Tube* that finally

did it for Lucy.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!” she screamed.

“Up!” Miarr’s voice crackled, and they shot above the tentacles and the weeds into

brighter waters. The *Red Tube* continued on its way, its pilot skillfully shadowing the

Marauder,

keeping

his

course

some

twenty

feet

below

his

Light.

He

reasoned—correctly—that none of the crew would be looking too closely into the

brilliance that followed them.

Surrounded now by clear green water and more familiar-looking fish, Lucy and Wolf

Boy settled back into their seats and began to enjoy the sensation of flying below the

water, as Wolf Boy put it, dodging between jagged-topped rocks that stretched toward the

sun, stopping just below the surface. Miarr offered them a ration box containing—to

Lucy's delight—a bag of chocolate raisins among the packets of dried fish and bottles of

stale water. The chocolate raisins tasted somewhat fishy, but Lucy didn't care—chocolate

was chocolate. She changed her mind, however, when she realized that the raisins were

tiny fish heads.

Above the water, not so far away, Beetle was having little success with the

familiar-looking fish. He and Jenna were sitting on a large rocky plateau by some very

deep water—so deep that the usual pale green of the sea was a rich, dark blue. They sat

watching the sea lapping against the rocks, peering down, seeing the seaweed on the

rocks moving dreamily with the currents below. Every now and then they caught sight of

fish swimming languidly in the depths, haughtily ignoring Beetle's offering. There were

obviously a lot nicer things to eat down there than hook-buried-in-fish-

head sandwich,
Jenna said.

Beetle was disappointed. After his successes from his fishing rock, he had begun to

see himself as an expert fisherman, but he now realized there was probably more to it

than he thought. He wound in the fishing line.

“Perhaps we should get back to Sep and see how Spit Fyre is,” he said.

Jenna was quick to agree. She did not find fishing the most fascinating of occupations.

They walked across the rocky plateau, dropped down onto a stone-covered beach and

picked their way across the shingle to the next outcrop of rocks. The tide was falling,

revealing a long line of rocks, which stretched out to sea in a gentle curve, as though a

giant had carelessly thrown down a string of massive black pearls. The line ended with a

tall pillar-like rock that Jenna recognized as the one she had seen from their beach and

had called the Pinnacle.

“Look, Beetle,” she said. “Those rocks are like stepping stones. We could run along

them all the way to the Pinnacle. Maybe we could even climb it and wave to Sep. That

would be fun.”

It wasn’t exactly Beetle’s idea of fun, but he didn’t mind—if Jenna wanted to do it

then he was happy to do it too. Jenna clambered down onto the first rock.

“This is great!” She laughed. “Come on, Beetle. See you there!”

Beetle watched Jenna set off, leaping from rock to rock, her bare feet landing surely

on the slippery, seaweed-covered rocks. Less sure of himself, he started after her,

stepping from rock to rock more carefully. By the time he reached the foot of the

Pinnacle, Jenna was already at the top.

“Come on up, Beetle,” she said. “It’s really easy. Look, there are steps.” There were

indeed footholds cut into the rock—and a huge, rusty iron ring hammered into its side.

Beetle climbed up the footholds and joined Jenna on the top. She was

right, he

thought, it *was* fun. Not quite as much fun as a double-whiz turn in the Ice Tunnels, but it

came a very close second. He loved sitting way above the water, feeling the cool breeze

in his hair, listening to the cry of the gulls and the *swish-swash* of the gentle waves

below—and he especially loved sitting there with Jenna.

“Look,” said Jenna, “there’s our bay, but I can’t see Sep anywhere.”

“He’s probably with Spit Fyre,” said Beetle.

“Mm, I hope Spit Fyre’s okay,” said Jenna. “He did smell a bit disgusting this

morning, didn’t he? I mean, more disgusting than usual.”

“Yeah,” said Beetle. “But I didn’t say anything. You know how touchy Sep gets

about stuff like that.”

“I know. It is lovely here, isn’t it? When Spit Fyre is better we must bring Sep up

here. It’s amazing.” Jenna gazed about, taking it all in. She was surprised at how narrow

the island was. There was no more than a rock-strewn spit of land separating what she

thought of as *their* bay from the coast on the other side of the island. She looked up at the

one and only hill, which rose behind them. It too was strewn with rocks and was topped

with a small grove of twisted, wind-stunted trees.

“Yeah, it is pretty special,” said Beetle. They sat for a while, listening to the

occasional cry of gulls and watching the sparkling sea, until suddenly Beetle said,

“There’s a *boat!*”

Jenna jumped up. “Where?”

Beetle carefully got to his feet for a better look. There was not a lot of room on top

of the Pinnacle. He shaded his eyes from the sun, which seemed extra bright when he

looked at the boat.

“Over there,” he said, pointing to a small fishing boat with red sails that had just

come into view at the northern tip of the island.

“It’s so bright,” said Jenna, screwing up her eyes. “I can hardly look at

it.”

“Don’t look at it,” said Beetle suddenly. “It’s *too* bright. I think...oh, how *weird*...I

think they’re towing a great big lamp!”

In the gentle breezes of the early afternoon, the *Marauder* was making slow progress

toward her destination. Skipper Fry had sailed north of the island for a safer approach that

avoided some notorious rocks, but the wind had dropped and it had taken much longer

than he had expected. But now their destination was in sight.

“Jakey!” he yelled. “Keep a lookout. We’re gettin’ near the Lurkers!”

The Lurkers

were a string of jagged rocks scattered around the Pinnacle and lying just below the

surface of the water.

Jakey was lying on the bowsprit, his feet dangling, peering down into the clear green

sea. He was as far as he could get from the weird Light bobbing along behind them, and

as far away as possible from his father and the Crowes, who felt even more menacing

hidden behind their dark eyeglasses. No one had bothered to give Jakey any glasses, so

he had spent the whole trip looking away from the Light with his eyes half-closed. He

stared into the water, amazed at how clear it was, how he could see all the way to the

seabed. There was not much to see, just flat sand, the occasional school of darting fish

and—oh, what was *that*? Jakey let out a shout.

“Port or starboard?” yelled the skipper, assuming Jakey had seen a rock.

“Neither—oh, it’s *huge*!”

“Where, you idiot— *where is it?* ” Skipper Fry fought to keep the panic from his

voice.

Jakey watched a long, dark red shape come up from the depths. He had never ever

seen a fish of that size—or that shape. The shape traveled smoothly under the boat toward

the Light, and Jakey looked away. “It’s gone!” he yelled. “I think it were a whale!”

“Idiot boy!” shouted Skipper Fry. “There’s no whales ’round here.”

Suddenly a yell came from Thin Crowe.

“*What?*” Skipper Fry, so near to his goal, was twitchy.

“There’s some more bloomin’ *kids!*”

“*Where?*”

“On the Pinnacle, Skip. Where you wanna put the Light.”

“I know perfectly well where I want to put the Light, thank you, Mr. Crowe,”

Skipper Fry growled. “And I shall be putting it there very soon, kids or no kids.”

“No kids is best,” said Thin Crowe. “Yer want me ter *remove* ’em?”

“Lurker!” yelled Jakey.

Skipper Fry yanked on the tiller. “Where?” he shouted. “Port or starboard, boy?”

“Starboard,” yelled Jakey.

Skipper Fry shoved the tiller away from him and the *Marauder* sailed past the jagged rock lurking below.

Jakey Fry looked up at the Pinnacle. They were getting closer. He thought it looked

like Lucy on top, though he didn’t see how it could be. But if it was Lucy, he hoped she

got out of the way pretty quick. In fact, he hoped whoever it was got out of the way pretty quick.

With carefully engineered shouts of “Lurker, port!” and “Lurker, starboard!” Jakey

Fry made sure the *Marauder* sailed out of the line of sight of the Pinnacle in the hope that

Lucy Gringe—if it was her—had time to disappear.

In the excitement of nearly reaching their destination, Skipper Fry had forgotten

something that all sailors know—sound travels loud and clear across water. Beetle and

Jenna had heard every word from the *Marauder*, and they were not about to wait around

to be “removed.” They clambered down the Pinnacle and quickly made their way back

across the stepping-stone rocks to the shore. Once on the rocks they ran, dodging for

cover, toward a sweep of sand dunes below the wooded hill. By the time the *Marauder*

came back into view the Pinnacle was once again deserted.

They threw themselves into the soft sand of the dunes and caught their breath.

“They can’t see us here,” Beetle puffed.

“No,” said Jenna. “I wonder what they’re doing?”

“Nothing good, that’s for sure.”

“That boat coming here,” said Jenna, “it’s *horrible*. It feels like...like...”

She

searched for the words.

“Like we’ve been invaded,” Beetle supplied.

“Exactly. I wish they’d go away.”

Beetle did too.

They watched the *Marauder*’s approach. The boat was a dark, fat shape against the

sparkling blue water. Its two triangular foresails billowed gently, its huge mainsail was

out at right angles and its little staysail stuck out at the stern on a spar like a stubby tail.

Behind it followed a great ball of Light, which competed with the afternoon sun—and

won.

The *Marauder* finally made it to the Pinnacle, which stood out like a dark finger,

taller than ever against the retreating tide. Jenna and Beetle watched a hefty figure

clamber onto the landing platform and secure the boat to the iron ring. Then the

Marauder swung around behind the rock so that they could see no more than the

bowsprit and foresails jutting out from one side and the brilliance of the Light on the

other.

For the next hour, Jenna and Beetle watched, through half-closed eyes, a bizarre

operation from behind their sand dune. They saw a ball of brilliant light being laboriously

winched up the Pinnacle until finally, secured by a web of ropes, it balanced precariously

on the flat top.

“What are they doing?” said Jenna.

“I think they’re wrecking,” said Beetle.

“Wrecking—you mean like they used to do on Wild Rocks in the old

days?”

“Yep,” said Beetle, who like all Castle children had grown up with tales of the

terrifying rocky coast beyond the Forest and the wild people there who lived by luring

ships to their doom. “But the really strange thing is, they’re using what looks like an

ancient Sphere of Light. Where could they possibly have gotten that?”

“The lighthouse,” said Jenna. “Remember how we couldn’t see the Light this

morning? They’ve stolen it from the lighthouse.”

“Of *course*,” said Beetle. “Wow, that lighthouse must be incredibly old. This is such

a weird place.”

“And getting weirder all the time,” said Jenna. “Look at *that*.” She pointed out to sea,

where, to the right of the Pinnacle, a long red pipe with a bend at the top was rising from

the water. Beetle and Jenna watched as the pipe swiveled around until it was pointing at

the Pinnacle and stopped. It then stayed motionless. The only movement was from the

white tops of tiny waves breaking over a red rock below the pipe.

“That’s a Looking Tube,” said Beetle. “We’ve got—I mean, *they’ve* got—one like

that in the Manuscriptorium. It goes down into the UnStable Spell room so that

we—they—can keep an eye on what’s going on.”

“So there’s someone watching from *under the sea*?” said Jenna.

“Looks like it,” said Beetle. “Like you said, it’s getting weirder all the time.”



34

THE Syren

Septimus and Syrah were walking across the springy turf of the cliff top toward the

Peepe. A stiff breeze blew, bringing with it the smell of the sea.

“Septimus,” murmured Syrah, “there are some things I must tell you, but I will look

at the ground while I speak. The Syren can read what you say by looking at your lips.”

“She can see us?” asked Septimus, a shiver running through him.

*“She Watches through the windows at the top— *do not look up*. I need to tell you this*

in case things go wrong—”

“Don’t even think like that,” Septimus warned.

“But for your sake, I must. I want to tell you how to escape.”

“I won’t need to,” said Septimus. “We will walk back out together. Like this.” He

took hold of Syrah’s hand. Syrah smiled.

“But, just in case,” she insisted. “You need to know that once you are inside the

Peepe, the entrance will disappear—though it is still there. Make a mark on the floor as

we go in. Also, in the Deeps—”

“The Deeps?”

“Yes, this is where we must go. You will see why when we are there.
You have the

Key hidden under your tunic?”

Septimus nodded.

“Good. Now, if you need to escape from the Deeps, there are some steps
that go back

up to the Peepe, but do not take them unless you absolutely have to.
They are bedded

deep inside the rock, and the air is unsafe. There are steps from the
Lookout, which is a

line of windows in the cliff, and those are fine. You will find them
opposite the middle

window. All right?”

Septimus nodded, even though he felt far from all right.

They had reached the shadow of the Peepe. “Turn around and look at the
sea,” said

Syrah. “Is it not beautiful?”

Septimus glanced at Syrah, puzzled. It seemed odd to be admiring the
sea at such a

moment—but then he realized what Syrah was doing, and he turned
away from the

Watching windows of the Peepe.

They looked out across the shimmering heat haze, and Septimus saw yet
another

island—a rounded green hillock with a tiny strip of white beach—set in
the sparkling

azure sea. The sun shone warm on the breezy cliff top, and he breathed
in the salt air,

savoring it as if he were taking his last breaths.

“Septimus,” whispered Syrah, “I must warn you that when we go into
the Peepe,

there will be a few horrible moments while, um, things happen to me. At first I will not

be in control of my body, but do not be alarmed. Count *slowly* to one hundred and by

then I will—unless something goes wrong—be able to do what I want. I shall not,

however, be able to say what I want—the Syren has a way with words. So remember this:

Trust only my actions, not my words. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand, but..."

"But what?"

"Well, what I don't understand is, surely the Syren will wonder why I am there—I

mean, I don't suppose you often bring your friends home?" Septimus attempted a smile.

Syrah stared at the brilliant blue. "No, I don't," she murmured. "But the Syren will

welcome you. She has said that she wishes for others, that she is tired of me. You do

appreciate what I am saying?" Syrah asked. "This is a dangerous thing for you to do. You

can still walk away, back into the sunshine."

"I know I can," Septimus said, "but I am not going to."

Syrah gave him a relieved smile. She turned, and together they walked the last few

yards to the Peepe. They stopped in front of the ancient rounded archway, which was

filled with a shifting darkness that Septimus recognized from the description in the young

ExtraOrdinary Wizard's will.

Syrah turned to him, her eyes anxious. *MindScreen*, she mouthed. Septimus nodded

and squeezed Syrah's hand. Together they stepped through the shadows—and into the

surprising brightness of the Peepe. Syrah dropped Septimus's hand as though it had

suddenly burned her and ran to the far wall of the tower, putting as much distance

between them as possible.

Septimus was on his own.

Quickly he marked an X in the earthen floor with the heel of his boot. With his

MindScreen running comforting memories of an afternoon at the Spring Equinox fair

with Jenna and Beetle, he glanced at Syrah on the opposite side of the tower. She was

pressed against the wall wearing the expression of a hunted rabbit. Septimus felt sick. He

looked away and began to systematically examine the inside of the Peepe, noting

everything as carefully as if he were doing a homework project for Marcia.

The inside walls of the Peepe were covered in rough white plaster. Light streamed

through the line of tiny windows that ran around the top, throwing long, bright strips of

sunlight on the pressed earthen floor, in the middle of which Septimus saw a bright circle

of light, edged with stone. The only item of furniture was a rusty metal library ladder on

wheels, which was suspended from a circular rail running just below the lookout slits. A

tiny metal chair was perched on top of it and—yes, now he saw it—in the chair was the

faint blue shape of a woman. This, Septimus guessed, was the Possession Wraith of the

Syren.

Extremely ancient ghosts can sometimes look like Possession Wraiths, especially if

they lose interest in being ghosts, as some do after many thousands of years, but

Septimus knew how to tell the difference between a Wraith and a ghost. You wait until it

moves—a ghost will keep its form, while a Wraith will not. Septimus did not have to wait

long. The shape stretched into a long ribbon of ice-blue particles that began to spin like a

tiny tornado. It streamed out of the chair, flew around the line of windows three times,

gathering speed as it went, before diving down and heading straight for Syrah.

From across the tower, Syrah cast a panicky glance at Septimus. *Trust me*, she

mouthed—and then she was gone. The swirl of blue spiraled over her

head and

enveloped her in a glowing blue outline. Syrah was Possessed.

Septimus shuddered. He took a deep breath and began to count to one hundred.

Marcia had once told Septimus that it was a truly terrible thing to see a human being

Taken by a Possession Wraith. He now understood why—the new Syrah was a travesty.

She came pirouetting toward him, spinning like a dancing child—pointing her toes,

waving her hands, grinning an empty smile. Septimus could hardly bear to look. She

reminded him of the life-size puppets he had seen at the Little Theatre in the Ramblings

not long ago. He had found them extremely creepy—and so had Marcia, whom he had

dragged along with him. “Like skeletons on strings,” Marcia had said.

Syrah-on-a-string reached Septimus and, still twirling and prancing, began to speak,

but not in her own voice. “She has betrayed you, Septimus,” the Syren’s deep, resonant

voice taunted while Syrah did a little clockwork dance. “She has brought you here at my

command. And hasn’t she done it so very cleverly? Good girl, oh, I *am* a good girl. He

will do well, and he is more Magykal than you, Syrah. And how I shall enjoy singing in a

boy’s voice—so much purer than that of a girl.”

Septimus was suddenly convinced that Syrah had indeed betrayed him. He looked

into her eyes to try to see the truth, and looked away in horror—they were covered in a

milky white film. It was then that a thought came to him, safely hidden below his

MindScreen. If Syrah had brought him to the Peepe at the Syren’s command, why had

she told him how to escape? He glanced behind him to check whether the entrance to the

tower had indeed disappeared. It had—but his X was still there.

Syrah caught his panicky glance. “There is no escape,” she said, laughing. “She

didn’t tell you that.”

Septimus ran a series of decoy thoughts about how much he hated Syrah for what she

had done, but underneath them he began to have some hope. If the Syren really did think

that Syrah had not told him about the disappearing entrance, then that must mean Syrah

was successfully running her own MindScreen—unless, of course, the Syren was double

bluffing. Septimus's head spun with the effort of keeping his MindScreen going—now

creating a full panic about the Syren—and below it trying to keep calm and work things

out.

The puppet Syrah pranced around him, picking at his hair, pulling at his tunic, and it

was all Septimus could do to stand his ground and continue his slow count to one

hundred. He reached the nineties with Syrah skipping around him in circles, giggling like

a banshee, and he began to fear that Syrah could not get control. Doggedly Septimus

continued his count and, to his relief, as he reached ninety-seven, Syrah abruptly stopped,

shook her head and took a long, shuddering breath. The macabre dancing doll was no

more.

Syrah turned to Septimus, gave him a crooked smile and, very slowly, as though she

were getting used to her body again, she pointed at the bright circle in the middle of the

floor. She nodded, ran toward it and, to Septimus's amazement, leaped in and

disappeared. A gentle *thump* followed, and a few feathers drifted up.

Septimus ran to the edge of the hole and looked in, but all he could see was feathers.

It was decision time. Right now he could just walk out through the wall where his X was

marked and never see Syrah again. Thanks to Syrah, Spit Fyre would soon be well. He,

Jenna and Beetle could leave the island, and he could forget all about her. But Septimus

knew that he would never be able to forget Syrah. He closed his eyes and

jumped.

He landed in a blizzard of gulls' down. Coughing and spluttering, he staggered to his

feet. As the feathers settled, he saw Syrah waiting for him in a narrow archway at the top

of a ladder. She beckoned to him. Septimus waded across the chamber, climbed the

ladder and they set off along a narrow white passageway hewn through the rock. Syrah

set a brisk pace, the padding of her bare feet drowned by the sound of Septimus's boots

as he followed. The passage took them past a long line of windows that Septimus

recognized as the Lookout, and as they went by the middle window, he saw the entrance

to the escape stairs. He began to feel a little more confident.

Septimus followed Syrah around two more bends to a dead end—the passageway

was blocked by a wall of a shiny and incredibly smooth substance. Syrah placed her palm

on a worn spot on the right-hand side of the wall. A green light glowed beneath her hand

and then a concealed oval door slid open so silently that he jumped back in surprise.

Septimus stepped over the threshold and followed Syrah into a small, round chamber

with walls, floor and ceiling made of the same shiny black material. Syrah pressed her

hand against another worn spot beside the door, a red light glowed, and the door slid

closed. Very deliberately, Syrah walked over to a faint orange arrow that looked, thought

Septimus, as though it was floating just below the surface of the wall—like a swimmer

trapped below ice. He shivered, knowing that now he too was trapped. Syrah pressed the

arrow, which pointed toward the floor, and Septimus suddenly had a terrifying sensation

of falling.

Septimus leaned against the wall. He felt sick, and his stomach seemed to have shot

up to his ears. He checked the floor—it was still there—so why did he

feel as though he
were falling at breakneck speed?
“Because we are,” said Syrah in the rich, resonant voice of the Syren.
With a stab of fear, Septimus realized that his MindScreen had slipped.
Quickly he
reinstated it with some decoy thoughts of his meeting with Wolf Boy on
the
Causeway—a meeting that felt like years rather than days ago. He
glanced at Syrah, but
she was staring at the orange arrow, which was slowly moving
downward. Septimus
decided that the safest option was to react as normally as he could.
“How can we be falling and yet still be in the same place?” he asked.
“We can be many things at the same time,” Syrah replied. “Especially in
an ancient
place like this.”
“Ancient?” Septimus asked politely, changing his MindScreen to a mild
interest in
what Syrah was saying.
“I have known this place since the Days of Beyond,” she said.
“But that’s not possible,” said Septimus, shocked. “*Nothing* goes back to
the Days of
Beyond. There is nothing left from that Time.”
“Except this,” replied Syrah, waving her hand around the chamber. She
ran her
finger along the wall, and a dull orange light followed its path, fading as
she took her
finger away.
Septimus was so intrigued that for a moment he forgot who he was
talking to. “Is it
Magyk?” he asked.
“It is Beyond Magyk,” was the reply.
Suddenly Septimus’s stomach dropped to his feet.
“We are here,” announced Syrah.
With his MindScreen busy wondering about the Days of Beyond,
Septimus noted
that the orange arrow now pointed up. Syrah walked across the chamber,
and Septimus
watched how she once again put her hand on a small area where the
shine was dulled
from use. A green light briefly glowed under her hand, and an oval door
on the opposite

side of the chamber slid open. A waft of dank air came through. Syrah's resonant tones filled the chamber. "Welcome to the Deeps," she said.



35

THE DEEPS

Septimus and Syrah stepped into a wide, brick-lined passageway lit by the same hissing

white lamps that Ephaniah Grebe favored in the cellars of the Manuscriptorium.

The temperature fell steadily as they walked, and Septimus could see his breath

frosting the air. He concentrated on his MindScreen—his walk the previous year along

the Outside Path with Lucy Gringe. He wondered why that sprang to mind, and then

realized that that walk into the unknown had led him into deep trouble. He had a distinct

feeling that this one might be doing the same. He glanced down at his Senior Apprentice

stripes, their Magykal sheen still visible below the stains from Spit Fyre's tail, and told

himself that whatever he had to do right now, he could do it. He was, he reminded

himself, the only Apprentice ever to complete the Queste.

The passage wound steadily to the left and, after a few minutes, they reached a wide

flight of steps, at the foot of which was a massive wall of the same black shiny material

that had formed the moving chamber. Septimus could see the rectangular shape of a wide

doorway set into it, and he guessed that they were near their journey's

end.

As
they
walked
down
the
steps,
Syrah's
deep
Syren
voice
suddenly—shockingly—rang out. “The boy comes no further.”
Septimus froze.

Syrah shook her head. Frantically she beckoned him forward, while her
Syren voice

countermanded. “Stand back! Do not touch the entrance!”

Septimus stood back. Not because he was obeying the voice, but because
there

seemed to be some kind of battle going on between Syrah and her
Possessor, and he

wanted to keep his distance. He watched Syrah move her hand up toward
the worn

opening panel beside the door with an odd, juddering action, and he
could see the

muscles in her arms straining as, with a huge effort, she forced her hand
onto the panel.

Slowly the door hissed open, and Syrah walked forward in the manner of
a mime artist

pushing against an imaginary gale. With great trepidation, Septimus
followed.

The door closed behind them. A faint click cut the air and a blue light
came on.

Septimus gasped. They were in a soaring cavern hewn from deep inside
the rock. Above

his head long stalactites hung, glittering in the ethereal blue light—and at
his feet was the

biggest Ice Tunnel hatch he had ever seen. Septimus was shocked.

It was not the massive size of the hatch that shocked Septimus—it was
the fact that it

was swimming with water. The slightly rounded bulge of the hatch
emerged like an

island from a sea of gritty gray swash that covered the cavern floor. For

the very first

time Septimus saw an Ice Tunnel hatch without its protective covering of ice, and it was

impressive. It was a solid lump of dark burnished gold, with a raised silver Sealing Plate

in the center. Into the gold was inscribed a long line of tightly packed lettering that began

at the Sealing Plate and wound in a spiral to the edge.

Syrah's wavering finger pointed at the hatch. Her other hand went to her neck, then

sprang away, grabbed her pointing finger and forced it down. Now Septimus understood

what he was here for: Syrah wanted him to Seal the hatch with the Key. He didn't know

why there was an Ice Tunnel here, and he didn't know why it was UnSealed, but what he

did know was that he had to act fast. Syrah was losing control of her actions. Quickly he

took the Alchemie Keye from around his neck, got down on his hands and knees in the

ice-cold water and held the Keye above the Sealing Plate. He felt Syrah's gaze on the

back of his neck and glanced up. Her white eyes were watching him with the expression

of a wolverine about to pounce.

Suddenly Syrah lunged at the Keye and snatched it. Septimus leaped to his feet and

then, bizarrely, with her muscles shaking from the effort of fighting the will of the Syren,

Syrah very deliberately placed the Keye back in his hand and her mouth formed the

words *Run, Septimus, run*. With a sudden inner force, her body was thrown to the floor,

and she lay sprawled in the pool of melted ice.

Septimus stood for a moment irresolute, wondering if he could somehow save Syrah,

but then he saw a telltale blue mist emerging from her prostrate form. He came to his

senses and slammed his palm against the worn panel in the black wall. The door hissed

open. Behind him he saw the Possession Wraith rising from Syrah like a crab leaving its

shell, and he ran.

Praying that the door would close before the Syren could reach it, Septimus hurtled

up the steps, his boots clattering on the stone. As he reached the top, he turned just in

time to see the Wraith of the Syren squeezing through the ever-diminishing gap.

Septimus did not wait to see more. He tore along the curving, brick-lined passage, which

seemed to go on forever, but at last he saw the shiny black wall of the moving chamber.

He knew that his only chance was to get into the chamber and close the door *fast*.

He skidded to a halt in front of the featureless wall. *Where was the door?* He took a

deep breath— *concentrate, concentrate*, he told himself. Suddenly he saw the worn spot

where Syrah had placed her hand. He put his palm onto it, a green light glowed beneath,

and the door opened briskly. Septimus leaped through and slammed his hand onto the

corresponding worn spot on the other side. As the door began to close, he saw the Syren

appear around the last bend in the corridor, so close that Septimus could see her

features—her long wispy hair blowing as if in a ghostly breeze, her milky eyes staring at

him, her thin, bony hands stretching toward him. It was a terrifying sight, but there was

something even worse. Running in front of her were *Jenna and Beetle*—who screamed,

“Wait, Septimus! Wait!”

Before he had time to react, the door closed.

Septimus discovered he was shaking. From the other side of the door he heard Jenna

and Beetle shrieking, *“Help! Let us in, let us in!”*

It was—he *knew* it was—a Projection. Jenna and Beetle had looked exactly as they

had in his MindScreen, with Beetle wearing his Manuscriptorium uniform—not his fancy

new Admiral’s jacket, which he had so far refused to take off. But the Projection spooked

Septimus badly; the Syren was powerful—she could make Projections *speak*.

Septimus knew he had to get the chamber moving. Ignoring the pleading of the

Projections, he went over to the orange arrow—but as he stooped to press it, the Syren’s song began.

Septimus was utterly transfixed. His hand fell limply to his side as he realized that all

he wanted to do was listen to the most beautiful sound in the world. How, he wondered,

had he ever managed to live his life without it? Nothing— *nothing*—had meant anything

to him before this. It was exquisite. The song looped and soared through the chamber,

filling his heart and mind with a feeling of joy and hope, because in a moment, when he

opened the door and let the Syren in, his life would be complete. *This* was everything he

had ever wanted. Dreamily he wandered back toward the door.

As Septimus’s palm hovered over the opening panel, brilliant images cascaded

through his mind: endless days on sunny beaches, swimming lazily in warm green seas,

laughter, joy, friendship. He felt as though he were surrounded by all the people he

loved—even Marcia was there. Which was, he suddenly thought, a little odd. Would he

really want Marcia here on this island with him? An image of Marcia looking

disapproving filled his head, and for a brief second it displaced the Syren’s song.

That second was enough. Keeping images of Marcia’s most disapproving moments

firmly in his mind—which was easy, as there were so many to choose from—Septimus

stepped quickly over to the orange arrow and pressed hard. With Marcia telling him that

he was late again just because he had been skulking in the backyard of the

Manuscriptorium drinking that disgusting stuff with Beetle what was it called—FizzBoot?

And did he really think he had the right to put the stairs on emergency mode and

inconvenience all the hard-working Wizards going about their business—he was sadly

mistaken the chamber gave a lurch, Septimus’s stomach dropped to his toes, and he knew

he was moving up.

Septimus spent the journey in the company of an irate Marcia striding into Marcellus

Pye’s house demanding *what Septimus thought he was doing there* until at last the

chamber stopped. Quickly he pressed the opening panel, the door slid open and—to the

accompaniment of Marcia complaining about Spit Fyre’s hygiene or, to be precise, lack

thereof—Septimus ran. As he ran he heard the Syren’s voice screaming up from the

depths, “I shall come for you, Septimus, and *I shall find you...*”

Septimus shot up the narrow escape stairs, which were hewn out of the rock of the

cliff, and emerged through a Hidden exit into the Peepe. He saw his X still marked in the

earthen floor, took a deep breath and ran straight at the apparently solid wall behind it.

Suddenly he was standing on the springy grass of the cliff top, breathing in the fresh,

warm air.

Syrah had told the truth.



36

CHIEF CADET

Septimus raced away from the Peepe, wondering how long it would take the Wraith of

the Syren to swirl up the escape stairs and come after him. He dived into the cover of the

trees and immediately began a basic SafeShield—something that did not need too much concentration.

He topped it up with a Silent UnSeen and set off through the copse, hoping that the

Syren did not have the ability to See the telltale signs of Magyk—as some Entities did.

When he emerged on the other side of the trees, Septimus took a shorter, steeper path

down the side of the hill that led to the cover of the dunes below.

As he half ran, half slid down the side of the hill, Septimus could not get the image

of Syrah sprawled in the water out of his head. It took him right back to the time he had

seen a Young Army boy left for dead in the shallows of the river, and memories of

Young Army exercises in the Night Forest began to haunt him. Besieged by his thoughts,

Septimus made his way through the dunes and was startled when he

stumbled into Jenna

and Beetle—but not half as startled as they were.

“Argh!” shouted Jenna, swiping the air. “Beetle, help! There’s something here! Get

it, get it—oh! Sep, it’s *you*. What are you doing?”

Septimus had very rapidly removed his UnSeen, but not before Beetle landed a

swipe on his arm. “Ouch!” he yelped.

“Sep!” gasped Beetle. Then, seeing Septimus’s expression, he asked with concern,

“Hey, what’s up—it’s...it’s not Spit Fyre, is it?”

Septimus shook his head. At least that was one thing he did not have to worry about,

thanks to Syrah.

Sitting in the sand dunes, watching the orange ball of the sun sink behind a strip of clouds

on the horizon, outlining it with brilliant pinks and purples, Septimus told them what had

happened.

At the end of his story there was silence. Then Jenna said, “That was a crazy thing to

do, Sep, going into a creepy tower with that Syrah girl—or whatever she was. Some kind

of island spirit, I suppose.”

“Syrah’s *not* an island spirit,” said Septimus. “She is a real person.”

“So why didn’t she come and say hello to us like a real person would?” asked Jenna.

“Syrah *is* real,” Septimus insisted. “You don’t understand because you haven’t met

her.”

“Well, I hope I don’t,” said Jenna with a shiver. “She sounds weird.”

“She is *not* weird.”

“Okay, no need to get cranky, Sep. I’m just so glad you got out of there, that’s all.

You were lucky.”

“*She* wasn’t,” muttered Septimus, staring at his feet.

Jenna shot Beetle a glance as if to say, *What do you think?* Beetle shook his head

imperceptibly. He really didn’t know what to make of Septimus’s story—and in

particular the description of the Ice Tunnel hatch. Beetle cast his mind back to the

previous week in the Manuscriptorium Vaults, when Marcia had allowed him to see the

Live Plan of the Ice Tunnels—or had she? He knew he hadn't seen an Ice Tunnel going

out under the sea—he would have remembered *that*. But Beetle also knew that the fact

that he hadn't seen it did not mean anything; Marcia could easily have Obscured some of

the information. Everyone in the Manuscriptorium knew that the ExtraOrdinary Wizard

only showed you what she wanted you to see. But, even so, he found it hard to believe.

“You sure it was an Ice Tunnel hatch, Sep?” he asked. “They're not usually that

big.”

“I know that, Beetle,” Septimus snapped. “And I also know an Ice Tunnel hatch

when I see one.”

“But an Ice Tunnel out here...it's an awful long way from the Castle,” said Jenna. “It

would have to come all the way under the sea.”

“Yes, I *have* thought of that,” said Septimus. “I'm not making this up, you know.”

“No, of course you're not,” said Beetle hastily. “But things aren't always what they

seem.”

“Especially on an island,” added Jenna.

Septimus had had enough. He stood up, brushed the sand off his tunic and said, “I'm

going back to see Spit Fyre. He's been on his own all afternoon.”

Jenna and Beetle got up. “We'll come too,” they said together, and then grinned at

each other, much to Septimus's irritation.

A movement out at the Pinnacle suddenly caught their attention. They ducked into

the dunes once more and peered out. The *Marauder* was on the move. They lay in the

sand and watched it go, but the boat did not, as they hoped, head safely out to sea. Instead

it turned to the right and took a course along the island, heading around the rocks that ran

from Spit Fyre's hideout. The *Marauder* was a fine-looking boat, despite

those who

sailed her, and she made a lyrical picture silhouetted against the darkening sky lit with the first few stars.

“This island is such a beautiful place,” said Beetle with a sigh as he watched the

Marauder finally disappear behind the rocks. “It’s so difficult to believe that anything bad could happen here.”

“There’s a Young Army saying,” said Septimus. ““Beauty Lures the Stranger More Easily into Danger.””

Night had fallen and the Light shone like a tiny, brilliant moon. As Septimus, Jenna and

Beetle emerged from their hiding place and began their walk along the beach, they did

not see a new arrival at the base of the Pinnacle. A long red capsule rose from the water,

flipped open a hatch and disgorged three bedraggled figures. The smaller figure swarmed

up the Pinnacle like a large bat and settled itself beside the Sphere of Light. If anyone had

turned back and looked, he or she might have seen the tiny black shape of Miarr outlined

against the glowing white ball, but no one did. The Light was something they all

instinctively avoided looking at. It was achingly bright.

It was tough going on the beach. Septimus insisted that they walk in the soft sand under

the cover of the sand dunes, and he also insisted that Jenna and Beetle go first.

“Can’t we walk on the sand farther down?” asked Jenna. “It would be so much easier.”

“Too exposed,” said Septimus.

“But it’s getting dark now. No one can see us.”

“They could on the beach. Figures stand out on a beach. It’s an empty space.”

“I suppose there’s a Young Army saying for that too.”

“A Lone Tree Is Easy to See.”

“There were some really bad poets in the Young Army.”

“There’s no need to be so critical, Jen.”

Jenna and Beetle stumbled on, followed by Septimus, who, Beetle noticed whenever

he glanced back, seemed to be walking in an oddly crablike way. “You all right?” asked

Beetle.

“Fine,” Septimus replied.

They drew near to the rocks that bordered what they thought of as their bay. Jenna

was about to jump onto them when Septimus stopped her.

“No,” he said. “The Syren—she’ll see us.”

Jenna was tired and snappy. “How *can* she, Sep? We can’t see the tower thingy from

here, so she can’t see us.”

“Besides, with a Dwelling Possession Wraith, it’s not a problem,” said Beetle.

“Unless we’re crazy enough to go *into* the tower.”

“She said she’d come and find me, Beetle,” said Septimus. “You weren’t there.”

“I know, but...well, think about it, Sep. I figure it—and it is an ‘*it*,’ not a ‘she’—I

figure it meant it would come and get you *in the tower*. It thought you were trapped

there—right? It didn’t know you knew how to get out. So it’s probably zooming around

right now looking for you. Or maybe it’s given up and gone back to—”

“Just shut up, Beetle. Okay?” Septimus snapped. He couldn’t bear to think of the

Syren going back to Syrah.

“Yeah, okay, Sep. It’s been a tough day, I can see that.”

Septimus knew that what Beetle said made sense, but he could not get rid of a

growing sense of threat. The fact remained that he had failed to do what Syrah had asked

of him. The Ice Tunnel was still UnSealed, and something told him that Syrah’s talk of

the threat to the Castle meant more than just an UnSealed Ice Tunnel hatch. But he didn’t

see how he could make Jenna and Beetle understand. So all he said was, “I don’t care.

We are *not* going over the rocks—it is too exposed. We go into the dunes single file

under battle silence—”

“*Battle silence?*” Beetle sounded incredulous.

“*Shh!* This is serious—as serious as any Do-or-Die exercise in the Forest. Okay?”

“No, but I don’t suppose it matters. It looks like you’ve pretty much decided to be

Chief Cadet,” Beetle observed.

“*Someone* has to be,” Septimus replied. He had never admitted it to himself while he

was in the Young Army, but he had always harbored a sneaking ambition to make it to

Chief Cadet. “You go first, men,” he said, getting into role.

“*Men?*” Jenna objected.

“You can be a man too, Jen.”

“Oh, *great*. Thank you so much, Sep.” Jenna made a face at Beetle, who grimaced in

return.

“But—” Beetle began.

“*Shh.*”

“No, you listen to me, Sep,” said Beetle. “This is important. If you’re so convinced

that the Possession Wraith is going to come out and find you, I think you’ve forgotten

something. All it has to do is follow our footprints and then later, when we are all asleep

in our hideout...”

Jenna shuddered. “Beetle— *don’t*.”

“Sorry.” Beetle looked abashed.

“There aren’t any footprints to follow,” said Septimus. “That’s why I’m going last.

To scruffle them.”

“To *what?*” asked Beetle and Jenna.

“Technical term.”

“*Scruffle*—a technical term?” said Beetle, half laughing.

But Septimus was deadly serious. “It’s a Young Army thing.”

“Thought it might be,” muttered Beetle.

“It’s the way you move your feet in the sand. Look, like this—” Septimus

demonstrated his crablike shuffle. “See, you *scruffle* them. If you do it properly, it makes

it impossible for anyone to pick out your footsteps, but only in soft sand. It doesn’t work

in firmer sand, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

Jenna and Beetle set off into the dunes with Septimus behind them. He directed them

to a path that was deep and narrow, like a miniature canyon. It was fringed at the top with

the coarse grass of the dunes, which arched protectively above their heads and formed a

secluded tunnel. Sheltered from the brightness of the Light, Septimus’s Dragon Ring

began to glow, and he pulled his purple-banded sleeves down to hide it.

Septimus was pleased with his choice. The path took them parallel to their beach,

and led to a spot just before the hideout. By the time they emerged, the sky was sprinkled

with stars and the high tide was on the turn. They headed straight for Spit Fyre.

The dragon was sleeping a healthy, gently snoring, dragon sleep. Jenna patted his

soft, warm nose and Beetle commented favorably on the bucket. Then, a little fearfully,

everyone went to look at his tail. At once they knew it was all right; the tail no longer

stuck straight out like a felled tree but now curved gently in its usual way—and it smelled

fine. A faint scent of peppermint still hung in the air, which reminded Septimus of Syrah.

A feeling of sadness swept over him at the thought of her.

“I’ll just sit with Spit Fyre a while,” he said to Jenna and Beetle. “Okay?”

Beetle nodded. “We’ll go and fix some *WizDri*,” he said. “You come down when

you’re ready.”

Septimus sat down wearily against Spit Fyre’s neck, which was still warm from the

sun. He reached into his pocket and took out the little water-stained book that Syrah had

given him and he began to read. It didn’t make him feel any better.

While Beetle tended an improbable combination of *WizDri* in a pan on the FlickFyre

stove, Jenna sat and watched the tide creep slowly out. Her thoughts drifted to Nicko. She

wondered if the *Cerys* had set sail. She imagined Nicko at the massive

mahogany wheel,
in charge of the beautiful ship, and a little twinge of regret crept into her mind. She would like to be standing on deck with Nicko, spending time with him as her big brother once more, just like it used to be, and then going below to sleep in her beautiful, comfortable, sand-free cabin. Jenna remembered the tiny gold crown that Milo had painted on her cabin door and smiled. The crown had embarrassed her at the time, but now she saw that Milo had done it because he was proud of her. Jenna sighed. She felt badly about the way she had behaved...maybe she shouldn't have left like she did. Beetle heard the sigh. "Missing Nicko?" he asked. Jenna was surprised that Beetle had guessed her thoughts. Septimus appeared. "Quiet, Beetle," he said. "This is a silent camp." Beetle looked up. "A *what?*" he said. "Silent camp. No noise. No talking. Hand signals only. Got that?" "It's gone to your head, Sep. You want to be careful." "What's gone to my head?" "Your Chief Cadet thing. It's not real, you know." "Beetle, this is not a picnic," hissed Septimus. "Oh, give us a break, Sep," Beetle snapped. "You're making mountains out of molehills. You meet a spirit on the beach who can do Magyk and you come back with the weirdest story anyone's ever heard. If you ask me, she Enchanted you and put it all into your head. Or you fell asleep and dreamed it." "Oh, really?" Septimus reached into his pocket and drew out Syrah's journal. "You read that and *then* tell me I dreamed it."

~~Syrah's~~
~~Julias Pike,~~
~~ExtraOrdinary Wizard.~~



37

THE BOOK OF SYRAH Syren

Beetle and Jenna looked at the cover of the book.

Syren's Book

Dedicated to:

My Islands

“Why has she changed her name and crossed stuff out?” asked Jenna.

“Read it and you’ll see,” said Septimus.

Jenna opened the book. She and Beetle began to read.

~~*Syrah Syra*~~

Dear, dear Julius, I am writing this book for you. I trust that we will read it

together sitting by the fire in your big room at the top of the Wizard Tower. But

the events of the last week have taught me not to expect things to go as I plan,

and so I know that it is possible that one day you may read this alone— or maybe

you will never read it? But however, and whenever, this little book returns to the

Castle (as I know it will), I wish to set down what happened to your faithful

Apprentice,

Syren, after she Drew the Questing Stone.

*Here follows an account of my troubles:
I never expected to Draw the Questing Stone. It had not been Drawn for
so
long that I did not believe it really existed. Even when I did Draw the
Stone, I
still did not believe it. I thought you were playing one of your jokes. But
when I
saw your face I knew you were not. When the Questing Guards took me
away,
that was the worst moment of my life. I fought all the way to the Questing
Boat,
but there were seven Magykal Guards against me. There was nothing I
could do.
The Questing Boat took away my Magyk and left me powerless. I believe
the
boat itself was Magykal, but not the kind of Magyk that you or I have
ever used.
It sailed down the river so fast that it seemed we reached the Port barely
a few
minutes after we had left the Castle. We swept straight past the Port and
out to
sea. In a matter of minutes I had lost all sight of land, and I knew I was
doomed.
As we sped across the waves, the Questing Guards unsheathed their
knives
and circled me like vultures, but they dared not strike while I looked
them in the
eye. Night fell and I knew that if I slept for even a moment, I would never
wake. I
stayed awake through the first night, and all through the next day, but as
night
fell for the second time, I doubted I could fight sleep much longer.
Midnight was long gone and the dawn could not have been far away
when
my eyelids began to droop, and I saw the flash of a blade coming toward
me. I
was awake in an instant and I leaped from the boat.
Oh, Julius, how cold the water was—and how deep. I sank like a stone
until
my robes ballooned out, and slowly I began to rise toward the surface. I
remember seeing the moon above as I floated up, and as I broke the
surface I*

saw that the Questing Boat was no more. I was alone in an empty sea,
and I

knew in a few minutes I would be sinking through the deep for the last
time.

Then, to my joy, I felt my Magyk returning. I Called a dolphin, and she
took me

to a lighthouse with—you will not believe this, Julius—ears at the top
like a cat

and eyes through which its brilliant light shone like the sun.

The lighthouse was a strange place. There were two creatures there,
more

like cats than men, who looked after the Magykal Sphere that provided
the light.

I left a message with them for you in case a passing ship should call—I
wonder

if you will receive it before I return? I was of a mind to wait for a passing
ship

myself, but that night, as I slept on a hard bed in a bunkhouse, I heard
someone

calling my name so sweetly. I could not resist. I tiptoed out of the
lighthouse and

Called my dolphin. She took me to the Island.

My dolphin took me to a rocky shore where there was deep water. Not far
away I found some sand dunes, where I fell asleep. I awoke the next
morning to

~~Julius, how wrong I was.~~

the sound of the gentle wash of the waves and the soft song of my name
being

whispered across the sand. As the sun rose over the sea, I walked along
the

beach

and

thought

myself

in

paradise.

“She added the last sentence later,” said Beetle, who had an eye for
handwriting. “It is
much more shaky.”

“And it’s been crossed out,” said Jenna.

“By someone else,” said Beetle. “You can tell because the pen is held
differently.”

Jenna turned the page and the book continued as a diary.

Island Day One

I have made a camp in a sheltered hollow overlooking the lighthouse. I like to see the light at night. Today I found all that I need: sweet water from a spring, a prickly yet delicious fruit that I picked from a grove of trees and two fish that I caught with my bare hands (you see, my time spent fishing in the Moat was not wasted!). And, best of all, I discovered this ship's logbook washed up on the beach, which I shall use as a diary. Soon, Julius, I shall Call my Dolphin and return to you, but first I wish to recover my strength and enjoy this beautiful place, which is full of song. I sing.

Island Day Two

Today I explored further. I found a beach hidden below a tall cliff, but I did not stay long. A cliff rears up behind, and I had a strange feeling of being watched. I am very curious about what is at the top of the cliff—I feel there is something beautiful there. Maybe tomorrow I shall climb the hill with the trees on the top and see what is there. Come to me.

Island Day Three

This morning I was awoken by the sweet voice calling me. I followed the song and, strangely, it led me up the hill and through the trees, where I had planned to go today. Beyond the trees, on the very top of the cliff, I found a lone tower. There is an entrance, but I saw a Darkenese across it. I watched it for a while until I felt it Drawing me too close. Now I have come safely away to my secret place in the sand dunes. I shall not go back to that tower again. Tomorrow I am resolved to Call my Dolphin and depart for the Castle. Julius, how I long to see

your smile when I walk through the great silver doors of the Wizard Tower once

more. Never more.

Island Day Four

~~*nineteen years*~~

~~*the castle*~~

~~*2005*~~

~~*Extraordinary Apprentice of Julius Pike*~~

~~*Syren Syren*~~

Today I awoke outside the tower. I do not know how. I have never before walked

in my sleep, but I believe this is what happened. I am thankful that I awoke

before I walked inside. I ran away, despite a beautiful voice begging me to stay.

I am back in my secret place in the dunes and I am afraid. I called my dolphin,

but she has not come. She will never come.

Island Day Five

I did not sleep last night, for I was afraid where I would wake. Still my dolphin

does not come. I shall not sleep tonight. Sleep.

Island Day Six

Last night I stayed awake again. I am so tired. It is as if I were on the Questing

Boat once more. Soon it will be nightfall and I am afraid. If I fall asleep, where

will I wake? I feel so alone. This book is my only friend. Tonight you shall come

to me.

“It’s horrible.” Jenna shivered.

“It gets worse,” said Septimus. He turned the flimsy page and, with a sense of

foreboding, Jenna and Beetle read on.

Island Day Seven

Today I awoke in the tower. I cannot remember who I am. I am Syren.

“Oh,” said Jenna. “Oh, that’s awful.”

The diary ended there, but there was one last legible page, which was grubby and

worn with use. This was where the book naturally fell open. At first it looked like a

child’s writing exercise repeated over and over, but instead of improving each time it

became increasingly disordered and defaced by another script.

I am Syrah Syara. I am nineteen years old. I come from the Castle. I was the

ExtraOrdinary Apprentice of Julius Pike. I am Syrah Syara. I am Syrah Syara.

I am Syrah Syara. I am old. I come from the Island. I am the

. Island. I am Syrah

Syara. I am

Syren.

I am Syren I am ageless. I come from the Island. I am the Island. I am Syren. I

am Syren. When I call, you will come to me.

“She’s gone,” whispered Jenna, shaking her head in disbelief. Septimus watched her turn

the pages, searching for Syrah’s neat, friendly writing. But there was no more. Nothing

but cold, precise copperplate detailing complex signs and symbols that none of them

could begin to understand. Jenna closed the book and silently handed it to Septimus.

“I feel like we have watched someone being murdered,” she whispered.

“We have,” agreed Septimus. “Well, we have watched someone become Possessed,

which is much the same thing. Now do you believe me?”

Jenna and Beetle nodded.

“Beetle,” said Septimus, “I’ll take the first Watch and you can do the second. I’ll

wake you in two hours. Jen, you need to get some sleep. Okay?”

Jenna and Beetle nodded once again. Neither said another word.

Septimus chose a place a few yards from the hideout, in the dip between two dunes,

which gave him a good view of the beach but provided him with cover. Despite the

unknowns of the night, he felt alive and excited. Now he had the support of his friends,

and whatever was going to happen they were in it together. Septimus hated to think how

Syrah must have felt, alone with just her little blue book for company.

Septimus sat stone-still, breathing in the cool air, hearing the distant sound of the

waves as the tide retreated. Slowly he moved his head from side to side, watching the

tops of the grasses for signs of movement, scanning the empty beach before him,

Listening. All was quiet.

Hours passed. The air grew cold, but Septimus stayed still and watchful, almost part

of the sand dune himself. The unearthly glow from the Sphere of Light lit the sky to his

left, and as the moon began to rise and as the tide drew ever farther out, Septimus

watched the glistening white shape of a sandbar appear. The sounds of the waves quieted

as the water receded, and in the silent space Septimus heard something: the distant cry of

a gull—and the deliberate step of bare feet on wet sand.



38

Projections

*S*ilently, like a snake through the grass, Septimus wriggled down the sandy dip between

the dunes, pulling himself forward with his elbows. In the dim light of the rising moon

his hair was the color of sand and his cloak the dull green of the grass above—but his

movement had not gone unnoticed.

In the sandy darkness of the hideout, Beetle was suddenly awake, listening

hard—something was wrong. Beetle edged out from under his HeatCloak, got to his feet

and automatically ran his hand through his hair. He immediately wished he hadn't—his

hand was now covered in a sticky mixture of hair oil and sand. Stooping awkwardly, for

the hideout was not quite high enough for him to stand up, Beetle looked out through the

narrow slit of the entrance. To his concern he saw Septimus slowly edging down the

slope toward the beach. Beetle squeezed out of the hideout, dislodging some sand, which

just missed Jenna's head.

Inside, Jenna slept on, dreaming of Nicko on his ship.

More like a turtle than a snake, Beetle set off down the slope toward Septimus, who

had now stopped at the foot of the dip and was peering onto the beach.

Beetle joined him

in a shower of sand. Septimus turned and put a finger to his lips.

"*Shh...*"

"What's up?" Beetle whispered.

Septimus pointed to the left, along the beach. Silhouetted in the glow from the Light,

Beetle saw two figures walking, boots in hand, along the line of the outgoing tide. They

looked, Septimus thought somewhat enviously, as though they did not have a care in the

world. As the figures drew nearer, it became clear that one was a boy and one was a girl.

And as they drew nearer still, Septimus had the oddest feeling that *he knew who they*

were.

"It can't be," he muttered under his breath.

"What can't be?" whispered Beetle.

"It *looks* like 409 and Lucy Gringe."

"409?"

"You *know*. Wolf Boy."

Beetle didn't actually know Wolf Boy, but he did know Lucy Gringe—and he

figured Septimus was right.

“But...how could they possibly have gotten *here*?” Beetle whispered.

“They *haven't*,” whispered Septimus. “It’s a Projection. The Syren is trying to lure me out.”

Beetle was skeptical. “Hey, wait a minute—how does this Syren thing know about

Lucy and Wolf Boy?”

“I was so *stupid*,” Septimus said. “I thought about them when I was doing my

MindScreen.”

Beetle and Septimus watched the Lucy and Wolf Boy figures draw nearer. They

stopped by the edge of the water and stood looking out to sea.

“They’re very realistic,” said Beetle doubtfully. “I thought people were hard to

Project?”

“Not for the Syren,” said Septimus with a shudder, remembering the Beetle

Projection begging him to wait. “Beetle, *get down*.”

Septimus pushed Beetle down. The two figures had turned and begun to walk up the

beach, heading toward the very place from where Beetle and Septimus were now rapidly retreating.

“Get back in the hideout,” Septimus hissed.

A few seconds later, Jenna was covered in an avalanche of sand.

“*Wha...*” spluttered Jenna, suddenly awake.

“*Shh...*” hissed Septimus. He pointed outside. Scared, Jenna got to her feet and

looked out.

Although the hideout’s entrance was only large enough for one person to get through

at a time, it was just about possible for three people to look out. And soon there were

three pairs of eyes—one violet, one brown, and one brilliant green—watching the figures

of Wolf Boy and Lucy Gringe climb wearily up the sandy slope between the dunes and

head straight for the invisible—Septimus hoped—hideout.

The figures sat down in the sand no more than a couple of feet away from the

entrance. A gasp of amazement escaped Jenna.

“*Shh...*” Septimus hissed, though he told himself that it didn’t matter—

Projections

couldn’t hear.

“What are *they* doing here?” mouthed Jenna.

“They’re a Projection,” Septimus mouthed back.

“A *what?*”

“A Projection.”

But they’re real, mouthed Jenna.

It was true, thought Septimus, that they did look very real. In fact, they looked so

lifelike that he felt that if he reached out, the real 409 would actually be there, matted

hair, sandy cloak and all. Septimus very nearly did reach out. He stopped just in time by

telling himself that this was another of the Syren’s tricks—as soon as he showed himself,

the Syren would be there, waiting for him. She had sent out her Projections like terriers

down a rabbit hole to flush out her quarry, and there was no way he was going to venture

out of the rabbit hole until they had gone.

Suddenly one of the Projections spoke.

“Did you hear something just now?” it said, fiddling with its braids.

“They’re *talking*,” whispered Beetle. “Projections don’t do that.”

“The Syren’s do,” whispered Septimus. “I *told* you.”

Outside the hideout the Projection-with-braids was getting twitchy. “That noise.

There it was *again*.”

“It’s okay,” said the Projection-with-matted-hair. “Probably sand snakes or

something.”

Beetle gulped. *Sand snakes*—he hadn’t thought of that.

The Projection-with-braids

leaped to its feet. “Snakes?”

it screamed.

“Snakes—*aargh!*” It began leaping around, frantically shaking its tunic. Showers of sand

cascaded into the hideout.

“Sep, that is Lucy Gringe—for *sure*,” Beetle hissed, rubbing the sand out of his eyes.

“No, it’s *not*.” Septimus was adamant.

“Ugh!” yelled the Projection-with-braids. “I hate snakes. I hate them!”

“Don’t be silly, Sep. Of course it is,” said Jenna. “No one else screams like *that*.”

The Projection-with-matted-hair now also leaped up. “*Shh*, Lucy. *Shh!* Someone might hear us.”

“Someone *has* heard you.” Jenna’s disembodied voice came from the hideout.

The Projections grabbed hold of each other. “What did you say?” the Projection-with-braids asked the Projection-with-matted-hair.

“*Me?*” The Projection-with-matted-hair sounded offended. “I didn’t say anything.

That was a *girl*. In fact, it sounded like...well, it sounded to me a lot like Jenna Heap.”

“Princess Jenna? Don’t be *stupid*,” snapped the Projection-with-braids. “It can’t be.”

“Yes, it can,” said Jenna, emerging—apparently—from the inside of a sand dune.

The Projection-with-braids uttered a pathetic squeak.

Jenna shook the sand from the folds of her tunic. “Hello, Wolf Boy, Lucy. Fancy

seeing you here,” she said as calmly as though she and Lucy had just met at a party.

Lucy Gringe opened her mouth. “Lucy, please don’t scream again,” said Jenna. Lucy

Gringe closed her mouth and sat down, for once lost for words.

For Septimus’s benefit, Jenna said, “You *are* real, aren’t you?”

“Of *course* I am,” Lucy replied indignantly. “In fact, I could ask *you* the same thing.”

“Yes, I’m real too,” said Jenna. She looked at Wolf Boy. “And so are you, I

suppose.” She grinned.

Wolf Boy did not look too sure. “This is so weird....” he muttered. He nodded his

head toward what he now recognized as a standard Young Army hideout. “412 in there as

well?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Jenna. “And Beetle—Beetle’s in there too.”

“Yeah, well...there’re a lot of them in the sand. They bite.”

“No, it’s *Beetle*. Oh, Sep, do come out now.”

Septimus emerged looking embarrassed and somewhat annoyed. “What’re *you* doing

here, 409?” he asked.

“Could ask *you* the same thing,” Wolf Boy replied, watching a sand-caked Beetle

emerge from the hideout. “How many you got down there, 412—a whole army?”

Beetle, Septimus and Wolf Boy sized one another up warily, as if each had

encroached on the other’s territory.

Jenna took charge. “Come on. Let’s go down to the beach and light a fire. We can

roast some Banana Bears.”

Lucy looked amazed. “You’ve got *Banana Bears* in the middle of nowhere?” she

asked.

“Yep,” said Jenna. “Would you like some?”

“Anything that doesn’t taste of fish is fine by me,” said Lucy.

Septimus began to object, but Jenna stopped him. “Look, Sep, this Young Army stuff

has gone on for *long enough*. There’s five of us now. We’ll be fine.”

Septimus did not know what to say. He felt mortified after all the fuss he had made

about the Projections.

“There’s some driftwood on the beach,” said Beetle. “Coming, Sep? And, um, 419?”

“Four- *oh*-nine,” Wolf Boy corrected him with a smile. “But you can call me Wolf

Boy—everyone else does.”

“And you can call me Beetle,” said Beetle. He grinned. “And I don’t bite.”

Half an hour later they were gathered around a spluttering fire on the sand, roasting

Banana Bears, unaware that not far away, Jakey Fry was watching them longingly.

Jakey was perched on top of the highest point of Star Island—the star-shaped island

just off the tip of the main island. He was cold and hungry and, he realized as he watched

the group gathered around the fire, lonely too. He chewed the head of a small dried fish

that he had found in his pocket and shivered; it was getting cold, but he did not dare go

back to the *Marauder* for a blanket.

Dutifully Jakey scanned the horizon. He had been sent to watch the sea, not the land,
but every now and then he could not resist a glance at the group on the beach. They
looked tantalizingly close, and Jakey saw that the retreating tide was leaving behind a
sandbar, which connected Star Island to their beach. A desire to run across the sandbar
and join the group almost overwhelmed Jakey, but he did not budge. It wasn't the thought
of his father and the murderous Crowe twins a stone's throw away on the *Marauder* that
scared him—it was the old ghost that had been waiting for them on the wall of the old
Star Island harbor when they had arrived. There was something about the ghost in his
ancient dark blue robes and his staring, goatlike eyes that had terrified Jakey. It hadn't
escaped his notice that even his father seemed scared of the ghost—and Jakey had never
seen his father scared of anything. As soon as night had fallen, the ghost that had told
Jakey to “Be off and watch for the ship, boy. I don't want to see your peaky face again
until that ship is *wrecked*. And when it is, I want you right back here the *very moment* it
hits those rocks—got that?” Jakey had indeed got that.
Oblivious to their envious spectator, the group on the beach settled down by the fire,
and Wolf Boy and Lucy began to tell their story. Jenna and Beetle listened, enthralled,
but Septimus could not shake off the feeling of threat. He sat a little way apart from the
group. To preserve his night vision he did not look at the fire or the Light shining from
the top of the Pinnacle.
“Relax, Sep,” said Jenna, catching sight of another one of Septimus's anxious
glances. “It's fine. This is such *fun*.”
Septimus said nothing. He wished he felt it was fun, but he didn't. All he could think
about was Syrah lying facedown at the foot of the steps. What fun had

she had?

Lucy and Wolf Boy's story unfolded, but Septimus only half-listened. Still thinking

about Syrah, he chewed a couple of Banana Bears and drank Jenna's offered hot

chocolate, but the memories of the afternoon had settled over him like a damp blanket,

and he watched the group around the fire as if, like Jakey, he was on another island. The

fire began to die down and the air grew colder. Septimus huddled inside his cloak and,

trying to ignore Lucy Gringe's cat noises, stared out to sea.

Septimus could not believe it. No sooner had Beetle and Jenna—at last—understood

that something really bad was happening on the island, then Lucy and Wolf Boy had

appeared and turned the whole thing into a beach party. The more he thought about it, the

angrier he felt. Instead of laughing at Lucy's stupid cat impressions, they should be

discussing why the crew of the *Marauder* had taken the Light and put it on the Pinnacle;

they should be trying to work out what Syrah had meant by a threat to the Castle;

wondering what the *Marauder's* crew were doing right now. Septimus was sure that all

these things were connected, but it was difficult to figure it out on his own. He needed to

talk about it, to find out what Lucy and Wolf Boy knew. But every time he had tried to

steer the conversation, he had gotten nowhere. They were, thought Septimus, fooling

around as though they were on a day trip to the Portside dunes.

While Lucy regaled the others with a description of chocolate fish heads, Septimus

continued to look out into the darkness. It was then, to the background of a chorus of

“eeeeew,” that he saw on the horizon the shape of a ship in full sail.

Wolf Boy and Lucy's story was drawing to a close. They told how they had set out

across the stepping stones to seek help from the people that Miarr had seen standing on

top of the Pinnacle earlier that day. “Who’d have thought it was you?” Lucy giggled.

The story ended and the group around the fire fell quiet. Septimus watched the

steady progress of the ship.

“You okay, Sep?” Jenna asked after a while.

“There’s a ship,” he said, pointing out to sea. “Look.”

Four heads turned to look, and four pairs of eyes that had been staring into the bright

embers of the fire could see nothing.

“Sep, you need some sleep. Your eyes are playing tricks again,” said Jenna.

It was the last straw. Angrily Septimus sprang to his feet. “You just don’t get it, do

you?” he said. “You sit there, laughing and making stupid noises like nothing’s

happened, blind to what’s right in *front* of you.” Without another word, he strode off up

the beach, back to the dunes.

“Sep—” said Beetle, getting up to go after him.

Jenna tugged Beetle back down beside her. “Let him go,” she said. “Sometimes Sep

just needs to be on his own. He’ll be fine in the morning.”

Septimus reached the dunes and his temper evaporated in the darkness. He stood for a

moment, half-tempted to go back to the comforting glow of the fire on the beach and his

friends sitting around it. But Septimus had had enough of backing down for one night. He

decided to climb to the top of the dunes and watch the ship. He would prove he was

right—if only to himself.

He scrambled up through the dunes and soon emerged onto the firmer ground of the

central spit of land. He stopped and caught his breath. It was beautiful. The sky was clear

and a shower of stars frosted the night. The tide was gently ebbing, leaving sandbars

glistening in the moonlight, revealing for a few hours a secret pattern of ancient roads.

Roads that had belonged to the people who had lived on the island long ago, before the

floods came and divided one island into seven.

Septimus shaded his eyes and looked for the ship, half expecting that he had

imagined it and that now he would see nothing. But there it was, much closer now, the

moonlight picking out the white of the sails. It seemed to him to be sailing straight for the

island. He was about to rush down to the beach to tell the others when, out of the corner

of his eye, he saw a line of blue lights glimmering through the trees at the top of the hill.

He threw himself to the ground.

Septimus lay hidden in the grass, hardly daring to breathe. He watched the lights,

waiting for them to move down the hill toward him, but they stayed in exactly the same

place. Finally he figured out what the lights were—the line of little windows at the very

top of the Peepe. As Septimus lay wondering what they could mean, he saw a roll of mist

begin to emerge from the trees below the Peepe and tumble down the hill to the sea. He

shivered. The air around him suddenly felt cold and the mist was oddly purposeful, as

though it were on its way to an appointment.

Septimus got to his feet. Suddenly the combination of fire and friends were

irresistible. He ran back down through the dunes, and in front of him the mist spread

along the shore and began to tumble across the water, thickening as it went. The beach

was already engulfed in mist, but the reddish glow from the fire guided him back.

Breathless, he reached the fire. Beetle was busy throwing on more wood.

“Wotcha, Sep.” He grinned, relieved to see Septimus. “We’ll keep this going tonight.

This mist is *weird*.”



39

NICKO'S WATCH

Nicko was at the wheel of the *Cerys*. It was a beautiful night; the moon was rising in the

sky and a myriad of stars were shining down on the elegant, finely tuned ship. The wind

was perfect, it blew steadily, sending the ship singing through the waves. Exhilarated,

Nicko breathed in the salt air of the sea—the sea that he had dreamed of for such a very,

very long time and had been so afraid he would never see again. He could hardly believe

that he was now back in his own Time, at the wheel of the most beautiful ship he had

ever seen, heading for home. Nicko knew that he would remember this moment for the rest of his life.

The purposeful motion of the ship and the swell of the indigo-blue water, carrying

fleeting glimpses of phosphorescence, soothed away Nicko's frayed and frazzled edges.

The *Cerys* responded easily to his turns on the wheel, the wind perfectly filling her sails.

Nicko glanced up at the sails and then smiled at Snorri, his navigator. Snorri was leaning

against the rail, her long fair hair blowing in the breeze, her green eyes sparkling with

excitement. Beside her stood Ullr, black and sleek in his nighttime guise

as a panther.

Feeling Nicko's gaze upon her, Snorri turned around and smiled.

"We did it, Snorri. *We did it!*" Nicko laughed. "And look at us now!"

"We are lucky," Snorri said simply. "So lucky."

This was the first night that Milo had left Nicko in sole charge of the ship. The

previous night, the first mate—a cynical man who considered the gangly, unkempt Nicko

Heap far too young to have control of the *Cerys*—had stood observing Nicko's every

move as he steered the ship steadily through the waves, looking for the slightest error to

report back to Milo. But to his chagrin he found none. He saw Nicko steer a steady

course, reacting perfectly to the wind. He watched him take the *Cerys* safely past a trio of

fishing boats with their nets spread wide under the brilliant moon and, much to the first

mate's surprise, steering an unflustered course through a pod of whales, their dark

massive backs like islands in the night.

The first mate may have been a cynical man, but he was also an honest man. He told

his master that Nicko was a surprisingly competent helmsman and if only the boy were

ten years older he would have no objection to him taking charge of the *Cerys* on the night

passage. Milo—who had been filled in on the peculiarities of the House of Foryx by

Jenna—thought that, all things considered, Nicko was probably older than the entire

ship's company put together, and so he had left Nicko in sole charge of the helm on the

second night of their voyage back to the Castle.

And so Nicko was king of the waves. The fresh smell of the sea filled his nose, his

lips tasted of salt spray and his eyes roamed over the wide-open horizon unfettered by

walls, unclouded by candle smoke. Below him were the wild depths of the ocean and

above him was the glitter dust of stars, with nothing but a thin blanket of air lying

between Nicko Heap and the entire universe. Nicko's head swam with joy at his freedom.

But Nicko's delight did not take away an ounce of his concentration from the

task—to steer the *Cerys* safely through the night until the first Day Watch helmsman took

over at sunrise.

Nicko knew the night's passage plan by heart. He was to steer a southwesterly

course, 210 degrees by the compass, until the loom of the CattRokk Light was visible on

the horizon. The first mate had told Nicko and Snorri the lighthouse was easily

identified—it looked like a cat. The light was fixed and shone from two “eyes”—though

until you drew near, it looked like one. To complete the cat impression, the tower was

topped with two earlike protuberances. Nicko was intrigued at the first mate's description

of the CattRokk Light. If he had heard it from anyone else he would have thought it was a

joke, but Nicko could tell that the first mate was not a man who made jokes.

Nicko would head for the lighthouse until the one “eye” became two, and then turn

the *Cerys* to the south and steer a course 80 degrees by the compass. This would take the

ship close to another lighthouse—with ears but no light—which the first mate had

assured Nicko he would be able to see, because by then the moon would be at its height.

At a bearing of 270 degrees to the dark lighthouse, Nicko was to steer a southeasterly

course, which should—wind and tide permitting—take the *Cerys* straight to the Double

Dune Light.

It was not the most straightforward of courses, but Nicko was confident that he and

Snorri could do it. The first mate had annoyed him by insisting three times that they must

not on any account take the *Cerys* southeast of the CattRokk Light, toward the island that

lay beyond. Nicko had replied that if he could avoid a whale, he thought he could

probably manage to steer clear of an island.

Suddenly Snorri's excited cry broke through Nicko's thoughts. "There it is! I can see

the loom. Look!"

From the lookout in the crow's nest came an echoing shout, "CattRokk dead ahead!"

Sure enough, on the horizon Nicko saw a misty diffusion of light, almost like the

glimmerings of the sunrise—and the *Cerys* was headed straight toward the glow.

Nicko felt elated. For all his apparent confidence, he had been worried that he might

steer too southerly a course and miss the CattRokk Light completely. He glanced down at

the heavy globe of the compass rocking gently in its binnacle and smiled—the needle was

steady at 210 degrees exactly.

The *Cerys* cut through the waves, heading toward the glow, which crept above the

horizon and became ever brighter. It was, Nicko thought, not quite as he had anticipated.

The CattRokk Light was known for its great height, and yet the light appeared much

nearer to the water than he had expected.

As they sailed on Nicko became increasingly concerned—something was not right.

He had expected to see the tall tower of the CattRokk Light by now, but there was still

nothing but a bright light shining in the distance. The moon disappeared behind a large

cloud, and the night seemed suddenly dark. Nicko glanced yet again at the compass; the

needle held steady, shivering slightly as compass needles do, above the marker for 210

degrees. They were on course—it did not make sense.

"Snorri, can you see CattRokk yet?" he asked anxiously.

"No, Nicko. It is strange. This is not like the chart, I think," said Snorri.

A shout suddenly came from the lookout above. "Fog ahead!"

Nicko was shocked. The night was crisp and clear, most definitely not the kind of

night he would have expected fog. “Fog?” he shouted up.

“Aye, sir,” was the reply. “Comin’ this way.”

Nicko had never seen anything like it. A bank of fog was rolling across the sea

toward them like a long white tidal wave. In a moment it had wrapped the ship in its

chilly, dripping blanket of damp. It spiraled up the masts, enfolded the sails and

smothered all sound, so that Nicko never heard the lookout’s surprised shout of,

“CattRokk Light sighted! Dark—it’s *dark*, sir!”

Syrah sat in the Peepe, perched in the little metal chair at the top of the rickety ladder,

creaking and grinding around and around in circles as it traveled its endless journey along

the rusty rails. A bright blue light filled the whiteness of the Peepe, and as Nicko’s ship

drew level with the blind eyes of the CattRokk Light, Syrah threw back her head and

opened her mouth. From somewhere deep inside her a beautiful, sweet, enchanting voice

sang out. The notes did not die away as normal voices do but hung in the air, waiting for

more to join them. As Syrah sang, the sounds formed eddies in the air inside the

Peepe—tumbling and twisting into a whirlpool of song, growing louder and stronger with

each circuit, sweeping around the walls, gathering itself until at last it flew from the

windows like a bird, into the night air, across the sea, heading toward the full-sailed ship

in the moonlight.

As the fog covered his eyes, Nicko’s ears were filled with a song more beautiful than

he had imagined possible. Deep inside the song he heard his name, “Nicko, Nicko,

Ni cko...”

“Snorri?” Nicko asked.

“Nicko, where are you?”

“Here. I am here. Did you call me?”

“No.” Snorri’s voice was strained. “Nicko, we must drop the anchor. Now. It is

dangerous to proceed. We cannot see where we are going.”

Nicko did not reply.

“Nicko... *Nicko...*” sang the voice, filling the air with delight and his heart with a wonderful feeling of coming home at last.

“Nicko...Nicko...come to me, Nicko,” the song sang so sweetly. A soft smile spread

across Nicko’s face. It was true; he was indeed coming home. Coming home to the place

where he truly belonged, to the place he had been searching for all his life.

Suddenly, much to Nicko’s irritation, Snorri’s urgent voice broke through his

reverie. “Anchor! *Drop the anchor!*”

Nicko thought Snorri was being very tedious. There was a sound of footsteps below,

but Nicko did not care. All that mattered now was the Enchanting song.

“Land Ho!” came the lookout’s shout from above. “*Land Ho!*”

“Nicko!” Snorri screamed out. “Rocks! Bear away *now*. Now!”

Nicko did not respond.

Snorri looked at Nicko in horror and saw his unfocused eyes gazing into the distance.

Snorri, a Spirit-Seer, knew at once that Nicko was Enchanted. She hurled herself at him

and tried to wrest the wheel from him. Nicko shook her off. He grasped the wheel tight

and the *Cerys* sailed on.

“Ullr, Ullr, help!” gasped Snorri. Ullr’s green eyes lit up; the panther bounded up to

Nicko and opened his mouth. “Ullr, pull him away. No, don’t *bite*. Quickly—I *must* have

the wheel.” But as Ullr took a mouthful of Nicko’s tunic, a great shudder ran through the

ship and, a few fathoms below, the keel plowed a deep furrow into a sandbank and the

Cerys ground to a juddering halt.

Still at his post on Star Island, Jakey Fry peered into the thickening mist, scared that he

might miss something. He watched the night lantern set atop the main mast of the *Cerys*

sail past like a small boat cast adrift on a strange white sea and accompanied by a horrible

grinding sound, he saw it shudder to a halt and topple from the mast.

Jakey leaped from the rock and, skidding on some loose stones, he hurtled down the

hill to the tiny deep-water harbor on the hidden side of Star Island, where the *Marauder*

was docked. The goat-eyed ghost was lounging aggressively on the harbor wall, while

Skipper Fry and the Crowes were sitting awkwardly on the deck of the *Marauder*. It

looked like a very uncomfortable tea party—without the tea. Suddenly Jakey was glad

that he had been on watch on his own.

A shower of small stones skittered onto the narrow quayside and Passed Through the

ghost. The ghost jumped up and glared at Jakey with narrowed eyes.

“Don’t... *ever*...do...that... *again*,” the ghost intoned very slowly.

It was the most threatening voice that Jakey Fry had ever heard in his life. Goose

bumps ran down his neck and it was all he could do not to turn tail and run. He stopped in

his tracks and managed to squeak, “The ship—she just grounded.”

Skipper Fry looked relieved. He and the Crowes jumped to their feet as though an

unwelcome guest was at last leaving.

“We’re off,” Skipper Fry told his son. “Get down here and let go of the rope.”

Jakey dithered, unwilling to go anywhere near the terrifying ghost who was standing

right beside the bollard with the rope on it. But the ghost solved the problem for him—it

began to walk slowly along the quay to the steps at the end.

At the top of the steps, the ghost stopped and pointed a menacing finger at Skipper

Fry. “You have the Talisman?” it said in a hollow voice that gave Jakey more goose

bumps all over.

“Yes, sir,” said Skipper Fry.

“Show me.”

Skipper Fry removed the leather pouch that Una Brakket had given him from his

trouser pocket.

“*Show me*,” insisted the ghost.

With trembling, clumsy fingers, Skipper Fry extricated something from the wallet.

“Good. And the words? I want to see you have the idiot’s version,” snarled the ghost.

More fumbling produced a water-stained piece of paper with a phonetic incantation scrawled on it.

“Here, sir. It’s here,” said Skipper Fry.

“Good. Remember—accent on the first syllable of each word.”

“On the first... *sill*?”

The ghost sighed. “The first *part* of the word. As in *don* key-brain. Got that?”

“Yes, sir. I got that, sir.”

“Now, put it back in your pocket and *don’t lose it*.”

The ghost turned and walked down the harbor steps, continuing—to Jakey’s

surprise—into the sea. As its head disappeared below the water, the words, “I’ll be

watching you, *Fry*,” drifted through the mist.

“Don’t just stand there like a plucked chicken waitin’ fer an overcoat,”

Skipper Fry

yelled at Jakey. “We’re *off*.”

Quickly Jakey Fry leaped onto the quayside, unwound the rope from the old stone

bollard and threw it into the *Marauder*. Then, anxious not to be left behind in case the

ghost came back, he jumped aboard.

“Take the helm, boy,” Skipper Fry growled. “An’ yer two,” he said to the Crowes,

“yer two can take one a them each.” He pointed to a pair of large oars.

The Crowes

looked puzzled. “Ain’t no wind with this blooming fog, idiots,” the skipper snapped, “so

yer can get paddlin’ and keep it *quiet*. No splashin’, no gruntin’ and no moanin’. This is a

surprise job, got that?”

The Crowes nodded. They picked up the oars and went to the starboard side of the boat.

“One on each *side*, fatheads,” snarled the skipper. “Yer might want ter spend yer life

going round in circles, but *I don’t*.”

With his father at the bow making hand signals to go left or right, Jakey Fry did the best he could inside the fog and steered the oar-powered boat out from the narrow harbor into open water. The tide was very low, but the *Marauder* was built for fishing close to the shore—she had a shallow draft and could easily go where other boats dared not venture. As he steered the *Marauder* around the northernmost point of Star Island, Jakey could not resist a glance across the water to see if he could spot the beach fire, but there was nothing to be seen except a blanket of low-lying mist—and the three masts of the *Marauder*'s prey rising above it. The boat crept forward under Crowe power. Jakey stared at the stupid backs of the Crowe twins as they dug their oars into the water like automatons; he saw his bully of a father up at the prow, his sharp nose to the wind, teeth bared like a wild dog, and he wondered what nastiness he was heading for. Jakey thought of the group of friends he had seen gathered around the fire, and suddenly he knew that more than anything, that was what he wanted—to be free to sit with friends of his own around a fire. His life didn't have to be like this. Jakey Fry wanted out.



AGROUND

On the *Cerys*, Nicko came to his senses in the middle of every sailor's nightmare. He

stared at Snorri in disbelief.

"What?" he gasped. "I've done *what*?"

"Run aground," Snorri replied tersely. "Nicko, you would not listen to me.

You...you were *crazy*."

"*Aground*? No...oh no. *No!*" Nicko ran to the side of the ship and stared down. All

he could see were curls of mist hugging the surface of the water, but he knew Snorri was

right. He could feel it—there was no movement of water below the keel. The beautiful

Cerys had left her element and become nothing more than a great inert lump of wood.

A hubbub had broken out belowdecks. The entire crew was awake, throwing

themselves out of their bunks, hurtling up the companionways. The thunderous sound of

footsteps filled Nicko with dread, and in a moment Milo—disheveled from sleep, a

blanket thrown hastily over his silk brocade nightgown—was towering over him.

"What—" yelled Milo. "What have you *done*?"

Mute, Nicko shook his head; he could hardly bear to look at Milo. "I...I don't

know," he said desperately. "I just don't *know*."

The first mate emerged on deck and promptly answered the question. "E's run us

aground, boss." An unspoken *I told you so* hung in the air.

Snorri knew that Nicko would not even try to stick up for himself. "It is the

lighthouse," she said. "It has moved."

The first mate laughed mockingly.

"But it *has* moved," Snorri insisted. "It is *there* now. *Look*." She pointed to the

Pinnacle, which rose from the mist—a giant black finger of doom crowned with a

brilliant light.

"Hah!" scoffed the first mate. "Some idiot lighting a fire on top of a rock. Happens

all the time. No need to run the blasted ship at it.”

“The ship, she...she is only on a sandbank,” Snorri faltered.

“You’re an expert, are you?” the first mate replied scornfully.

“I know how a sandbank feels beneath a boat, and I also know how a rock feels,”

said Snorri. “This feels like a sandbank.”

The first mate did not know quite what to make of Snorri. He shook his head.

“She will float at the next tide, I think,” said Snorri.

“Depends on the damage,” the first mate growled. “Sand covers a multitude of

sins—an’ a multitude of *rocks*. You find the worst rocks under sand. Water smooths ’em.

Sand don’t. Sand keeps ’em sharp. Like razors, some of them. Cut through a ship like hot

wire through butter.” He turned away from Snorri and addressed Milo. “Permission to

send a man over, sir. Inspect the damage.”

“Permission granted,” said Milo.

“I’ll go,” said Nicko, trying his best not to plead. “Please. Let me do something to help.”

Milo looked at him coldly. “No,” he snapped. “Jem can go. I *trust* Jem.” Abruptly he

turned on his heel and walked slowly to the prow, where he stood and stared dismally

through the mist at the vague shapes of the land—so unexpectedly, unnaturally, close at hand.

In a daze Milo heard Jem climb down the rungs on the side of the hull, then put the

rope ladder out to reach the sand below. He heard the sounds of splashing through the

shallows and Jem’s shouts: “Seabed is sand, sir...bit of a scrape here... not too

bad...ah...uh-oh...” And then more splashing.

In despair Milo put his head in his hands. He thought of his precious cargo fastened

below in the hold. The prize for which he had searched for so many years, which had

taken him away from his wife and then from his daughter. Foolish years, thought Milo,

foolish years that had come to this. He imagined the *Cerys* filling with water on the rising tide, the sea pouring in, surrounding the great chest, drowning it forevermore, consigning its precious contents to the seabed, to be washed up on the lonely shores of this benighted place.

Milo looked out over the prow, which rose up even higher than usual, for the *Cerys*

had settled into the sand and was leaning back at an unnatural angle. He stared through

the mist at the Light on top of the Pinnacle and saw that it was not, as the first mate had

said, a fire. And as he looked at the Light, trying to figure out exactly what it was, the

mist began to retreat. A chill settled on Milo as he watched the mist behave as no mist

should—rolling *up* the craggy hill toward a small tower perched at the very top, as if it

were a line being reeled in by a fisherman with a very large fish by the name of *Cerys* on

the end of it, thought Milo wryly. A shiver ran through him. There was something strange

going on, and there was something particularly strange about that tower—and he wanted

a closer look.

“Telescope!” yelled Milo.

Within seconds a member of the crew was at his side with his telescope. Milo put the

finely tooled brass tube to his eye and focused on the tower. Running along the top of the

tower he saw an eerie line of tiny blue lights. They reminded him of a strange sea tale the

pirates on Deakin Lee’s ship would tell late at night about the Isles of the blue-eyed

Syrens, which were scattered throughout the seven seas, where voices Call and Beguile

sailors, luring their ships onto the rocks.

Milo watched the carpet of mist rolling up the hill and streaming into the tower

through the blue-lit windows, and he began to wonder just how much Nicko was to blame

for the grounding. He decided to go have a quiet word with the boy. It was then that Milo

heard a girl's voice calling from below. It sounded like—but surely it couldn't be—his

daughter.

“Look, it is the *Cerys*! I knew it. Hey, Nicko! Milo!”

Now Milo knew it was true—this was indeed one of the notorious Isles of Syren.

“Hey—hey, Milo— *father*! Look down. It's me, Jenna!”

Milo put his fingers in his ears. “Go away!” he shouted. “Leave us alone!”

Far below, at the head of a small band of would-be rescuers wading through the

shallows, Jenna heard the shout. Upset, she turned to Septimus and Beetle. “Typical,” she

said.

“*Shh,*” whispered Septimus. “There's someone coming. Quick, everyone, *get*

down!” He ducked behind the large rock that the *Cerys* had so very nearly plowed into,

pulling Jenna with him. Beetle, Wolf Boy and Lucy quickly followed.

“What's up, Sep?” Beetle muttered, kneeling on a limpet, much to the discomfort of

both creatures.

Septimus pointed to the rearing shape of the *Cerys*, so very different from when he

had last seen her in all her glory on Harbor Twelve at the Trading Post. Now, seen from

limpet's-eye view, her massive rounded shape was no longer elegant but fat, like a

beached whale. Although her topsides were still smooth and her gold stripe shone in the

glow of the Light, below the waterline the ship was dull and dirty with a scattering of

barnacles. But it was not the sad sight of the beached *Cerys* that Septimus wanted to point

out—it was the unmistakable shapes of the Crowe twins, almost invisible in the shadows

of the overhang of the hull, stealthily making their way toward Jem, who was busy

inspecting the damage.

They watched in horror as, in their classic Pincer- *Splat* maneuver, the

Crowes crept

up on the unsuspecting Jem. At the very last moment, just before they pounced, Jem

turned in surprise, then he gave a sharp cry and tumbled face-first into the shallows. Each

Crowe put a knife back into his belt, then continued on their way, creeping along the keel

of the ship, well hidden from the view of anyone on board.

The Crowes moved stealthily to the rope ladder that dangled from the unsuspecting

Cerys. Now the watchers saw two more figures—Skipper and Jakey Fry—appear from

behind the stern and creep toward the ladder. At the foot of the ladder they stopped, and

Jakey could be seen pointing to the sailor's body. An argument appeared to break out

between Jakey Fry and his father, who settled it with a long knife held to Jakey's throat.

The Crowe twins had now also reached the ladder. Jakey was told to hold it, and one

at a time the Crowe twins, each with a fearsome collection of knives stuck into his belt

and boots, began a laborious ascent.

"No!" gasped Jenna. She went to slip out from behind the rock, but Wolf Boy

grabbed her.

"*Wait*," he told her.

"But *Nicko*—" Jenna protested.

Wolf Boy looked at Septimus. "Not yet, 412—yeah?"

Septimus nodded. He knew Wolf Boy was calculating the odds, just as they had been

taught in the Young Army. And right then the odds were stacked against them in the form

of knives, ruthlessness and brute strength. They desperately needed something in their

favor, and they had only one thing—surprise.

"To Win the Fight, Time It Right," Septimus said. Exasperated, Jenna raised her eyes

to heaven.

"But Jen, it's true," said Septimus. "We *must* get the timing right. When they least

expect it we pounce. Okay, 409?"

Wolf Boy gave Septimus a thumbs-up and a grin. This was like the old days—only a thousand times better. They were together in their own platoon and they were going to *win*.

Jenna, however, didn't see it that way. Horrified, she watched Skipper Fry follow the

Crowes up the ladder, the glow from the Light glinting off a large cutlass thrust into his

waistband. The Crowe twins had reached the top. They stopped and waited for Skipper

Fry; then all three slipped silently onto the ship.

On the *Cerys* shouts broke out and someone screamed.

Jenna could stand it no longer. She pulled away from Wolf Boy and ran out from the

rock, splashing through the shallow water and leaping across the raised sandbars toward

the stricken ship while the sound of screams, yells and *thud* s echoed down.

Jakey Fry saw Jenna coming, but he did not move. He saw four more figures slip out

from behind the rock and follow her, but still he did not move. He watched the figures

reach the body of the sailor, saw them kneel down and turn the man over, and Jakey felt

terrible. He clung to the ladder, apparently obeying his father's last words to him: "Hold

on to that ladder, you little pikey, and don't you *dare* let go whatever happens, *got that?*"

But actually Jakey was too shocked to let go.

Jakey watched the five figures pick up the sailor and stagger with him back to a

nearby flat rock. He wanted to go and help, but he didn't dare—right then he didn't dare

do anything at all. He saw them haul the sailor up onto the rock, and then a boy with a

nest of straw on his head kneeled beside him. A few seconds later, the boy got to his feet

and pointed angrily at Jakey.

Suddenly Jakey heard his father's threatening bellow cut through the sounds of the

fight above and all went quiet. Jakey shuddered. His father probably had

a knife to

someone's throat—that was the way he usually got what he wanted. He glanced up but

could see nothing but the barnacled curve of the *Cerys's* hull. When he looked down he

saw the boy-with-the-nest-of-straw-on-his-head and his four friends—*one of whom was*

Lucy Gringe—heading straight for him. Jakey gulped. He was in for it now.

Jenna and Septimus reached Jakey first. Septimus grabbed Jakey by his collar and

pulled him away from the ladder.

“Get out of the way, you *murderer*.”

“I—I'm not. I—I didn't do it, honest.”

“Your *friends* did. It's the same thing. You're all in it together.”

“No—*no*. They're not my friends. They're *not*.”

“Just *get out of the way*. Our brother's on that ship, and we're going up.”

“I'll hold the ladder fer ya,” said Jakey, much to Septimus's surprise.

Septimus

jumped onto the ladder and began to climb.

“You be careful,” warned Jakey. “You going up too?” he asked Wolf Boy.

“Yeah,” said Wolf Boy, scowling.

“Good luck,” said Jakey.

Jenna went next, followed by Beetle. Lucy hung back. She had had enough of

ladders. She glared at Jakey. “What's going on, fish breath?” she demanded.

“I dunno, Miss Lucy, honest,” Jakey babbled. “There's somethin' on the ship. Pa

knows, but 'e never tells me nuffin'. You goin' up too?”

Lucy glanced up at the ladder just in time to see Septimus disappear over the

gunnels. She sighed. There were two of Simon's little brothers up there now and, like it

or not, she was going to have to help them—they were, after all, very nearly family.

Businesslike, she tied her braids into a knot so that no one could grab them (Lucy had

learned a thing or two at the Port Witch Coven).

“Yeah, turtle head, I'm going up,” she said.

“You take care, Miss Lucy,” said Jakey. “If you need any help, I'll be

there.”

Lucy flashed Jakey an unexpected smile. “Thanks, kiddo,” she said. “You take care too.” With that she began the precarious climb.

As Lucy struggled up the side of the *Cerys*, an odd-looking gull with yellow feathers

landed on the sandbank. It put its head to one side and looked at Jakey Fry with some

interest; then it stuck its beak into the sand, pulled out a long, wriggling sand eel and

gulped it down. Yuck, it *hated* sand eels. Sand eels were the worst thing about being a

gull. But it couldn’t help it. As soon as it felt the shift of sand grains beneath its sensitive

little flat feet something took over, and the next thing it knew it had one of the disgusting

things halfway down its throat. The gull took off and flew to a nearby rock to recover.

The little yellow gull could not believe that once again its fortunes had suddenly

changed. But it had had no choice, it told itself. It knew that the bossy ExtraOrdinary

Wizard would indeed have kept it imprisoned in the Sealed Cell forever if it had not

agreed to her terms. The gull decided that it would not be rushed. It would get moving

when it had digested the sand eel and not before. It hoped its Master would be worth all

the trouble, but it doubted it. Trying to ignore the sensation of sand eel wriggling in its

stomach, the gull watched Lucy climb the precarious-looking rungs up the side of the

Cerys’s hull.

At last Lucy reached the top. She peered over the gunnels. To her surprise, the deck

of the *Cerys* was deserted.

Where had everyone gone?



[41](#)

THE HOLD

Lucy looked across the deck of the *Cerys*, which she thought looked surprisingly

normal, apart from some spilled paint that she had stupidly stepped in.

Lucy bent to pick

her trailing boot ribbons out of the annoying goop, which stuck to her fingers and— *oh*.

Lucy opened her mouth to scream, only to have a smelly hand shoved over it.

“*Shh*, Lucy. Don’t scream. *Please*,” Wolf Boy hissed.

“It’s blood, it’s *blood*,” Lucy spluttered beneath Wolf Boy’s grubby paw.

“Yeah,” muttered Wolf Boy. “There’s a lot of it around. And there’ll be even more if

they find us.” He jerked his free thumb toward the prow of the ship.

Suddenly Lucy

realized that the deck was not quite as deserted as she had thought. On a large open area

in front of the middle mast she could see three figures silhouetted in the light of a lamp,

trying to operate the cargo-hold crane. They had not noticed the most recent arrivals on

board—and if Wolf Boy had anything to do with it, they were not going

to notice either.

Slowly, stealthily, he walked Lucy backward to the cover of an upturned rowboat.

“No screams, okay?” he whispered.

Lucy nodded, and Wolf Boy took away his hand.

The upturned boat was on the dark side of the deck, away from the glow of the Light.

Lucy slipped in behind it.

“Oh, *that’s* where you all are,” she whispered touchily. “You could have *waited* for me.”

“Didn’t think you were coming,” answered Septimus, who had rather hoped that

Lucy wasn’t.

Like a curious meerkat, Lucy suddenly stuck her head above the boat and looked

around excitedly. “So—what are we going to do?” she whispered eagerly, as if they were

deciding on which games to play at a picnic.

Jenna gave an angry yank on Lucy’s precious—and very stained—blue cloak. “Get

down, shut up and *listen*,” she hissed. Lucy looked shocked, but she settled down without

another word. Jenna turned to Septimus and Wolf Boy.

“You’re the experts,” she told them. “Tell us what to do and we’ll do it.”

Five minutes later, they had a plan. They split into two groups, one led by Septimus, the

other by Wolf Boy. Septimus’s troop consisted of a grand total of one—Jenna. Wolf Boy

had drawn the short straw with Lucy, but he figured Beetle made up for it. It was decided

that each troop would take one side of the deck in a pincer movement that would have

impressed even the Crowe twins. Wolf Boy’s band was to have the shadows of the port

side and Septimus’s crew would take the more exposed starboard side, which was

illuminated by the Light. When they arrived at the hold they were all to do their UnSeens.

At this Lucy had protested. It wasn’t fair: everyone had an UnSeen except for her.

But Septimus had no intention of trying to teach Lucy Gringe an

UnSeen, even

though he had just—he hoped—taught Beetle a very simple one.

“Look, Lucy,” whispered Jenna, “Beetle and I won’t do ours, okay?”

Then you won’t

be the only one.”

“All right,” said Lucy grudgingly.

They set off toward the lamplit figures, picking their way through the mass of ropes

and collapsed sails and stepping over ominous spatters of blood. As they inched their way

forward, the worrying silence on the ship persisted—the only sound they could hear was

the creaking of the overhead lifting gear that Jenna had last seen used to lower the doors

of the cargo hold. She had not noticed the noise in the hubbub of the port, but now, in the

silence of the night, the squeaking of the handle that turned the crane set her teeth on

edge. Luckily it also drowned out the squeal that came from Lucy Gringe when she

stepped on what she thought was a severed hand—which turned out to be a glove used

when handling ropes.

Septimus and Wolf Boy crept forward, keeping their eyes fixed on the scene ahead.

Septimus could tell that Skipper Fry was on edge. He was impatiently directing the

Crowes as they tried to swing the crane into position over the cargo-hold doors, but every

few seconds he cast a hasty glance around the deck. Each time he did, the two

approaching pincers froze. As soon as he turned back to the sweating Crowes and the

squeaking crane, the pincers moved off once more, noiselessly slipping from pile of rope

to boat to mast to capstan to hatchway, until they reached the cargo hold.

Wolf Boy’s crew slipped behind a pile of barrels, and Septimus and Jenna found

cover behind a hastily lowered sail. From either side of the deck, they took in the scene.

Septimus gave a thumbs-up, which Wolf Boy returned. They were ready to go. Each

made a silent count of three, then slipped onto the deck and began their UnSeens,

synchronized so that they could both still see each other.

Skipper Fry sniffed like a suspicious dog and his left eyebrow began to twitch. He

knew what that meant.

“Stop the crane!” he yelled at the Crowes. Poised above the cargo-hatch doors, the

crane creaked to a halt.

Skipper Fry listened hard. The only sound he heard was the *swash* of the sea as, far

below, the tide turned and began to feel its way back toward the *Cerys*. It was a sound

that told Skipper Fry he needed to get moving. But his eyebrow was twitching like a

caterpillar in a hurry—and he didn’t like it. It gave Skipper Fry the creeps. He preferred

Darke Magyk, and not just because it didn’t make his eyebrow twitch—Darke Magyk did

the kind of things that he liked to do.

Skipper Fry scanned the deck suspiciously. He figured that one of the crew must

have used an UnSeen to escape the roundup. The *Cerys* was a fancy ship—too fancy by

half, he thought—and it would not surprise him if one of her sailors was some kind of

part-time Wizard. Skipper Fry despised UnSeens. If you didn’t want someone to see you,

you got rid of them—much more effective and enjoyable too.

But Skipper Fry knew a few tricks and he prided himself on having outwitted some

of the most Magykal of Wizards. He went over to the crane and made a great play of

inspecting it—then suddenly spun around. But he saw nothing. Skipper Fry was puzzled.

In his experience anyone doing an UnSeen reacted as though they could still be

seen—and ran for cover. As a sailor who was used to watching the seas for hours on end,

Skipper Fry was an expert at spotting a moving UnSeen, which always led to some

distortion. But he could see nothing—because both Wolf Boy and

Septimus were

standing stock-still—instinctively obeying the Young Army rhyme: “When You Freeze,

No One Sees.” Skipper Fry stared into the dark, moving his head from side to side like a

pigeon (another trick of his), and very nearly caught Septimus, who was suddenly almost

overcome with a desire to laugh.

But Skipper Fry’s eyebrow still twitched. He decided to run—literally—a basic

check for UnSeens. Suddenly he launched into a wild, zigzagging dance, swinging his

arms like a windmill in a gale. Skipper Fry’s unorthodox approach to detecting UnSeens

was surprisingly effective—Wolf Boy and Septimus only just got out of the way in time.

He did in fact brush against Wolf Boy, but luckily Wolf Boy was in the process of

leaping behind the main mast, and Skipper Fry mistook Wolf Boy’s elbow for a knot of

rope.

Septimus was seriously considering a retreat when the dancing windmill impression

stopped as abruptly as it had started—Skipper Fry had caught sight of the Crowe twins

making signs to each other, indicating that their skipper’s sanity was not all it could be.

Their signals touched a raw nerve.

“Bloomin’ freezing here,” he said, harrumphing and stamping his feet as if he were

cold. “Get a move on, yer useless lumps.” The Crowes grinned mockingly and did not

move. Skipper Fry unsheathed his cutlass and advanced on Thin Crowe. “Do as yer told

or I’ll slice that stupid head off yer scrawny little chicken neck,” he growled. “An’ yer

too, Fatso.”

The Crowes set to work with renewed enthusiasm.

Still troubled by his left eyebrow, Skipper Fry warily surveyed the deck while he

directed the Crowes. Fat Crowe grabbed the hook on the end of the crane, pulled it down

and looped it through the ring in the center of the starboard hatch.

“Stop!” yelled Skipper Fry. “Yer got pudding for brains or what? I told yer *not* to

open the hatch until I said them words.” He stuffed his hand in his pocket and drew out

the crumpled incantation. “Get me the lamp, chicken head,” he told Thin Crowe. “*Now!*”

Thin Crowe brought the lamp. Skipper Fry smoothed his scrap of paper, coughed a

little nervously and very carefully intoned,

“Yks eht ni tel, *hct* ah eht *lae* SnU,

Eil su *nee* wteb *re* irrab on tel.”

Septimus and Wolf Boy shot each other wary glances—and so did Fat and Thin

Crowe. All four, for different reasons, recognized a Reverse Incantation when they heard

one. Skipper Fry wiped the sweat from his brow—he hated reading—and yelled, “Don’t

just stand there, pin head, open the doors!”

Thin Crowe ran to the crane and began to turn another squeaky handle.

A few minutes later the doors to the cargo hold were lifted and there was now a great

dark, gaping hole in the deck. Septimus and Wolf Boy glanced at each other—this was

the opportunity they had been waiting for.

Skipper Fry held up the lantern and peered down into the depths. Gingerly the Crowe

twins peered in too. From behind the heaped-up sail, Jenna watched the eerie scene. It

reminded her of the drawings she had seen of the midnight grave robber gang, which had

terrified the Castle one winter when she was little. The next moment all resemblance to

grave robbers had gone, and the scene now reminded her of the flying monkey troupe that

had performed outside the Palace Gates at the Spring Equinox Fair—except this time the

monkeys were bigger, uglier and made a lot more noise.

Three heavy *thud* s later the monkeys were lying on top of the massive chest at the

bottom of the hold.

“Got ’em!” Septimus’s triumphant voice came from beside the crane,

which began to

swing down to pick up the cargo-hold doors.

Deep in the hold, Skipper Fry and the Crowes unleashed a torrent of foul words—many of which Jenna and Beetle had not heard before—which continued until

the doors were dropped firmly in place and the arm of the crane lay on top of them.

Septimus and Wolf Boy let go of their UnSeens and the five headed toward the

nearest hatchway to the decks below. Septimus pushed against the small double doors,

expecting them to be locked and barred. They weren't. The doors swung open much too

easily, leaving everyone wondering why no one had ventured out.

And so, as dawn approached and the sky lightened to a green-gray, one by one they

left the deserted deck and followed Septimus through the hatchway, down the

companionway and into the ship.

What, everyone wondered with a feeling of dread, were they going to find?



BANANA MAN

Jakey Fry leaned against his ladder watching the sunrise. The tide was coming in and the hummock of sand he was standing on was now a small island surrounded by swirling, sandy seawater. Jakey knew that soon his island would be back below the waves where it belonged, and then what? Should he climb the ladder up to the *Cerys* or did he dare to wade out to the *Marauder*—and leave them all behind? Jakey glanced up at the *Cerys*. He had heard the creaking of the crane and the *thud* of the hatch cover being dropped into place, but since then he had heard nothing at all. What was going on? Jakey wondered what had happened to Lucy; he figured that whatever had happened was not good—Lucy was *never* quiet. Not so far away, perched on its rock, the yellow gull had finished digesting the sand eel. Gloomily its little bird brain ran through the agreement the interfering ExtraOrdinary Wizard had forced it to sign. If the gull could have sighed it would, but it hadn't figured out whether that was something birds did. There was no way out. The gull took a deep breath and, with a yellow flash and a small *pop*, it Transformed. Jakey looked out to sea. Past the gently rolling waves to the east, behind the line of rocks that led out to the Pinnacle, the sky was a beautiful milky green and promised a brilliant sunny day—a good day, thought Jakey, to be in charge of your own boat with no one shouting at you, no one ordering you about. The water lapped at Jakey's toes and the next swash of waves covered his island and washed around his ankles. It was decision time. Jakey realized that at this moment he was free—free to leave behind all that he loathed so much. A new life beckoned, but was he brave enough to take it? The sun rose above the horizon and sent shafts of warming light across his face. Jakey made a

decision. Right now, at this moment, he *was* brave enough. He stepped off his drowned

island and the water came up to his knees. Then someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Jakey nearly screamed.

Jakey spun around to see a tall, willowy man in a yellow jerkin and breeches lurking

in the shadows of the keel. The man was wearing the weirdest hat Jakey had ever seen in

his life—or did he actually have a pile of ever-decreasing yellow doughnuts balanced on

his head? Just then Jakey felt that anything was possible. He stared at the man, speechless

with surprise. Jakey, who was used to sizing people up fast, could immediately tell that

he was not a threat. Like an apologetic banana, the man seemed to mold himself to the

contours of the ship, and as he withdrew his arm from tapping Jakey on the shoulder

there was a rubbery quality to his movements.

The banana man gave Jakey a polite smile. “Excuse me, young master, be you

Septimus Heap?” he asked in an oddly accented whisper.

“No,” said Jakey.

The man looked relieved. “I thought not,” he said. And then he added, “Be you the

only young master around here?”

“No,” said Jakey.

“Oh.”

The banana man sounded disappointed. Meaning to be helpful, Jakey pointed up the

ladder.

“There be *another* young master up there?” the man asked, rather reluctantly.

Jakey nodded. “Lots,” he said.

“Lots?” the man repeated dismally.

Jakey held up three fingers. “At least,” he said. “Probably more.”

The man shook his head mournfully, then he shrugged. “Could be worse, could be

better,” he said. “Maybe I shall be free a little longer, maybe not.” The man looked

doubtfully at the ladder, then he reached out his rubbery arms, grasped

the thick ropes

and put his foot on the bottom rung.

“I’ll hold it fer you,” Jakey said politely.

The man tentatively stepped on. The ladder swung away from him.

“Lean back a bit,” Jakey advised. “Much easier to climb that way.”

The man leaned out and very nearly fell off backward.

“Not so far,” cautioned Jakey. “An’ once you’ve got started, don’t stop an’ don’t

look down. You’ll be fine.”

Gingerly the man turned just enough to smile at Jakey. “Thank you,” he said. He

looked at Jakey with his oddly piercing yellow eyes. “And are *you* free, young master?”

he asked.

“Yes,” said Jakey with a grin. “I think I am.” Jakey stepped off his sea-washed island

and waded toward the towering stern of the *Cerys*. There he plunged into the deeper

water, and began swimming toward the *Marauder*, which he had left beached on a

sandbar some distance from the *Cerys*. The *Marauder* was now floating in a few feet of

water, tugging at her anchor, ready to go wherever Jakey wished to take her. Jakey’s

smile broadened with every stroke that took him farther away from the *Cerys*. He was

free at last.

As Jakey Fry swam to freedom, Jim Knee climbed onto the deserted deck of the *Cerys*.

He gazed around for some minutes before deciding to sit and watch the sun rise while he

considered his next move. Like all jinn, Jim Knee had the ability to track down his

Master—if he absolutely had to—and he was sure his Master was on board the ship. So

what, he reasoned, did a few more minutes of freedom matter? It wasn’t as if his Master

was going anywhere. No doubt he was tucked up in a warm bunk asleep—unlike his

unfortunate jinnee. Jim Knee settled down on a fallen sail and closed his eyes.

Not far below Jim Knee, five figures were moving stealthily through the

deserted

middle deck of the *Cerys*. The ship had three decks: the top deck, which was open to the

elements; the middle deck, where Milo and his guests lived in some splendor; and the

lower deck, which was used for the crew's quarters, kitchens, laundry and storage

lockers. The middle and lower decks also contained the cargo hold, which descended into

the very bottom of the ship.

Septimus led Jenna, Beetle, Wolf Boy and Lucy through the empty middle deck.

They checked every cabin, every locker, nook and cranny as they went. Milo's stateroom

door was thrown wide, showing his hastily exited bed; Nicko's cabin was shipshape and

orderly, just as he had left it when he went up to take over the wheel for the night

passage. Snorri's cabin was equally neat, with the addition of a folded blanket laid on the

floor for Ullr. The rest of the guest cabins were also empty.

They crept along the companionway toward the farthest part of the middle deck—the

saloon, where Milo did his entertaining. Warily Septimus pushed open the mahogany

door and peered inside. It was deserted, but hoping for clues, maybe even a hastily

scrawled note— *anything*—Septimus stepped inside. The others followed.

The saloon had been left tidy and spotless by the night steward. It lay ready for

breakfast, which in normal circumstances would have been beginning soon. Somberly

everyone stared at the table, laid with three place settings and a small bowl on the floor

beside Snorri's chair.

"Suppose...suppose it's become a ghost ship," whispered Jenna, voicing Wolf Boy's

thoughts.

"No," said Septimus, shaking his head. "No, Jen. Ghost ships don't exist."

"Aunt Zelda says they do," muttered Wolf Boy. "She knows about stuff

like that.

No, Lucy— *don't*.”

Lucy Gringe looked offended. “I wasn’t *going* to scream,” she said. “I was just going

to say that if it is a ghost ship, we ought to get off while we still can— *if* we still can....”

Her voice faded away, leaving trails of goose bumps all over her listeners.

Jenna glanced at Septimus. They all knew the stories of ships that had somehow

become ghost ships. There were many of them reputed to sail the seven seas, fully

functioning with a ghostly crew. They all also knew that once anyone came aboard they

were never seen on land again, though they were sometimes glimpsed on board waving at

grieving relatives who had tracked down the ship.

A sudden *thud* from the other side of the wall made everyone jump.

“What was that?” whispered Jenna.

Thud, thud, thump.

“Noisy ghosts in there,” Beetle observed.

Everyone laughed uneasily.

“That’s the cargo-hold bulkhead,” said Septimus. “It’s Fry and those Crowes.

They’re trying to get out.”

Worried, Jenna glanced at Septimus. “Can they break through?” she asked.

“No way,” said Septimus. “Did you see the lead lining on those walls? They’d need

an army to get out of there. Milo’s sealed everything—doesn’t want his precious stuff to get spoiled.”

Jenna nodded. She knew the extreme care Milo took to protect his treasures from

damage—the lead linings, the watertight doors, the strong room for his most precious objects...

“That’s *it!*” Jenna gasped. “The strong room—it’s locked from the outside and it’s

soundproof. That’s where everyone must be. Hurry— *hurry!*”

“Okay, Jen,” said Septimus, “but what’s the panic?”

“It’s airtight, Sep.”

At the end of the saloon was a small door leading to steps down to the galley on the

lower decks. Septimus threw it open and hurtled down the steps, where he stood waiting

impatiently for Jenna and the others to catch up. “Lead the way, Jen,” he said urgently.

“You know where it is.”

But Jenna wasn’t sure that she *did* know where the strong room was. All she could

remember was feeling irritable while Milo was showing it to her and telling her how

valuable all the stuff in it was—she could not remember how they had gotten there.

Unlike the middle deck with its wide, bright corridors and generous portholes, the lower

deck was a tangled warren of dingy, narrow passages cluttered with ropes, wires and all

the workings of a complex ship like the *Cerys*. It was completely disorientating. Jenna

looked around in a panic and saw everyone staring at her expectantly. She glanced at

Septimus for help—hoping maybe he could do a Find or something—and saw his Dragon

Ring begin to glow with its warm yellow light. And then she remembered.

“There’s a yellow lamp outside the door,” she said quickly. “It comes on when

people are in the room, in case...in case they get locked in by mistake. It’s this way.”

Jenna had, to her immense relief, just seen the telltale yellow glow reflecting off a run of

highly polished brass pipes at the far end of the corridor.

As they approached the end of the corridor the relief gave way to dread. Jenna

remembered the room—lead-lined and airtight to protect Milo’s treasures from exposure

to damaging salt air. How could anyone survive in there for long—let alone a whole

ship’s company? Jenna thought of Nicko’s horror of enclosed spaces, then stopped

herself—some things really did not bear thinking about.

The strong-room door was made of iron; it was narrow and covered with

rivets. In

the middle was a small wheel, which Wolf Boy, who knew he was the strongest, grabbed

hold of and turned. The wheel spun, but the door did not move. Wolf Boy stepped back

and wiped his hands on his grubby tunic.

“Ouch,” he said. “There’s some kind of Darke Seal on the door. My hands can feel

it.” Wolf Boy’s palms were very sensitive.

“No!” Jenna gasped. “There can’t be. We’ve *got* to get it open.”

Septimus placed his hands on the door and took them straight off again. “You’re

right, 409,” he said. “I’ll need to do some kind of Reverse...not so easy without a Darke

talisman. *Rats.*”

Jenna knew that when Septimus said “rats,” things were bad. “Sep—please, you *have*

to get them out.”

“I *know*, Jen,” Septimus muttered.

“Wait,” said Wolf Boy. “I’ve got just the thing.” He opened the leather pouch that

hung at his waist, and everyone reeled back.

“Eurgh!” Lucy gagged as the stench of the rotting Grim tentacle tip filled the

enclosed space. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“No, you’re not,” said Jenna briskly. “What *is* that?” she asked Wolf Boy.

“If Sep wants Darke, he’s got it,” Wolf Boy replied, lifting out the dark splotch of

slime and handing it over.

“Thanks, 409,” said Septimus with a rueful grin. “Just what I always wanted.”

Septimus took the disgusting tentacle tip (which reminded him of Spit Fyre’s tail at

its worst) and rubbed it all around the edge of the door, muttering something under his

breath at the same time—something that he took care no one else could hear. Then, doing

his best not to gag, he handed the mangled mess of flesh back to Wolf Boy.

Wolf Boy made a face and stuffed it back into his pouch.

“Do you always carry that?” asked Beetle.

Wolf Boy grimaced. “Not if I can help it. Let’s give it a push now, okay? One, two,

three…”

Septimus, Beetle and Wolf Boy put their shoulders to the door. Still it did not shift.

“Let me do it,” said Jenna impatiently.

“But Jen, it’s really heavy,” said Septimus.

Jenna was exasperated. “Sep,” she said, “*listen to me*. Three words: hut, snow,

Ephaniah.”

“Oh,” said Septimus, remembering the last time he had told Jenna she couldn’t

manage to open a door.

“So *let me do it*, okay?”

“Yep. Of course. Stand back, 409.”

Jenna took hold of the wheel and pulled. Slowly the door to the lead-lined strong

room swung open.

No one dared look in.



43

BREAKOUT

Nicko fell through the door like a sack of potatoes. Jenna caught him and toppled

backward with his weight.

“Nicko! Oh, *Nik*—are you okay?”

Gasping like a fish out of water, Nicko nodded. “Argh...eurgh—Jen, what are *you*

doing here?”

Snorri rushed out with a small orange cat tucked under her arm. “Nicko, Nicko. It is

all right now,” she said, putting her arm around him.

But Jenna, despite herself, was still worried. “Nik,” she said, “where’s Milo?”

Nicko’s answer was lost in the general commotion of the strong room emptying, but

the bark of a command answered Jenna’s question.

“Quiet!” came Milo’s voice. The relieved hubbub ceased. The crew—bloodied and

unkempt, a dozen assorted shapes and sizes in a mixture of nightshirts, striped tops, dark

blue breeches and some with braids to rival Lucy Gringe—fell silent. Milo strode out,

white-faced, his silk nightgown crumpled and bloodstained—but very much in charge.

He scanned the narrow, packed corridor, wishing he had his spectacles. “Jem!” he called

out. “Jem, where are you? Did *you* let us out?”

Jenna—mistaking “Jem” for “Jen”—felt suddenly pleased. Milo had actually thought

of her. “Yes, it was me!” she shouted.

“*Jenna?*” Puzzled, Milo looked around. The light was dim; it was at times like this

that being shortsighted bothered him. He saw his crew lined up along the corridor and, to

his surprise, he also saw—yes, he was *sure* it was—Septimus and Beetle with two ragged

teenagers of dubious cleanliness. Where had they come from? And then, to his

amazement, he caught sight of Jenna—pushed into the corner, half hidden by Nicko and a

tangle of ropes.

“Jenna! But—how did *you* get here?”

Taking Milo by surprise—and herself too—Jenna rushed forward and flung her arms

around him. “Oh, Milo, I thought you were...I mean, we thought you were all *dead*.”

“A few minutes more and we would have been,” said Milo, smiling down at Jenna

and somewhat awkwardly patting her on the head. “However, last year I installed a

ventilation system with filters for some exotic cacti I was after. Very efficient but not

designed for fifteen people. We were struggling in there, I can tell you. Now—let’s see

what those thugs have taken. Grabbed what they could and ran for it, I suppose. Vicious

brutes. I would have fought them barehanded but...”

“But *what?*” Jenna snapped. She had heard too many stories like this from Milo.

“But when they have a knife to someone’s throat, what can you do?” said Milo.

Nicko’s hand reached for his neck, and as it did Jenna glimpsed an angry red line just

below his ear. “Nicko!” she gasped. “Not *you?*”

Nicko nodded. “Yeah,” he said bitterly. “Me. Again.”

Jenna quickly revised her opinion.

Milo’s thoughts were elsewhere. “You,” he said to the nearest crewmember, “go and

fetch Jem. I need to know what he's found down there. He's lucky to have missed all this."

The man turned to go, but Jenna stopped him.

"No," she said to Milo. "He's not lucky. He's dead."

"What?"

"They—those thugs—they killed him."

A gasp of dismay spread through the crew.

"Dead?" Milo looked stricken. "*Dead*. So...where is he?"

"We...we took him to a rock near the beach. We—well, Sep, really—tried to help him, but there was nothing we could do."

"Volunteers to go and bring Jem up," Milo shouted.

A forest of hands was raised. Milo chose four of his crew—those who did not have

any injuries from the Crowes' vicious knives—and the party set off quickly down the

corridor. "The rest of you get yourselves down to the sick bay and sort yourselves out.

Then up on deck. I want this ship fixed and ready to go on the next tide."

"Aye, sir," replied the crew.

"Jem was a good man," said Milo sadly as the crew disappeared around the corner.

"A good man and a good medic, too."

"I could help with that," Septimus said. "I know some basic Physik."

Milo, however, was not listening. "Come, all of you," he said, spreading his arms

wide and sweeping them along the corridor in front of him. "You've done *very*

well—defeated those pirates, eh? Now we must see how the *Cerys* has fared. Oh, if I

could get my hands on those thugs right now..."

Jenna was irritated that Milo was ignoring Septimus's offer of help—but it was the

way he was shepherding them as if they were a group of excitable toddlers that really

annoyed her. "Well, you *can* get your hands on them if you want to," she said, thinking

she was calling his bluff. "They're in the hold."

Milo stopped dead. "In the *hold*?"

Jenna noticed Milo suddenly looked very pale. She was not surprised. She had

known all along that Milo was scared.

“Yes,” she replied. “In the hold.”

“With the... *chest*?” whispered Milo. “Are they in the hold *with the chest*?”

“Yes, of *course* they’re in the hold with the chest. Sep and Wolf Boy pushed them in.

It was two against three—they were really brave,” said Jenna pointedly, although she

didn’t mention that they had been invisible at the time.

They had turned a corner and were now walking along a passageway, which was on

the other side of the cargo-hold bulkhead. A series of heavy *thud* s were coming from the

hold.

“How many of them are there?” he whispered.

“Three,” said Septimus. “We pushed in three.”

“Sounds like a lot more than three right now,” said Wolf Boy. “I suppose it’s the

echo or something.”

Milo looked terrified. Jenna felt embarrassed for him—how could he possibly be so

scared of three idiots locked in a hold? Worse than that, he was now talking to himself.

“It is not possible,” he was saying. “They cannot know what it is. It is *not possible*.” Milo

took a deep breath and appeared to collect his thoughts. “I am going up on deck,” he said.

“We must secure the hold. Nicko, will you come too? I shall need your help.” And with

that he rushed off. Nicko, pleased to be useful once more, followed him.

Jenna watched her father run along the passageway, his silk nightgown flying, his

velvet slippers flapping on the boards like a pair of pigeon’s wings.

“He’s *crazy*,” she

said.

“Well, he’s *worried*, that’s for sure,” said Wolf Boy.

“I think it may be that he has something here to worry about,” said Snorri slowly.

“What do you mean?” said Jenna. She found Snorri’s way of speaking hard to

understand at times.

“There are ancient spirits on board this ship. I feel them now. I did not

before. And

Ullr feels them too, see?” Snorri held up Ullr, whose fur was sticking up on end. He

looked like an orange puffball.

Beetle chuckled.

“Ullr is not funny,” said Snorri reprovingly. “Ullr Sees things. He Sees that

something is here, and *that* is not for laughing at. I am going to help Nicko.” Head held

high, Snorri stalked off after Nicko.

“Oh.” Jenna was suddenly thoughtful. She had spent some months looking after Ullr

and had a lot of respect for the cat. While she was quite happy to ignore Snorri, Ullr was

a different matter.

They turned a corner and found Snorri pushing her way through the crowd outside

the sick bay. Inside was a scene of utter chaos. One of the crew—not much more than a

boy—had collapsed in a pool of blood. Bandages were flying everywhere and a large

bottle of Gentian Violet had spilled, covering everyone in splashes of purple. No one

seemed to know what to do.

“It’s crazy in there,” said Septimus. “I’m going to help. 409—I could do with

someone who knows his potions.”

“Okey-dokey,” said Wolf Boy with a grin. Potions, he could do.

“I’ll do the bandaging,” Lucy offered. “I’m good at bandages. They’re like ribbons,

only stretchy.”

Septimus did not agree. “They are *not* like ribbons,” he retorted. He pushed through

the throng and disappeared into the sickbay.

“Sep,” Jenna called after him. “I’m going up on deck.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Beetle.

Jenna and Beetle set off along the corridor, at the end of which was a ladder to the

middle deck. They climbed the ladder and made their way through the deserted stateroom

and along the corridor past the empty cabins. As they neared the steps that led to the top

deck, they heard a series of *thump* s behind them from inside the cargo hold.

Jenna turned to Beetle. She looked worried. “I think you should go and get Sep,” she

said. “I have a feeling we might need him.”

“But what about you?”

“I want to go up and see if Nik needs any help.”

“I can do that. Why don’t you go for Sep?”

“No, Beetle. I’m never there when Nicko needs me. This time I’m going to be. Go

and get Sep— *please*.”

Beetle could not refuse. “Okay. Won’t be long. Jenna...be careful—promise?”

Jenna nodded and disappeared up the steps.

Beetle was surprised by the difference in the sick bay. No more than a few minutes had

passed, and yet Septimus had everything organized. The boy collapsed on the floor was

now lying in a bunk. Septimus was attending to him and discussing with Wolf Boy which

potion to use for a nasty-looking stab wound. But what surprised Beetle the most was the

sight of Lucy Gringe—looking the very model of efficiency—neatly bandaging a crew

member’s arm. Septimus ran a good sick bay, he thought admiringly.

One by one the tended crew left to go up on deck. Beetle was anxious to get on deck

too, but he did not want to interrupt. He leaned against the doorway, watching Septimus

at work. He looked, thought Beetle, completely at ease.

Septimus glanced up and saw Beetle in the doorway. “Okay?” he asked.

“Dunno, Sep. Jenna wants you to come up on deck. Something’s not right.”

Right on cue, a deep *thud* vibrated through the ship.

“Oh. Right. Nearly ready. Just want to check this one again. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Sounds like the ship’s shifting on the sandbank,” said the first mate, who—apart

from the young galley hand in the bunk—was the last one left. He got up and winced.

“I’ll be needed on deck. You coming, Miss?” he asked Lucy.

“I’m all right here,” said Lucy.

“No, Lucy, you go,” Septimus told her.

“Quite right, sir,” said the first mate. “Best be up a’ top when a ship’s shifting. We’ll

be down to get you if there’s any trouble, lad,” he said to the galley hand.

Beetle watched Lucy and the first mate leave. As he waited, a little less patiently

now, for Septimus and Wolf Boy to finish, he felt something brush his foot. He looked

down and saw a long line of rats, nose to tail, running past him along the companionway,

heading toward the ladder at the end. Beetle shivered, and not because he didn’t like rats.

Beetle had a great respect for rats, and these rats, he thought, knew something. They

knew that the *Cerys* was no longer a safe ship to be on.

“Sep...” said Beetle anxiously.

Septimus was washing his hands. “Coming,” he said. “Ready 409?”

“Yep,” said Wolf Boy.

Septimus cast a last look around. All was shipshape, and the wet-iron smell of blood

had been replaced by the scent of peppermint. He breezed out of the sick bay with the

confidence of a job well done.

Beetle propelled him and Wolf Boy down the corridor—fast.

“Hey, what’s up?” Septimus asked.

“Jen wants you up on deck. There’s something weird going on—and the rats know

it.”

“The *rats*?”

“Yep. I just watched them leave.”

Septimus shared Beetle’s respect for rats. “Oh,” he said.

As if to prove Beetle’s point, a series of rhythmic *thud* s shook the ship’s timbers.

“Come on,” said Wolf Boy, who had had quite enough of being stuck belowdecks.

“Let’s get out of here.” He raced toward the ladder that led to the middle deck.

At the foot of the ladder they scooted to a halt—someone was coming down.

A tall, willowy man dressed in yellow and wearing what looked to Septimus like a

pile of yellow doughnuts on his head stepped off the ladder. He turned,

looked straight at

Septimus and sighed heavily.

“Be you Septimus Heap?” he said in a resigned tone.

Both Septimus and Beetle knew enough to recognize a jinnee when they saw one,

and Wolf Boy knew quite enough to recognize something extremely weird.

“Sep—he’s *found* you!” whispered Beetle excitedly.

“Wow,” breathed Septimus. “Yes,” he replied. “I be Septimus Heap.”

Jim Knee looked despondent. “I thought as much,” he said. “Just like the old witch

described. Bother, bother, *bother*. Oh, well, here we go again: *What Do You Will, Oh*

Great One? ”

In the excitement of the moment, Septimus was suddenly unable to remember the

fail-safe form of words that should always be used in response to the all-important

Second Question—if you don’t want your jinnee to mess you around forevermore. He

looked at Beetle and mouthed, *What are the words?*

Jim Knee tapped his foot impatiently—were *all* Septimus Heaps this slow?

“I *will*...you to *be*...faithful servant...loyal to *me*. To do what is *right*... and for the

best...to do it *all*...at *my* behest,” whispered Beetle.

Thanks, Beetle, Septimus mouthed. Then in slow, clear tones, he repeated what

Beetle had told him word for word.

“Well, at least you’re better than the last Septimus Heap, I suppose,” Jim Knee said

grudgingly. “*Not* that that would be difficult.”

Beetle nudged Septimus. “Ask him if he has a name,” he whispered. “Someone

might have already Named him, and if you don’t know it you won’t be able to Call him.”

“Oh, thanks, Beetle. Didn’t think of that.”

“Yeah, he’s a tricky one. I reckon he’s hoping you won’t ask. Just say, ‘*Jinnee, how*

are you Called,’ and he’ll have to tell you.”

Septimus repeated the question.

Jim Knee looked extremely grumpy. After a long pause he answered

reluctantly,

“Jim Knee,” and then added, “Oh *Clever One*.”

“Jim *Knee*?” asked Septimus, not sure if he had heard correctly.

“Yes. Jim Knee,” Jim Knee said irritably. “So, Oh *Doubting One*, do you want

anything done right now, or can I go off and get some sleep? There are some very

pleasant cabins up there.”

Another spate of *thump* s vibrated through the ship.

“As it happens,” said Septimus, “I think I could do with your help *right now*.”

Jim Knee was finding it hard to get used to his sudden loss of freedom.

“Very well,

Oh *Exacting One*,” he said. “Your wish is my command, and all that. I’ll find that nice

little cabin later.”

Beetle shot Septimus a quizzical look. “He’s not *quite* what you’d expect, is he?”

“No,” Septimus said as another shudder ran through the ship. “But then, what is?”



44

JINN

The low, slanting rays from the rising sun shone straight down through

the stern hatch,

half-blinding Septimus, Beetle and Wolf Boy as they ran up the steps to the open doors.

They emerged, blinking in the daylight, and were met with a scene of chaos. Milo and his

battered crew were desperately piling spars, sails, barrels and anything heavy they could

drag on top of the doors to the cargo hold. Lucy and Snorri were throwing on a heavy coil

of rope and Ullr, fur on end, was following Snorri like an anxious orange shadow. Nicko

and the bosun were nailing a large plank across the doors, but each stroke of their

hammers was met with an answering thud from below and a corresponding upward

movement.

From the edge of the scrimmage, Jenna spotted Septimus, Beetle and Wolf Boy

making their way forward. She left the barrel she was helping to drag across the doors

and ran to join them.

“Where *were* you?” she gasped. “There’s something really big down there—bigger

than those three you chucked in. It—it’s trying to get out. And Milo...oh, I know he

makes a fuss about stuff, but this time it’s for real. Look at him!”

Milo looked desperate. Velvet slippers abandoned, his nightgown as grubby as any

deckhand’s, he and Nicko were frantically dragging another plank across the doors.

“Get a move on!” he was yelling to the bosun.

The bosun shouted something back.

“You won’t *have* a ship to *leave* if you don’t nail these doors shut *right now!*” Milo

bellowed.

Wolf Boy rushed forward to help. Beetle and Septimus went to follow, but Jenna

stopped them. “Wait. Sep, there’s something I meant to tell you,” she said. “And Beetle

should know too.”

“What, Jen?”

“Well, while you were at that pigeon place, Milo had something put in

the cargo
hold.”

“Milo was *always* having something put in the cargo hold,” said Septimus.

“Yes, I know. But he told me not to tell you about this. I was going to anyway, as I

don’t see what right he has to go around telling me what to do or what not to do. It was a

massive chest, and he said we had to go to the Manuscriptorium about it when we got

home.”

“The *Manuscriptorium*?” asked Beetle. “Why?”

“I don’t know. He started on about something else, so I didn’t ask. You know what

he’s like.”

“Did you see inside the chest?” asked Septimus.

“There wasn’t much to see. Just tons of little lead tubes lined up in trays.”

“Lead tubes?” asked Beetle. “How many exactly?”

“I don’t know,” said Jenna impatiently.

“You must have some idea. Ten, fifty, a hundred, a thousand—how many?”

“Well...thousands, I suppose. Gosh, Beetle, you’re worse than Jillie Djinn.”

“*Thousands*?”

“Yes, *thousands*. Look, what does it matter how many?” Jenna sounded exasperated.

“Surely, what matters is what was hiding *underneath* the tubes.”

“I think,” said Beetle slowly, “that what matters is what was hiding *in* the tubes—don’t you, Sep?”

“Yes,” replied Septimus, “I think that matters quite a bit.”

“*In*

the
tubes?”

Jenna
asked.

“What

do
you
mean,
how
could

anything— *ohmygoshwhat's that!*”

Another tremendous *thud* shook the ship—but this time it was accompanied by a

loud splintering noise from the cargo-hold doors. Nicko and the bosun’s plank were

tossed aside like matchsticks. Someone screamed—and it wasn’t Lucy Gringe. And then

it began—slowly, steadily, relentlessly, the two doors rose from the deck, sending

everything piled on top of them tumbling—spars falling, barrels rolling and people flying

like ninepins.

Milo was thrown into a tangle of ropes hanging from a broken spar and pinned there

by the plank. Wolf Boy was sent flying by a barrel of tar, and Snorri and Ullr narrowly

missed being squashed by one of the lifeboats.

The hatch doors had now reached a point of no return. They wavered for a moment,

and then suddenly, with a thunderous *crash*, they smashed down onto the deck, shattering

the debris into smithereens and leaving the cargo hold wide open. Everyone scattered, but

the sight that came next stopped all in their tracks.

As if on an invisible moving platform, Theodophilus Fortitude Fry and the Crowe

twins were rising from the cargo hold. Some of the more superstitious crew members

threw themselves to the ground, thinking that Fry and his henchmen were miraculously

flying, but others who looked more closely could see that they were balancing on

something more solid than air. Once again Jenna was reminded of the traveling circus at

the Spring Equinox Fair. This time it was the acrobatic clowns who had formed a human

pyramid and then fallen over spectacularly. But the sight that followed swept all thoughts

of acrobatic clowns from Jenna’s mind. Fry and the Crowes were standing—wobbling

would be a more accurate description—not on the shoulders of clowns but on the raised

shields of four armored warriors.

“Warrior jinn,” said Beetle. “Thought it might be.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jenna.

“The lead tubes you saw are classic jinn multiple storage units.”

“They’re *what*?”

“They’ve got jinn in them,” Beetle simplified.

“What— *one in each tube*?” Jenna’s math was not great, but even she could work out

that that was an awful lot of jinn.

“Yeah. They don’t usually share.”

“Share?”

“Twin jinn are extremely rare.”

“Oh, so that’s just fine then. Oh, my gosh, *look* at them. They...they’re scary.”

Everyone on deck had fallen silent, mesmerized by the sight of the warrior jinn rising

through the hatch, their shields held straight-armed above their helmeted heads, bearing

their cargo of Fry and the Crowes. Leaving it a little late, the cargo half jumped, half fell

onto the deck. The four jinn rose higher until they, in turn, sprang off another line of

rising shields. They landed on the deck with a synchronized *thud*, and the entire ship’s

company gasped.

The hair on the back of Wolf Boy’s neck stood on end. There was something

inhuman, almost mechanical, about the warriors. They stood at least seven feet tall and

were clad from head to toe in ancient leather armor, dull black apart from their

silver-winged helmets, which caught the rays of the rising sun and glinted as though

struck by fire. The jinn stood poised at the ready, short swords drawn, eyes staring

blankly forward. And if they were not frightening enough, behind them another two ranks

of four were already rising from the hold.

From the safety of his impressive armed guard, Theodophilus Fortitude Fry surveyed

the dumbstruck gathering on deck.

“Well, well,” he said. “So someone let you out, did they? I suppose it

was these

pesky kids.” He stared pointedly at Wolf Boy and Lucy. “Yer brought yer little friends

along, have yer?” Skipper Fry eyeballed Septimus, Jenna and Beetle. “If any of yer the

ones that pushed us in, yer did us a favor. We was goin’ down there anyway. And now

we got what we came for and there ain’t nothin’ yer can do about it. Enjoy the show,

kiddywinks. Have fun and”—he stared pointedly at Jim Knee—“wear all the silly hats

yer can while yer got the chance, because if yer plannin’ on goin’ back to the Castle, yer

won’t find it much fun *there*.” He laughed. “We know who y’are and we don’t *ever*

forget a face—do we?”

“No, Skip,” chorused the Crowes, “we *don’t*.”

But Skipper Fry’s speech did not have the effect he had hoped—no one, apart from

Jim Knee, who did not like being insulted, was really listening. They were transfixed by

what was going on behind him. A set of eight warrior jinn had now stepped on deck and

every minute even more were appearing—three ranks of four now, filling the entire area

of the open hold. As they too stepped on deck, the next line of twelve shields could be

seen below.

“Beetle,” whispered Septimus as he watched the jinn step onto the deck, “this is

Manuscriptorium stuff. Is there any way of stopping them?”

“Not unless you know the Awake.”

“Milo!” said Septimus. “He must know it. You don’t acquire a whole ton of jinn

without knowing how to Awaken them, do you?”

“Well, *you* wouldn’t,” said Jenna.

“Oh, surely even Milo’s not *that* stupid.”

Jenna shrugged.

“I’ll go ask him,” said Septimus.

“Be careful, Sep,” said Jenna anxiously.

“Yep.” Septimus quickly did a SafeShield UnSeen and disappeared into the crush of

debris and crew.

Milo was still desperately trying to untangle himself from the rigging when Septimus

reached him. Septimus was about to appear, when to his astonishment Milo suddenly

yelled, "*Grub!*" in his ear.

Septimus jumped—but not half as much as Skipper Fry. Fry swung around to see

where the shout had come from and his eyes lit up with malice at the sight of the trapped

Milo. He swaggered up to him and—by standing on the end of the plank—was able to

stare Milo straight in the eye. "*Sir* to you, boy," he growled.

"Don't you *dare* call me that ever again—you hear that, *Grub?*" Milo snarled.

Skipper Fry laughed, too triumphant to notice an annoying twitch beginning in his

left eyebrow. "With five thousand men at my command, I'll call you what I like, *boy*. Got that?"

Milo fumed. He was outnumbered on board his own ship, just as he had been nearly

ten years ago, when the notorious pirate Deakin Lee and his first mate, the vicious Grub,

had captured his ship. He could not believe it.

"Yer bin double-crossed good, boy," Skipper Fry said with a grin. "Them monkeys

yer sent to fetch the *consignment*—yer should a paid 'em more. Everyone has his price."

"You'd know all about *that*," said Milo, struggling to free himself from the rigging,

but only succeeding in entangling himself further.

Skipper Fry eyeballed Milo. "Yer know what, Banda— *I never forgot*. I were two

whole weeks in that boat what yer and that ungrateful turncoat crew a mine cast me off in.

All I had ter eat were a dead seagull. Drank rainwater outta me own boots."

"I should have let your crew throw you overboard like they wanted to," snapped

Milo recklessly. "*Grub.*"

"Well yer didn't, did yer?" Skipper Fry snarled, eyebrow twitching fast.

“So now it’s

payback time. Kill him!” he shouted at the first four warrior jinn. “*Kill!*”

The jinn stepped forward, leveling their swords at Milo. Septimus went cold. *The*

warrior jinn had no hands—their weapons were part of their bodies. The leather cuffs of

their tunics seamlessly gave way to a short sword at the end of their right arms and a

rectangular shield at the end of their left.

From the raised deck at the stern of the *Cerys*, Jenna saw the jinn pointing their

swords at her father. “No!” she yelled. “*No!*” She rushed down, but the deck below was

packed with the crush of crew backing away from the encroaching jinn. Jenna quickly

became trapped in the throng, and so she did not see the strange sight of the collapsed

rigging suddenly taking on a life of its own—unwrapping itself from Milo and

transferring its attentions to Skipper Fry, leaving him trussed up like a fly in a spider’s web.

Skipper Fry saw the warrior jinn approaching with their short, razor-sharp swords

pointing straight at him, their blank eyes staring right through him, and he suddenly

realized that it didn’t matter to the jinn *who* was stuck in the rigging. Milo Banda or

Theodophilus Fortitude Fry—it was all the same to them.

It was not, however, all the same to Skipper Fry. “Get me out of here, you idiots!” he

screamed at the Crowes.

The Crowes did not move.

Fry’s voice rose to a wild shriek. “Stop, *stop!* Oh, what are the *words?*” Fear

temporarily loaned Skipper Fry an adequate number of brain cells and, with the four

swords at his throat, he remembered the Reverse.

Milo, meanwhile, was being dragged through the crowded deck by an invisible force

that smelled strongly of peppermint. Somewhere in the crowd Jenna found him.

“Ouch!” yelled the invisible force. “My foot.”

“Sorry, Sep,” said Jenna.

Septimus let go of his UnSeen before anyone else stood on him. Milo looked

relieved at the sight of Septimus; being grabbed by something invisible had been a

disconcerting experience. “Thank you, Septimus,” he said. “You saved my life.”

They escorted Milo up to the small section of raised deck at the stern of the ship, and

Septimus got straight to the point. “What’s the Awake?”

“Huh?” asked Milo, still a little disconcerted.

“The Awake,” Septimus repeated impatiently. “It’s *your* chest, they’re *your* jinn, so

you know the Awake. Tell us the Awake and we can stop them.”

Another batch of twelve jinn stepped on deck, and Milo saw the dark tide of warriors

move closer. He shielded his eyes from the daggers of light glancing off the winged

helmets, and he knew that the ship was no longer his to command. But he said nothing.

“Mr. Banda, *please*,” said Beetle. “Tell us the Awake.”

While Septimus had been rescuing Milo, Beetle had gathered everyone together on

the raised deck (where they had discovered Jim Knee dozing in a corner). Milo now

found himself under the expectant gaze of not only Septimus and Beetle but also Jenna,

Nicko, Snorri, Ullr, Lucy, Wolf Boy—and the rudely awoken Jim Knee.

Milo gulped. “I don’t know the Awake.”

Beetle was aghast. “You take something like this on board and *you don’t know its*

Codes?”

Milo collected himself. “Security measure, apparently. The chest always travels

separately from the Codes. I was to collect them from the Manuscriptorium when I got

back. There’s a ghost there who keeps the Codes. A Mr.—”

“Tertius Fume,” said Septimus.

Milo looked surprised. “How do you know?”

Septimus didn’t answer the question. “Grub’s right,” he said. “You’ve been

double-crossed.”

A long line of rats appeared from the stern hatch below and headed for the side. Milo

watched them go. “The time has come,” he said, “to abandon ship.”

At that the *Cerys* gave a loud creak. Something shifted, and Milo knew that his

beautiful ship was no longer earth-bound, weighed down on land. Now she was back in

her element, rising with the tide.

A muted cheer rose from the crew.

Milo hesitated. It was a cruel coincidence that the sea had returned his ship to him at

the very moment it was being overrun. But as the first rank of warrior jinn took another

step nearer the ship’s ladder, threatening to cut off their escape route, Milo knew it was

now—or possibly never.

“Abandon ship!” he shouted.



45

TURTLE AND ANTS

Jakey Fry had not been able to forget Lucy’s smile as she had wished him good luck.

*As he sailed away into the early morning sun, the ominous silence from the *Cerys* had*

*played on his mind, until he could stand it no longer and had turned the *Marauder* back.*

*Now, far below the *Cerys*, at the foot of the ship’s ladder, Jakey stood at*

the tiller,

listening to the strange *clank* ing noises from above and gathering his courage to climb aboard and rescue Lucy.

His plans were thrown into disarray by a sudden shout from above: “Abandon ship!”

The next moment a fearsome mixture of bandaged men liberally sprinkled with

splashes of purple were pouring down the ladder and leaping onto the *Marauder*.

“Hey, not so fast,” said Jakey. “I only come back fer Lucy.” Despite his protests, the

Marauder steadily filled with crew. “Lucy!” he shouted up at the *Cerys*. “Lucy Gringe!

Come down!”

From above, Lucy heard the shout and leaned over the gunnels.

“The crew are getting on the *Marauder*,” she gasped. “Tell them not to— it’s a

trick!”

It was too late. Apart from the first mate, who had gone below to fetch the galley

hand, all the crew were now on the *Marauder*.

“Lucy!” Jakey was desperate now. “Where are yer?”

“Go away, fish head!” Lucy yelled.

Jakey saw her now—Lucy in her salt-stained blue cloak with her braids silhouetted

against the sky—and he suddenly felt happy. “Lucy, Lucy!” he shouted. “Down ’ere.

Quick!”

As if in reply a figure stepped onto the ladder—but it wasn’t Lucy. It was almost,

thought Jakey, the exact opposite of Lucy. A seven-foot-tall, armor-clad warrior carrying

a razor-sharp, double-edged sword—Jakey knew all about blades—was heading straight

for the *Marauder*.

Jakey’s new crew saw the warrior too. “Push off, *push her off!*” yelled the bosun. As

another warrior climbed onto the ladder, the crew pushed the *Marauder* safely away from

the side of the *Cerys*, and Jakey Fry’s dream of rescuing Lucy disappeared.

Equally dismayed, Milo watched the *Marauder* go—his order to abandon ship had

been a disaster. He had wanted to get Jenna safely away, but yet again nothing had gone

to plan. Overwhelmed, he put his head in his hands.

“Right,” said Septimus, “we need to get off this ship fast. Where’s that jinnee gone?”

Jim Knee had never, *ever* wanted to be a turtle. He had seen quite enough of turtles in his

time. He didn’t like their snappy little jaws, and just touching their shells set his teeth on

edge—but if his Master insisted that he become a giant turtle, then a giant turtle he had to

become. But it didn’t stop the jinnee from bargaining.

“I’ll do it for ten minutes, no longer, Oh Wearisome One,” he said. “You’ll do it for

as long as I say,” his Master retorted.

“No more than twenty minutes, I pray you, Oh Pitiless One,” Jim Knee wheedled.

“You’ll do it for as long as it takes to get us safely to shore. And you will Transform

large enough for us all to get on at once.”

“All of you?” Jim Knee surveyed the gathering with dismay. He was going to have to

be a very large turtle indeed.

“Yes. Hurry up.”

“Very well, Oh Ruthless One,” said Jim Knee gloomily. It did not bode well if the

very first thing his new Master asked him to do was to Transform into the creature he

hated the most—the turtle. He was going to be trapped inside a shell, the owner of four

flippy, flappy flippers instead of hands and feet for as long as his Master wanted—it was

his worst nightmare. The jinnee took a deep breath—his last for how long that would not

taste of turtle spit? Then he climbed onto the gunnels, held his nose, jumped from the

Cerys and splashed into the clear sea below. A moment later a huge turtle with yellow

eyes surfaced.

Nicko was ready with a rope. He secured it to a cleat and threw it over

the side.

The turtle took its passengers, as directed, to the rocks at the very end of the spit,

opposite Star Island, safely out of sight of the *Cerys*. The rocks were not easy to negotiate

and after misjudging the width of its shell, the turtle managed to get firmly wedged

between two of them. Luckily for its passengers the rocks were in shallow water, and

they were able to disembark and wade ashore. Less luckily for the turtle, it remained

wedged tight and—despite much pushing and shoving—had to wait until it was allowed

to Transform before it was free.

Jim Knee found himself lying facedown in two feet of water. He sprang to his feet,

spluttering and choking, then waded to the rocky shore, where he sat in the sun to dry out.

His hat, he was sure, would never be the same again.

His ex-passengers watched the jinnee pointedly choose a rock some distance away.

They too were recovering from their journey. The turtle had not been very

considerate—it had chosen to swim about six inches below the water in a highly erratic

fashion, as if it were trying to get rid of those riding on its back.

“Nicko,” said Milo as he finished wringing out the hem of his nightgown, “I owe you

an apology.”

“Oh?” Nicko sounded surprised.

“I should not have blamed you for grounding the *Cerys*. I believe this island is

Enchanted. I believe you were Called by a Syren.”

Septimus looked at Milo with new interest—maybe he was not the insensitive twit he

had taken him for.

Beetle glanced at Septimus, eyebrows raised.

“Thank you, Milo, but that is no excuse,” Nicko was saying. “The ship was under my

control—I was responsible for what happened to her. It is *I* who must apologize.”

“I’ll accept your apology, Nicko, but only if you will accept mine.”

Nicko looked as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He smiled for

the first time since the *Cerys* had grounded. “Thank you, Milo. I accept.”

“Good!” Milo jumped to his feet. “Now I must see what is happening to the *Cerys*. I

think we shall get a good view from those rocks over there, don’t you, Nicko?”

Everyone, it seemed, wanted to take a look at the *Cerys*—apart from Jim Knee, who

Septimus very nearly forgot until Beetle reminded him. Having a jinnee took a bit of

getting used to, Septimus thought. It reminded him of taking Maxie, Silas Heap’s arthritic

wolfhound, for a walk. Maxie had a very similar habit of lagging behind, and Septimus

often forgot about the hound and had to go back to find him.

The group, complete with Jim Knee, set off to the rocks Milo had pointed out. It was

a good choice; there was a clear view of the ship and the beach and enough cover not to

be seen. They settled down behind the rocks, and Milo took out his telescope.

“Oh, my goodness,” he gasped. He passed the telescope to Nicko.

Nicko put the telescope to his eye and uttered a long, low whistle.

“What is it, Nik?” asked Septimus impatiently.

“Ants,” muttered Nicko.

“*Ants?*”

“Yeah—like ants leaving the nest. Look.”

Septimus took the telescope. Immediately he saw what Nicko meant. A black stream

of warrior jinn was pouring down the side of the *Cerys*. He watched them descending,

their movements eerily synchronized—left, right, left, right—until they reached the

surface of the sea and disappeared beneath it without a break in step. As the waves closed

over the winged helmet of one jinnee, another stepped onto the ladder at the top.

Septimus let out a whistle uncannily similar to Nicko’s. Beetle, unable to contain his

impatience any longer, snatched the telescope.

“Crumbs,” he said. “What are they *doing?*”

“Well, I don’t think they’re off for a picnic,” said Septimus.

“They’d be enough to spoil anyone’s picnic,” said Nicko. “Imagine finding *them*

crawling all over your sandwiches.”

“It’s not funny, Nik,” said Septimus. “This feels really bad.”

The telescope was passed around the group; Jenna was last to get it. She looked

quickly at the jinn—which gave her the creeps—then swung it away from the ship and

surveyed the beach—the beach that until that moment she had thought of as *their* beach.

But what she saw made her realize that it did not belong to them anymore.

In the eye of the telescope she saw Tertius Fume standing by the water’s edge, his

face almost alive with excitement. And in the sea, just below the surface of the water,

Jenna saw a dark shape surmounted by a silvery glint. As she watched, the silver-winged

helmet of a warrior jinnee broke the surface and, water cascading from the joints in its

armor, the warrior jinnee marched out of the sea, onto the beach and saluted Tertius

Fume.

Septimus saw Jenna’s expression change. “What is it, Jen?”

“Tertius Fume,” Jenna replied. She pointed down at the beach. “Look.”

Oblivious to the gasps around him, Milo got to his feet. “Good!” he said. “I’m glad

he’s made the effort to come and work this out. You see—I *wasn’t* double-crossed at all.

Most conscientious of him, I must say.” Milo brushed the sand off his nightgown. “I shall

go and ask him for the Awake, then we can put all this behind us and get the *Cerys* safely

home with her cargo.” He smiled benignly down at the group.

Septimus jumped up. “Are you crazy?” he said, asking the question for real. “Have

you actually *seen* what Fume is doing?”

“My spectacles are, unfortunately, still on board,” said Milo, peering shortsightedly

into the distance. “Nicko, pass me the telescope please.” Milo took the telescope and saw

what everyone else was looking at. Forgetting that he was no longer onboard his ship,

Milo swore. "So Grub was right," he muttered. "I've been double-crossed good."

"May I have another look?" asked Septimus. Milo passed him the telescope.

Septimus swung it across to the *Cerys* and then back to the beach, where a steady flow of

jinn were emerging from the sea. As the jinn reached the beach they were confidently

marshaled by Tertius Fume, who had an expert touch that Septimus could not help but

admire. At some time in his life Tertius Fume had been a soldier—that he could tell.

Septimus passed the telescope on to Wolf Boy and continued watching the exodus from

the *Cerys*. Without the telescope the jinn looked like a long line of black rope being

pulled over the side of the ship, under the water and up onto the beach. There was no

doubt about it—the island was being invaded. But why?

"I'm going to check on Spit Fyre," Septimus said suddenly. "We might need to move

him. I could use some help."

"We'll all come," said Jenna. "Won't we?"

"Snorri and I need to watch the *Cerys*, Sep," said Nicko apologetically. "She's still in

danger from the rocks."

"That's fine, Nik. See you later."

"Yep." Nicko looked up at Septimus. "Don't get too near to those *things* down there,

little bro—okay?"

"I'll try not to," said Septimus. "You staying here, Milo?" he asked, hoping that Milo

would.

"Yes," Milo said irritably. "And you can give me the telescope. I want to watch *my*

army. Goodness knows I paid enough for it."

Septimus made Jim Knee take off his precious hat—which stuck up like a marker

buoy—and, in single file, they left the rocky spit and headed for the dunes above Spit

Fyre's rock. Jim Knee came second to last, corralled very effectively by Wolf Boy, who

had discovered that the jinnee had more respect for a decomposing tentacle tip than he did for his Master.

"You'd think after all these years stuffed into a tiny bottle in Aunt Zelda's cupboard

he'd be wanting to rush around doing things, wouldn't you?" Septimus said to Beetle.

"There's no understanding jinn, Sep," said Beetle. "They never do quite what you expect them to."

They reached Spit Fyre without incident. The dragon was sleeping peacefully, but at

Septimus's approach, Spit Fyre opened one eye and regarded him with his familiar

quizzical expression.

"Hello, Spit Fyre," said Septimus, gently patting the dragon's nose.

Spit Fyre gave an irritable snort and closed his eye.

"How is he?" asked Beetle.

"Fine," Septimus said with a grin.

Septimus gave Spit Fyre a long drink from the WaterGnome and checked out the

dragon's tail. It was healing well—the Magykal shimmer had all but disappeared, and it

seemed that Syrah's spell was very nearly done. The image of Syrah casting her Magykal

healing spell over Spit Fyre was so vivid that, when Syrah actually spoke to him,

Septimus thought she was still part of his thoughts.

"Septimus!" She sounded breathless. "Oh, I *hoped* I would find you with Spit Fyre."

It wasn't until he heard Beetle saying in amazement, "*Syrah?*" that Septimus

realized Syrah was actually there—for real.

He looked up and saw Syrah standing bemused, surrounded by Lucy, Wolf Boy,

Jenna and Beetle. "Who...who are all these people?" she asked. "Where are they from?"

Suddenly Syrah noticed Jenna and, beneath her sunburn, the color left her face. "Princess

Esmeralda," she gasped. "Why have you come here? You must flee this

place. It is

cursed.”

Jenna looked shocked. “But I’m *not*—” she began.

“It’s all right, Jen, I’ll explain later,” said Septimus, running to Syrah’s side. He took

her hand and led her gently away from the group. “Syrah,” he asked, “are you all right?”

Syrah was far too agitated to answer his question. “Septimus, please, you must keep

the Princess safe. Maybe it is good she is away from the Castle.” She pointed across the

dunes to the warrior jinn. “I do not have long. The Syren has sent me to greet Tertius

Fume—evil old goat, I shall *not* do it—but she may Call me at any moment. Septimus, it

is happening. Last night the ship with the army on board sailed past the dark CattRokk

Light as they had planned. It came within the Syren’s range and she Called it.”

“Why...exactly?”

“Because *they have come to invade the Castle.*”

“*What?*” chorused everyone—except Septimus, to whom it all made hideously

perfect sense.

“That is why I wanted you to Seal the Ice Tunnel. To stop them.”

“Yes, I see that now.”

“But I don’t get it,” said Wolf Boy. “What are they doing *here* if they want to invade

the Castle? Why didn’t they just stay in the ship and sail there?”

“Fume is going to march the warrior jinn along the Ice Tunnel, right into the middle

of the Castle,” said Syrah. “They will be there before anyone knows what’s happening.

Oh, I am Called,” Syrah gasped suddenly. “Septimus. Please. Stop them.” And then she

was gone. Pulled through the sand dunes like a doll dragged by a careless child, she ran

impossibly fast, with no regard to the sharp grass tearing at her legs or the stones cutting

her feet. The violence of Syrah’s sudden flight shocked everyone into silence.

“Are they *really* going to the Castle?” whispered Jenna.

“Yes,” said Septimus. “I think they really are.”



46

THE SILVER SNAKE

They sat among the rocks just above Spit Fyre, watching one warrior after another

wade out of the sea. Beetle looked at his timepiece.

“They’re coming out twelve a minute,” he said. “That’s the same rate as they came

out of the hold. So, if there really are four thousand jinn in there, like Grub says, it’s

going to take them...um...just over five and a half hours.”

“Beetle, you really are like Jillie Djinn,” Jenna teased.

“No, I’m not,” Beetle protested. “She would have figured it out to a tenth of a

second.”

“Bet you could do that too.”

Septimus got to his feet. “Well, at least that gives me enough time to Seal the Ice

Tunnel,” he said. “And this time I’m going to get it right.”

“Sep—don’t go back there,” Beetle said. “Send Jim Knee to do it.”

“*Jim Knee?*”

“He’s your jinnee—that’s his job: to do dangerous stuff for you.”

Septimus looked at Jim Knee. The long, lanky jinnee was lying in the sand, clutching

his precious hat to his chest like a soggy teddy bear. He was fast asleep.

Septimus shook his head. “Beetle, he’s hopeless. He’d probably fall asleep on the way. Or he’d wait until they were all in the tunnel and *then* Seal it. We can’t risk

anything going wrong. I have to do it.”

“Then we’re coming with you,” said Jenna. She looked at the others. “Right?”

“Yep,” said Beetle and Wolf Boy.

“Sorry,” said Lucy, “I can’t come. I promised to do something else. And so did Wolf Boy.”

Everyone, including Wolf Boy, looked puzzled.

“Like what?” said Jenna incredulously. “Go to a party or something?”

“Very funny. *Not*. Wolf Boy and I”—Lucy gave Wolf Boy a meaningful stare—“we

promised to help Mr. Miarr get his Light back to the lighthouse. Those horrible Crowes

over there—” Lucy waved her arm at the *Cerys*. “They tried to kill him before, and if

they see him on top of that rock thingy with the Light, they’ll do it again.”

“You mean there’s someone up there with that weird light?” asked Jenna, shielding

her eyes and looking toward the Pinnacle.

“Of course there is,” said Lucy, as though it were obvious. “Mr. Miarr is the

lighthouse keeper. And we promised to take him and his Light back to the

lighthouse—didn’t we?” She looked at Wolf Boy.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “We did.”

“We have to do it *now*, before anything bad happens.” Lucy stared at everyone,

daring them to contradict her. No one did.

“But how?” asked Wolf Boy.

“Easy,” said Lucy. “We’ll borrow Jim Knee—Septimus doesn’t want him. He can be a turtle again.”

It was okay with Septimus. It was not okay with Jim Knee. However, okay or not, in

a matter of minutes, there was a giant turtle in the water awaiting Lucy’s instructions.

Jenna, Septimus and Beetle watched the turtle swim out toward Star

Island, taking a

wide detour around the *Cerys*. It swam surprisingly steadily, with Lucy and Wolf Boy

sitting comfortably above the water.

“You don’t mess with Lucy Gringe,” said Beetle admiringly. “Even if you’re a jinnee.”

On the beach, the number of warriors was steadily growing. Tertius Fume was forming

the emerging jinn into a long line that folded back on itself. It reminded Septimus of the

anchor rope that Nicko had once made him lay out on deck when they had taken a boat to

the Port. The rope had zigzagged up and down the deck like a snake, so that when the

anchor was finally ready to go, it would drop into the water with no knots or hindrance.

“Flaking the anchor,” Nicko had called it. Nicko’s pickiness about the rope had annoyed

Septimus at the time, but when they had to throw the anchor overboard in a hurry, he had

seen why it was so important. And now he realized that that was what Tertius Fume was

doing. He was preparing the jinn to move quickly, easily and without confusion, while

keeping a large number of them in a small area. And, Septimus suddenly realized, the

ghost did not have to wait until they were all off the *Cerys*.

“I gotta go,” he said. “Now.”

“We’ve got to go, you mean,” said Jenna.

“No, Jen.”

“Yes, Sep.”

“No, Jen, this is dangerous stuff. If...if anything goes wrong, I want you to tell

Marcia what happened. I don’t think Nik quite understands it. But you do—and Marcia

will listen to you.”

“So...is Beetle going with you, then?”

Septimus looked at Beetle. “Beetle?” he asked.

“Yep. I’m coming,” he said.

Jenna was quiet for a moment. “It’s because I’m a girl, isn’t it?” she said.

“What is?”

“You don’t want me to come with you because I’m a girl. It’s this stupid
Young

Army stuff you’ve been doing. All boys together.”

“It’s not that, Jen.”

“So what *is* it then?”

“It’s...well, it’s because you’re the Princess—because you’re going to be
the Queen.

You’re important, Jen. Marcia can get another Apprentice, but the Castle
can’t get

another Queen.”

“Oh, *Sep*,” said Jenna.

“I’d really like you to go back to Milo and Nik. You’ll be safer there.”

“Back to *Milo*?”

“And Nik.”

Jenna sighed. “All right, *Sep*. I’m not going to argue.” She got to her feet
and hugged

Septimus hard. “Be careful. I’ll see you soon. Okay?”

“Okay, Jen.”

“Bye, Beetle.”

Suddenly Beetle wanted to give Jenna something—something to
remember him by,

just in case. He took off his precious Admiral’s jacket and gave it to her.
“For you.”

“Beetle, I can’t. You *love* this jacket.”

“Please.”

“Oh, *Beetle*. I’ll take care of it until you come back.”

“Yeah.”

Jenna hugged Beetle too—much to his amazement—then she put the
jacket on,

scrambled up the rocks and set off toward the rocky spit at the end of the
island. She did

not look back.

Beetle watched her go.

“Beetle,” said Septimus, breaking into his thoughts.

“Er, yes?”

“You do remember your UnSeen?”

Beetle looked uncertain. “I think so.”

“Good. I’ll do the same one, so we can see each other. We’ll do it now,
okay?

One...two...three.”

Together Septimus and Beetle—with a little prompting—whispered the
UnSeen

chant and, after a few false starts, the telltale signs of fuzziness began to appear around

Beetle as he slowly—very slowly—disappeared. They set off along the open ground

above the sand dunes, heading for the hill that would take them up to the Peepe. As they

jogged along they heard Tertius Fume bark, “Forward!”

From within their UnSeens, Septimus and Beetle looked at each other.

“We’re going to have to move fast,” said Septimus.

“Yep.”

They ran, leaping over the rocky ground. Suddenly, no more than a hundred feet in

front of them, Tertius Fume came striding out of one of the many paths that led up from

the beach. Septimus and Beetle stopped dead. Behind the ghost came the first warrior

jinnee, with silver wings shining on its black helmet, the ancient armor dark against the

green grass, and—this sent a shiver down Septimus’s spine—was a sharp, stubby sword

replacing its right hand, a shield replacing the left. Behind the warrior came another, then

another and another. Twelve swordsmen followed by twelve axmen, followed by twelve

bowmen, all marching with a mechanical precision in time with Tertius Fume, following

the ghost as he progressed across the grass with the strange motion that ghosts have, his

feet not always connecting with the ground.

To avoid the jinn Septimus decided to head for the side of the hill near the sea, on the

far side of the island. It was tough going—a steep climb with loose shale and no pathway.

They climbed fast and drew ahead of Tertius Fume and the jinn, who were winding their

way up Syrah’s snaking path. At the top of the hill, at the edge of the trees, Septimus and

Beetle stopped a moment to catch their breath.

“Ouch,” puffed Beetle, who had a stitch. “Better not stop...gotta get there...before

they do.”

Septimus shook his head and handed Beetle his water bottle. “Safer to go

in...with

'em," he said.

"*With* them?" Beetle passed the bottle back.

Septimus took a long gulp of water. "That way the Syren probably won't notice us."

Beetle raised his eyebrows. He hoped Septimus knew what he was doing. "Look at

them, Sep. What a sight."

The jinn were pouring down the side of the *Cerys* and disappearing below the

sparkling green water. In a river of glittering wavelets, they emerged from the sea and

joined the line, moving through the sand dunes, across the rocky spit, and up the hill like

a silver snake.

"Yep. They'd be quite something to have on your side," said Septimus.

"Creepy though," said Beetle, "the way they have no hands."

To the sound of the first warrior jinn crashing through branches, Septimus and Beetle

set off. They skirted the edge of the copse, which was thinner on this side of the hill, and,

as they reached the open cliff top, they saw Tertius Fume and the first warriors emerge

from the trees and head toward the Peepe, their marching feet sending vibrations through

the hollow ground.

"Hurry," said Septimus. "*We must* be at the front."

They hurtled across the grass, Septimus praying that if the Syren was looking out of

the Peepe, she would be too busy watching the oncoming jinn to notice the disturbance

caused by two UnSeens, one of which was not as UnSeen as it could be. The enormity of

what they had to do only hit Septimus as they came close to the warrior jinn. They were

huge and frighteningly mechanical. Their blank stares were inhuman and their arms—a

mixture of swords, spears, maces, daggers and bows—deadly. The thought of the Castle

being overrun with them made Septimus shudder.

He caught Beetle's eye and saw his thoughts echoed in Beetle's expression. With a

double thumbs-up, they slipped inside the Peepe just ahead of Tertius Fume.

Syrah was waiting. Her milk-white eyes briefly looked through Septimus until

Syrah—with some force—twisted her head away and moved forward to greet Tertius

Fume. Septimus grabbed hold of Beetle's hand and together they ran to the brightly lit

hole in the middle of the floor—and jumped.

They landed in the feathers, waded across to the archway and hauled themselves out.

As they hurtled along the white passageway past the Lookout, from the stairs deep within

the cliff they heard the rhythmic tread of boots on rock.

The warrior jinn were on their way.



47

TO THE CASTLE?

A s though he had done it a hundred times before, Septimus opened the door to the

moving chamber and touched the orange arrow. As the chamber began to move,

Septimus allowed himself a smile at Beetle's dumbstruck expression. Neither said a

word—Beetle was speechless, and Septimus was calculating whether they would have

time to get back to the chamber before Tertius Fume and the jinn emerged from the stairs.

It was going to be close. Nervously he fingered the Alchemie Keye, which he had taken

off in readiness.

The arrow crept downward. Septimus spoke. "Beetle, are you *sure* you

want to come

the rest of the way? Because if you don't...well, you know I don't mind, I really don't.

You can wait here. I can show you how to take this thing back up—just in case.”

“Don't be silly, Sep.”

The moving chamber suddenly slowed, and Beetle's stomach shot up to his ears.

“Hey, Sep—where have you gone?” he said.

The chamber settled to a halt.

“Can't you see me?” asked Septimus, concerned—his hand hovering by the door panel.

“Nope. You've disappeared.”

“It's your UnSeen that's disappeared.”

“Oh, gosh, I'm really sorry,” said Beetle. “I dunno what happened.”

Septimus let go of his UnSeen.

“Oh, there you are, Sep. *That's better.*”

“We'll try them again—together, okay?” said Septimus. “One, two, three...”

“You've gone again!” said Beetle.

Septimus reappeared. “One more time—okay?”

“Yep. Here goes.”

“You count this time, Beetle. Do it when *you're* ready. Sometimes that helps.”

“Okey-dokey,” said Beetle, sounding more confident than he felt.

It didn't work.

Septimus was aware that time was ticking away. With every second the warrior jinn

were getting closer—and every second passed was one less second they had to get back

to the moving chamber. He made a decision. “We'll do without. Who needs UnSeens

anyway?” He swiped the door open, and Beetle followed him into the wide, brick

passageway with the hissing lamps. They raced through the cold air, clattered down the

flight of steps and skidded to a halt in front of the shiny black dead-end wall. Septimus

ran his hand across the worn patch on the wall, and the door slid open.

They stepped inside the ice chamber. With a soft *swish* and a *click* the door closed

and the blue light came on. Wide-eyed, Beetle stared at the massive Ice Tunnel hatch

swimming with water, shining with ancient gold.

“That is *some* hatch,” he gasped.

Septimus was already on his knees, looking for the Sealing Plate.

“Hey, look at all the scribing in the gold,” said Beetle, completely forgetting about

the oncoming jinn in his excitement. “This hatch is *incredibly* old. One day we’re going

to have to come back. I could bring some translations with me. Just think, if we could

read what it says—”

Septimus placed the Key into the Sealing Plate.

Suddenly the rhythmic *thud* of marching feet on stone came through the walls of the

chamber—the jinn had reached the corridor. Beetle came back to reality. He and

Septimus looked at each other, translucently pale, as though they were drowning in the

thin blue light.

“I guess we’re...trapped,” whispered Beetle.

“Yeah,” said Septimus, trying to keep his voice steady, while concentrating on

holding the Key still. A skin of ice began to snake out from the Key and encircle the

lozenge-shaped hatch. “But at least they can’t get to the Castle now.”

“The Castle...oh, my gosh—why didn’t I think of it before?” said Beetle. “Sep, you

got your whistle for the Wizard Tower sled?”

“Yes—why?” Septimus was watching the slow progress of the ice, willing it to move

faster.

“Brilliant! *Sep, stop right there. UnSeal it!*”

“Beetle, are you *crazy*?”

“No. We’ll get into the tunnel and Seal it from inside. Then you whistle for the

Wizard Tower sled and we go home—simple!”

Septimus heard the marching footsteps coming nearer—and suddenly he realized

something. Unless he did an UnSeen, Tertius Fume would simply get the jinn to take the

Key off him and UnSeal the hatch. Beetle clearly could not manage

another UnSeen, so

if Septimus did do one, Beetle would be with the jinn— *alone*. It was a terrible thought.

“Okay!” Septimus slammed the Keye reverse-side down onto the Sealing Plate and

the narrow band of ice melted.

Beetle pulled open the ice hatch. Below him was the widest, deepest— and surely

the darkest—Ice Tunnel he had ever seen. A blast of freezing air met him.

The sound of footsteps rang on the steps outside.

“Halt!” Tertius Fume’s bellow came through the door. “Open the door.” A metallic

clang sounded. Nothing happened. Septimus smiled—one of the drawbacks of having

weapons for hands was that it was much harder to open palm-press doors.

Beetle swung over the edge of the open hatch and lowered himself into the darkness,

his feet searching for a foothold. He grinned. “Rungs,” he said, and disappeared.

Septimus followed fast. He found the rungs and tugged the ice hatch closed. Slowly,

slowly—horribly slowly—the hatch moved down to its Seal. The door to the ice chamber

swish ed open, and Septimus caught a brief glimpse of Tertius Fume’s ghostly blue robes

and knobby sandaled feet before the hatch settled onto its Seal.

Inside the tunnel everything went black. For a moment Septimus could see

nothing—where was the Sealing Plate? On the other side of the hatch, as Tertius Fume

bellowed at the first two jinn to *raise the hatch*, Septimus’s Dragon Ring began to glow,

its yellow light reflecting off the gold Sealing Plate.

Septimus slammed the Keye onto the plate and, in the ice chamber, Tertius Fume

stared in astonishment as a diamond-hard ring of Sealing ice encircled the hatch. His

furious bellow penetrated the hatch.

“Glad we’re down here,” said Septimus.

“Yeah,” said Beetle.

His hands already chilled, Septimus brought out a tiny silver whistle and blew hard.

As always, no sound came out.

“Do you think it worked?” he said.

“Yeah,” said Beetle. “Of course it did.”

Beetle was right. Far away, in a lonely Ice Tunnel underneath Beetle’s old hut in the

backyard of the Manuscriptorium, the Wizard Tower sled Awoke to the happy sound of

its Magykal whistle. It curled its carelessly flung purple rope into a neat coil, and in

seconds its fine golden runners were cutting crisply along the frost, setting off for

unknown territory and pristine ice.

Septimus and Beetle took stock. They could not see much by the light of the Dragon

Ring, but what they could see was enough to tell them that this was no ordinary Ice

Tunnel. It was, as Beetle put it, the Grandmother of all Ice Tunnels. It was also, he

pointed out, wide enough for a ten-sled race and as high as the tallest Manuscriptorium

bookshelf. And it was cold. Beetle shivered. The cold in the Ice Tunnel seemed much

worse than he remembered.

From far above came Tertius Fume’s angry shout—muffled but clear enough.

“Axmen, smash the hatch!”

There was a tremendous *crash* and a shower of ice rained down. Beetle leaped out of

the way.

“They can’t break it open, can they?” said Septimus, glancing up anxiously.

“Well...I dunno.” Beetle looked worried. “I suppose if they go on long enough they might.”

“But I thought ice hatches were indestructible,” said Septimus.

“I d-don’t think they’ve been tested against warrior j-jinn,” said Beetle, his teeth

beginning to chatter with cold. “At least, it didn’t say so in the official handbook. Wild

elephants, yes. They b-borrowed some from a traveling fair, apparently.

Battering rams,

yes—but no one tried four thousand warrior jinn. Per-probably couldn't get hold of any."

A series of blows rained down on the hatch, followed by a further shower of ice. A

shout of excitement came from Tertius Fume. "Mace men to the front! Smash the hatch!

Smash it! I want to see Marcia Overstrand's expression tomorrow when she wakes to see

the Wizard Tower surrounded!" A series of massive blows to the hatch followed. A large

chunk of ice landed in front of them, breaking into millions of crystals.

"Let's get out of here," said Septimus. "We can go meet the sled."

"N-no, Sep," said Beetle. "Rule one—once you've C-Called the s-sled, stay where

you are. How else is it going to f-find you?"

"I can Call it again."

"It will still go to where you f-first Called it. Then you've just wasted more t-time."

"Well, I'll stop it on its way. We'll see it coming."

"You can't just flag it down like a d-donkey cart."

Another series of blows shook the hatch and dislodged a flurry of ice.

"I...I don't think the sled's going to get here in time, Beetle," said Septimus. "The

Castle must be *miles* away."

"Yeah."

Crash.

"But we have to warn Marcia," said Septimus, "we *have* to. Hey, Beetle... *Beetle, are you okay?*"

Beetle nodded, but he was shivering badly.

Another *crash* came from above, and a huge lump of ice smashed down. Septimus

dragged Beetle out of the way and discovered that his fingers didn't seem to be working

properly. He waited, huddled with Beetle, for the sound of the ice hatch opening—which

must surely come soon. A spray of ice dampened his face and Septimus closed his eyes.

Something nudged him. It was the Wizard Tower sled.

The smashing of the Ice Tunnel hatch sent a loud *boom* along the tunnel,

followed by a

great *crash* as the hatch hit the ice below.

“Faster, *faster*,” Septimus urged the Wizard Tower sled, which *swish ed* through the

tunnel, its narrow silver runners cutting through the hoar frost on the ice.

It was the most

frightening sled ride Septimus had ever taken—and, as someone who had been a

passenger of Beetle’s, that was saying something. It was not only the speed; they were

also traveling in complete darkness. Septimus had Instructed the sled to douse its light.

A fine spray of ice flew into the air as they went, and Septimus, with his hands

clasping Beetle’s waist, was aware that Beetle was getting dangerously cold. He realized

he should have sat Beetle behind him to protect him from the icy blast as they traveled,

but he did not dare stop now. He told himself that as soon as they reached the nearest

hatch in the Castle, he would get Beetle aboveground and into the warmth of the sun.

Then he would Transport himself to Marcia—he was pretty good at Transports within the

Castle now—and together they would Seal off all tunnels into the Castle. It would be a

close-run thing. He figured he needed to be at least two hours ahead of the warrior jinn.

But at the breathtaking speed the sled was going, Septimus thought he’d easily manage it.

As the sled sped down the long, straight tunnel, Septimus risked a backward glance.

He saw a strange sight—a line of tiny pinpricks of light was moving down from the

hatch: the silver wings of the warrior jinn were lighting up in the dark. Septimus shivered

at the thought of the jinn pouring into the Ice Tunnel, with nothing now but a long,

freezing march between them and the Castle. Not that the cold would bother the jinn, or

their ghostly leader. The thought of the long journey ahead through the ice began to

worry Septimus, and he decided that as soon as the jinn were out of sight he would stop

for a moment and swap places with Beetle. He'd try a Heat Spell for himself and hope

that it warmed up Beetle a little.

Septimus's plans were interrupted by Tertius Fume's bellow echoing along the

tunnel: "To the Castle!" This was followed by the synchronized *crunch* of marching feet

on ice. The warrior jinn were on their way.

To Septimus's consternation, the Wizard Tower sled had chosen that very moment to

slow down. It was now crawling along at a snail's pace that Beetle, had he not been

shivering uncontrollably, would have derided.

"Faster!" Septimus urged the sled. "Faster!" It did not respond but bumped slowly

over a patch of rough ice—the kind that is often found below an ice hatch.

Anxiously Septimus looked back to see how fast the warrior jinn were gaining on

them. At first he was reassured—they appeared not to have moved at all. He could see a

steady flow of tiny silver lights moving down from the Ice Tunnel hatch and then it was

hard to tell what was happening. The jinn did not seem to be getting closer and yet the

clud-clump sound of their marching feet reverberated through the tunnel. Puzzled,

Septimus stared into the dark, and then he realized something rather important—the

pinpoints of light were receding. The jinn were marching in the opposite direction.

Septimus could not believe what had happened. *The sled had gone the wrong way.*

The Wizard Tower sled came to a halt. At first Septimus thought it had stopped

because it had realized its mistake. But then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the

shape of an ice hatch above and remembered what he had told the sled: "Nearest hatch.

Fast as you can." Septimus had assumed that the nearest hatch would be

in the Castle. In

his anxiety about Beetle, he hadn't given any thought to where else the Ice Tunnel might

go. In fact, he had assumed that it didn't go anywhere else—after all, where *would* it go?

He was about to find out. Beetle was dangerously cold, and he had to get him out of

the Ice Tunnel fast. Septimus climbed up the icy rungs on the side of the tunnel,

Unsealed the hatch and pushed it open. Immediately in front of him was the now familiar

black shine of a moving chamber.

Septimus decided to leave the sled free. He pushed Beetle up to the hatch, pulled him

through and Sealed it. Then he propelled Beetle into the moving chamber. He placed his

hand on the orange arrow and felt the chamber shift.

Where, he wondered, was it taking them?



48

ON TENTACLES

Unlike Septimus, Lucy had been having a great time—and not a little success. While

directing the turtle around Star Island, she had discovered the *Marauder*, complete with

Milo's crew and Jakey Fry, hiding out in the old harbor. Lucy knew an opportunity when

she saw one, which was why she was now standing in the well of the CattRokk

Lighthouse directing operations. Milo's crew was reinstating the Light, Miarr was back

where he belonged and Lucy Gringe had kept her promise.

Suddenly a narrow black door under the stairs flew open.

"Hello, Septimus," said Lucy. "Fancy seeing you here."

Half an hour later, on the rocks below the lighthouse, a conference was in progress.

Septimus was pacing up and down. "I'm going back down the Ice Tunnel; I don't see

any other way. We *have* to try and stop them."

Beetle shivered. He was warm now in the sun, but the very word "ice" chilled his

bones.

"You don't stand a chance, 412," Wolf Boy said. "Remember what they used to say:

'Ten against One and You Are Done'? Well, it's true. One against four thousand is

crazy."

"If I go right *now* there will be fewer—maybe four or five hundred."

"Four hundred or four thousand, it makes no difference. Still outnumbered. 'Use

Your Head or You Are Dead.'"

"Oh, do *stop* it, 409—that stuff gets irritating. I'm going *now*. Every second counts.

The longer I leave it the more jinn there will be."

"No, Sep," said Beetle. "Don't. *Please* don't. They'll smash you to pieces."

"I'll do an UnSeen—they won't know I'm there."

"And can the sled do an UnSeen too?"

Septimus did not answer. "I'm off," he said. "You can't stop me." He raced away up

the rocks, taking them all by surprise.

Lucy and Wolf Boy jumped up and tore after him.

"I'm stopping you," Lucy said, catching him and grabbing his arm. "You are not

going to do anything so *stupid*. What would Simon think if I let his little

brother go and
get killed?”

Septimus shook her off. “I should think he’d be pleased. The last thing he said to me was—”

“Well, I’m sure he didn’t mean it,” Lucy cut in. “Look, Septimus, you’re clever.

Even I know what those purple stripes on your sleeves mean, so—like Wolf Boy

said—use your head. Think of something that isn’t going to get you killed. What about

your turtle down there?” Lucy pointed at the little harbor far below. “Can’t he help?”

Septimus looked down at the *Marauder*—to which, he now noticed, someone had

tied a large and extremely unhappy turtle.

“He changes into things, doesn’t he?” said Lucy excitedly. “Can’t he change into a

bird and fly back to the Castle? He can warn them, and then they can Seal stuff and it will

be all right.”

Septimus looked at Lucy with grudging admiration. She had surprised him with her

skill in the sick bay, and she was surprising him once again.

“He could,” he admitted. “But the trouble is, I don’t trust him on his own.”

“Then make him be big enough to take you. Make him be a dragon!” Lucy’s eyes

were shining with excitement.

Septimus shook his head. “No,” he said slowly. “I’ve got a better idea.”

Back on the rocks above the harbor, under the beady yellow eye of an extremely

disgruntled turtle, Septimus outlined his plan. Beetle, Lucy and Wolf Boy listened,

impressed.

“So, let me get this straight,” said Beetle. “Jim Knee’s bottle was gold, right?”

Septimus nodded.

“And the jinn tubes in the chest were made of lead?”

“Yep.”

“And that’s important?”

“I think it’s crucial. You see, in Physik and Alchemie I learned a lot

about lead and

gold. Lead is considered to be the less perfect form of gold. And always, *always*, the

thing is: gold trumps lead. Every time.”

“So?” asked Wolf Boy.

“So, in the jinn pecking order, Jim Knee’s the tops. He’s from gold; they’re from

lead. He’s *much* more powerful than those warriors are.”

“You’re right!” Beetle said excitedly. “I remember now. Someone gave Jillie Djinn a

pamphlet called *Habits and Hierarchy of the Jinn* as a joke—which of course she didn’t

understand. I read it one quiet day in the office, and that is *exactly* what it said.”

Septimus grinned. “So Jim Knee can Freeze the warrior jinn. He’ll stop them in their

tracks.”

“Brilliant,” said Beetle. “Absolutely brilliant.”

“There,” said Lucy, “see what you can do when you try?”

Wolf Boy was not so sure. “It’s still four thousand to one,” he said. “As soon as he

Freezes one of ’em, the other three thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine will be after

him.”

“No,” said Beetle, “I don’t think so. I reckon these jinn are basically one organism—look at the way they all move together. Freeze one and you Freeze the whole

bunch.”

“That’s *right*,” said Septimus. “They only needed one Awake, didn’t they? After that

they just kept on coming.”

“Trouble is, Sep,” said Beetle, “there’s only one way to find out for sure.”

“Yep,” agreed Septimus. “Now where’s that turtle?”

A sodden Jim Knee sat on the harbor steps spitting out turtle spit and moving his fingers

separately, just because he could.

“Jim Knee,” said Septimus, “I command you—”

“You have no need to command, Oh Forceful One,” said Jim Knee, wiggling his toes

experimentally. “Your *wish* is my *command*.”

“Good,” said Septimus. “I *wish* you to Freeze the warrior jinn.”

“How many, Oh Vague One?”

“All of them.”

Jim Knee was aghast. “*All?* Every single one?”

“Yes, every single one,” said Septimus. “That is my wish. And my wish is *what?*”

“My command,” Jim Knee replied glumly.

“Right then. Come on. We’ll take you to them.”

Jim Knee looked up at his Master. “I could do with a nap first,” he said.

“Oh, really?” said Septimus.

“Yes, really,” said the jinnee.

Jim Knee did not know what hit him. One minute he was sitting, eyes slowly closing

in the heat of the sun, and the next he had been grabbed, hauled to his feet and

frogmarched down to the smelly fishing boat he knew too well.

“We’ve got him, Sep,” the dark-haired boy with the viselike grip on his left front

flipper—no, his *arm*—was saying.

“And we’re not letting go,” said the boy with the rat’s nest on his head, who had an

equally nasty hold on his right arm.

“Good,” said his Master. “Get him on the boat.”

Like all jinn, Jim Knee could hardly bear the physical touch of a human. There was

something about the rush of blood beneath the skin, the swiveling of the bones, the tug of

the tendons, the constant *ker-chump* of the heartbeat that set him on edge—it was all so

busy. And the feel of their skin touching his was disgusting. One human grabbing hold of

him would have been bad enough, but two was intolerable.

“Order them to unhand me, Oh Great One,” Jim Knee pleaded. “I promise I will do

what you wish.”

“*When* will you do it?” asked Septimus, who was rapidly wising up to jinnee

behavior.

“Now,” Jim Knee wailed. “Now! I will do it now, now, *now*, Oh Wise and

Wonderful One—if only you will *let me go*.”

“Put him on the boat first, and *then* let go of him,” Septimus told Beetle and Wolf

Boy.

Jim Knee retreated to the stern. Like a wet dog, he shook himself to get rid of the

feel of human touch.

“‘Scuse me,” said Jakey Fry, pushing past. “I need to get ter me tiller.”
At the touch

of Jakey’s elbow, Jim Knee leaped out of the way as though he had been stung.

The *Marauder* drew steadily closer to the *Cerys*, which was now safely at anchor in the

bay. Silence fell on the fishing boat. All on board could see the stream of warriors still

leaving the ship and, much farther away, pouring up the hill—looking exactly, as Nicko

had observed, like ants. Septimus could hardly contain his impatience. The *clud-clump* of

the warriors’ marching feet still echoed in his head, and he knew that, with every

moment, the jinn drew nearer to the Castle. He thought of Marcia and the Wizards in the

Wizard Tower going about their daily routines, Silas and Sarah in the Palace, all

oblivious to the threat drawing ever nearer. Septimus wondered how fast the jinn were

traveling—how much time was left before Tertius Fume would be marching into the

Castle at the head of his terrifying army?

The answer was not one that Septimus, or anyone on the *Marauder*, would have

wanted to hear. Tertius Fume had chosen a personal cohort of five hundred warrior jinn

and taken them on ahead. He was heading for the Wizard Tower, which the ghost knew

had open access to the tunnels—the Tower itself being considered a Seal. The jinn were

traveling fast, faster than any human could run, and at that very moment they were

pounding along below the Observatory in the Badlands.

It is a little known fact that it takes an arthritic wolfhound exactly the same time to walk

from the Palace Gate to the Wizard Tower as it takes a cohort of jinn to run the Ice

Tunnel from the Observatory to the Wizard Tower. That afternoon Sarah and Silas Heap

had an appointment with Marcia. As the jinn passed beneath the Observatory, Silas,

Sarah and Maxie went out of the Palace Gate.

Half an hour later, the *Marauder* drew up alongside the *Cerys*. Warily Jakey watched

a group of ax-handed jinn climbing down the side of the ship.

“How near d’yer want me ter go?” he asked. “Don’t want one a *them* landin’ on me

boat.”

“As near as you can—and as fast as you can,” said Septimus.

Jim Knee yawned. “No rush,” he said. “I can’t Freeze them until the last one is

Awake.”

“*What?*” gasped Septimus.

Sarah, Silas and Maxie walked past the Manuscriptorium.

“As I am sure you know, Oh All-Comprehending One, it is not possible to Freeze an

Entity when it is not fully Awake. And, as I am sure you also understand, Oh *Astute* One,

these jinn are but one Entity.”

There was a sudden shout from Beetle. “Last one! There’s the last one, Sep. Look!”

It was true. An ax-carrying warrior was mechanically descending, the *clang* of metal

on metal marking every step—and above him was an empty ladder.

“*Freeze them,*” said Septimus. “Now!”

Jim Knee shook Septimus off and bowed. “Your wish is my command, Oh Excitable

One.”

The last of the jinn stepped off the ladder and dropped into the sea. Dismayed,

Septimus watched the warrior sink to the seabed.

“I’ll wait until it comes out,” said Jim Knee.

“You will not,” Septimus told him. “You will go and Freeze one of those on the

beach instead.”

“I am sorry to inform you, Oh Misguided One, that a Freeze will only run in one

direction. Therefore, if you wish to Freeze all the jinn—something that I would strongly

advise, as a semi-Frozen Entity is a dangerous thing—you should Freeze either the very

last or the very first one. I would suggest the last one as the safest option.”

“Is he right, Beetle?” asked Septimus.

Beetle looked baffled. “I dunno, Sep. I guess he must know.”

“Okay, Jim Knee. I command you to Freeze the last one *now*. Transform to a turtle.”

Jim Knee remained surprisingly cool at the mention of the dreaded turtle. “As the

Wise One undoubtedly knows, I must hold the Entity I wish to Freeze in *both* hands, in

order to pass the Freeze between them. This is not possible with *flippers*,” he said,

pronouncing “flippers” with a tone of disgust.

Septimus was floored. What could Jim Knee Transform to? Surely everything under

the water had flippers or fins? He watched the silver points of light glancing off the

winged helmet of the last jinn, which was moving slowly— *so* slowly, like running in a

nightmare—twenty feet below the sea. The tide was rising, and the *Cerys* was now much

farther from the shore. How long would it take for the last of the jinn to emerge. And who

knew how near they were to the Castle?

At the end of Wizard Way, Sarah, Silas and Maxie reached the Great Arch.

“A crab!” yelled Lucy. “He can be a *crab*!”

Jim Knee gave Lucy a withering stare—a crab was little better than a turtle.

Septimus looked at Lucy in admiration. “Jim Knee,” he said, “I wish you to

Transform into a crab!”

“Any particular type of crab?” asked Jim Knee, putting off the evil moment.

“No. Just do it *now*.”

“Very well, Oh Exigent One. Your wish is my command.” There was a flash of

yellow light, a dull *pop*, and Jim Knee disappeared.

“Where’s he gone?” asked Septimus, trying not to panic. “*Where’s the crab?*”

“Aah!” screamed Lucy. “It’s here. On the floor. Go away, go away!”

A tiny yellow ghost crab was heading for Lucy’s boots.

“Don’t kick it, Lucy. *Don’t kick it!*” yelled Septimus.

Wolf Boy dived to the deck, grabbed the crab between finger and thumb and held it

in the air, legs waving. “Got it!” he said.

“Chuck it in the sea,” said Septimus. “Quick!”

Sarah, Silas and Maxie walked into the Wizard Tower courtyard.

Silence fell on the *Marauder*. Hardly daring to breathe, they watched the warrior jinn still

emerging onto the beach, waiting for the moment when the relentless march would cease.

They watched, they waited, and *still* the jinn moved forward.

“What is he *doing?*” muttered Septimus.

A small yellow gull broke the surface and flew to the *Marauder*. It perched on the

side, shook the seawater from its feathers and went *pop*. Jim Knee, looking somewhat

harassed, sat in its place. “I am sorry,” he said. “It didn’t work.”

Sarah, Silas and Maxie went up the marble steps to the silver doors of the Wizard Tower.

“No!” a collective cry rose from the *Marauder*.

Septimus was horrified. He had staked everything on his theory that jinn from gold

were more powerful than jinn from lead—and it was *wrong*. “Why?” he asked

desperately. “Why *not?*”

Silas said the Password, and the great doors to the Wizard Tower swung open.

“They were Awoken with Darkenesse,” said Jim Knee. “They must be Frozen with

Darkenesse. And, whatever you may think of me, Oh Displeased One, I do not have any

Darkenesse in me.”

“None?”

Jim Knee looked offended. “I am *not* that kind of jinnee.”

Wolf Boy reached into the leather pouch that hung at his waist and drew out the

decomposing Grim tentacle. Everyone reeled. “Is that Darke enough for you?” he asked.

“I am not even *touching* that. It is revolting,” said Jim Knee. “And, before you

command me to take it, Oh Desperate One, I warn you—take care. To command

Darkeness upon a jinnee is a dangerous thing.”

“He’s right, Sep,” said Beetle. “If you command it, you too become part of the

Darkeness, and you will never get rid of it. Implicated, it’s called. He’s not such a bad

jinnee after all. Some of them would jump at the chance to Implicate their Master.”

Sarah, Silas and Maxie were in the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower, waiting for Marcia.

“Are there builders in the basement?” Silas asked Sarah. “There’s a lot of banging down there.”

Septimus was thinking hard. “Okay...but what if he takes it because he wants to?”

“Then that’s all right,” said Beetle. “You’re not part of it then. But it won’t

happen—he doesn’t want to.”

“Jim Knee,” said Septimus, “I wish you to Transform to a gull.”

Jim Knee sighed. There was a yellow puff of smoke and a *pop*. Once more the little

yellow gull stood on the gunnels of the *Marauder*.

“Okay, 409,” said Septimus, “show the gull the tentacle.”

Marcia stepped off the spiral stairs and forced a welcoming smile for Sarah, Silas and the malodorous Maxie.

Wolf Boy held his hand out to the gull. The tentacle, rank and putrid, sat in his palm like

a fat, juicy sand eel.

The little gull regarded its Master with a mixture of loathing and grudging

admiration. It knew what was going to happen, but it couldn’t stop itself. With a swift

peck at Wolf Boy’s scarred palms, it sucked up the oh- so-repulsive tentacle and gulped it down.

“Nice one, Sep,” said Beetle admiringly.

A massive crash came from inside the broom closet. Maxie growled. Marcia went to investigate.

Heavy with undigested tentacle, the gull took off from the *Marauder*. It

skimmed the

surface of the sea, searching for the telltale stream of tiny air bubbles that would be

floating up from the armor of the final warrior jinn.

The ghost of Tertius Fume Passed Through the broom closet door into the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower.

“Ah, Miss Overstrand,” he said. “We have a score to settle.”

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing here, Fume,” Marcia blazed. “But you

can get out—now! I won’t tell you again.”

“How true,” said Tertius Fume with a smile. “Indeed, you won’t. One of the many

things you will not be doing again, Miss Overstrand.”

He spun around and yelled to the broom closet door, “Kill her!”

The gull stopped in mid-flight. There was a small puff of yellow smoke, the gull vanished

and a tiny ghost crab plopped into the water.

Twelve warrior jinn came smashing through the broom closet door as though it were

made of paper. In a second Marcia was trapped, surrounded by a circle of swords.

“Run!” she yelled to Silas and Sarah.

The watchers on the *Marauder* waited. Still the jinn marched out from the sea.

Frantically, Marcia began a SafeShield spell, but the Darke in the jinn made her Magyk

slow. With the points of twelve razor-sharp blades just inches from her throat, Marcia

knew it was too late. She closed her eyes.

A little yellow crab caught the heel of the last warrior jinn.

In an instant, the jinn Froze. Marcia felt the sudden chill in the air and opened her eyes

to see twelve swords dulled by a fine, crystalline frosting surrounding her like a necklace.

Marcia Shattered them and stepped out of the circle of Frozen jinn, shaking. She found

three Wizards lying in a dead faint and Sarah and Silas white-faced with horror. She

marched up to the shocked Tertius Fume and told him:

“As I said, I will not tell you again. But I will tell you this, Fume. I shall be taking

steps to Eradicate you. Good day.”

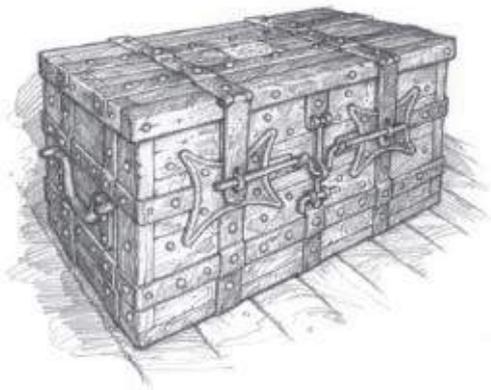
Jenna heard a distant cheer go up from the *Marauder*. Through Milo’s telescope, she saw

the jinn stopped in mid-step, covered with a sparkly sheen of crystal. She swung the

telescope back to the *Marauder*—the closest she could get to joining in the celebrations.

“Oh, yuck!” she said.

Jim Knee was getting sick over the side of the boat.



49

Returns

That night found Jenna and Septimus sitting together on what was once again their

beach, a little way from a talkative group gathered around a blazing fire. At Jenna’s

insistence, Septimus had just finished telling her all that had happened.

“You know, Sep,” said Jenna, “if being Queen means always having to watch

everyone else do stuff, I don’t think I want to be one. You and Beetle get to do exciting

things with jinn and Ice Tunnels and sleds while *I* have to sit and politely listen to Milo

drone on and on. Nicko and Snorri weren’t much better—all they talk about is boats.”

“The Ice Tunnels weren’t that great,” said Septimus. “Believe me.” He looked up

and saw a banana-like figure emerge from the sand dunes. “Oh, at *last*—there’s Jim

Knee. Excuse me, Jen. I have to talk to him.”

“Oh, go on then, Sep. I know *you* have important things to do,” said Jenna.

“You can come too, Jen. Actually, *he* can come to us. Jim Knee!”

Jim Knee wandered over, his doughnut hat swaying as he walked. “You called, Oh

Sedentary One?”

“Did you do it?” Septimus asked anxiously.

“It was a battle,” he said, “but I won.” The jinnee smiled. Life with his Master was

not turning out to be as tedious as he had feared. “We go back a long way, the Syren and

I. I was due a little victory.”

Septimus had a sudden attack of goose bumps. He realized that he was talking to a

very ancient being. “Thank you, Jim Knee,” he said. “Thank you. You are...incredible.”

Jim Knee bowed. “I know,” he said, and handed Septimus the small silver phial that

Syrah had given him for Spit Fyre. It was ice-cold.

Gingerly, Septimus took the phial between finger and thumb and held it at arm’s

length. “Is it Sealed?” he asked.

“Indeed it is, Oh Cautious One. Will that be all? I could do with that nap now. It has

been a bit of a day.”

“No, that will not be all,” said Septimus, reminding himself that, however grateful he

was, to his jinnee he must appear to be tough and not—as Beetle had recently reminded

him—a pushover.

“What else do you wish, Oh Taxing One?”

“Three things, actually.”

“*Three*, Oh Insatiable One? You do realize that three is the maximum number of

wishes that may be commanded at any one time?”

Septimus didn’t, but he was not going to admit it. “Three. Number one, I command

you to stop calling me silly names.”

Jim Knee sighed. “Oh, well, it was fun while it lasted. Your wish is my command,

Oh Great One—I may call you that, may I not? It is standard jinnee practice. Unless you

prefer something else, of course.”

“I think,” said Septimus, considering the matter, “I would prefer Apprentice. That is

what I am.”

“Not *Senior* Apprentice, Sep?” Jenna teased.

“Can you imagine what he’d make that sound like, Jen? No, Apprentice is just fine.”

Jim Knee sounded resigned. “Very well, Oh Apprentice.”

“I said Apprentice, not *Oh* Apprentice.”

“Very well, *Apprentice*.”

“Number two, I command you to go, as fast as you can, to the far end of the Frozen

warrior jinn. I wish to know if they reached the Castle. If they have reached the Castle,

you are to inform the ExtraOrdinary Wizard what has happened.”

Normally the jinnee would have protested that this was in fact two wishes, but he felt

he was on soft ground. He had not entirely honored the agreement that had released him

from the Sealed cell. “The ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Oh G—Apprentice?”

“Yes. You will find her at the Wizard Tower. Tell her I sent you.”

Jim Knee looked uncomfortable. “Ah,” he said, “that reminds me. She asked me to

find you and get some kind of Key...to, um, Seal some tunnels? Quite went out of my

head with all the excitement. I’ll do that now, shall I?”

Septimus could hardly believe what he had just heard. “Marcia asked you to Seal the

tunnel? But I don’t understand—how did she know? And how on earth did you meet

Marcia?”

Jim Knee looked shifty. “Just bumped into her,” he said. “I’ll go now, shall I?”

“I haven’t finished. My third wish is that you return all the jinn to their tubes.”

Jim Knee sighed. It was what he had expected, but that didn’t make it any easier.

Never since he had been a slave in the stables of King Augeas had the jinnee faced such a

Herculean task—except this time he doubted Hercules would turn up to help.

“Your wish is my command, Apprentice,” said Jim Knee, bowing low. The doughnut

hat fell off, he snatched it up, crammed it back on and, mustering his dignity, walked off.

Jim Knee made his way to the first warrior jinnee he had Frozen. The tide was

retreating and the seven-foot-long armor-clad figure lay facedown in the wet sand, his

arms outstretched, his ax half-buried in the sand, his shield and the silver wings on his

helmet caught up with strings of seaweed. At the sight of the indentations from the ghost

crab's claws still visible in his unprotected heel, Jim Knee allowed himself a half-smile.

He was thankful the jinn had not seen him coming, for they would have seen him as he

really was—the wild, wall-eyed wise woman of some twenty-five thousand summers

who had, mistakenly, she sometimes thought, chosen existence as a jinnee in preference

to life as a turtle trader's fourth wife. The turtle trader's wife had once had the misfortune

to meet the vicious warrior from whom they had been taken, and it was not an encounter

Jim Knee wished to repeat.

There was a flash of yellow light, and Septimus saw his jinnee whiz along the line of

fallen warriors and disappear into the dunes. He took Syrah's book from his pocket and

anxiously looked at the cover. It now read:

Syrah's Book

Dedicated to: Julius Pike, ExtraOrdinary Wizard

Septimus smiled—the Syren's crabbed writing was gone. He looked along the beach,

then scanned the dunes.

"You okay, Sep?" asked Jenna.

"Yes, thanks, Jen. *Very* okay, in fact." He glanced up to the hilltop.

"You expecting someone?"

"Well, I—oh, *bother*," muttered Septimus.

A figure had detached itself from the group around the fire and was making its way

toward them.

"Ah, *there* you are," said Milo cheerily, settling himself down between Jenna and

Septimus. "Mission accomplished, Princess." He smiled at Jenna fondly. "I picked the

rats up, though I would happily have left them stranded on that rock.
Why you think the

Cerys needs its rats back, I really do not know.”

Jenna grinned. “They’ll be leaving at the Port,” she said. “I’ll be arranging a pickup.”

Milo smiled indulgently. “So like your mother. Always some mysterious project

going on.” He turned to Septimus. “And you, young man, I cannot thank you

enough—you saved my precious cargo.”

“You’re welcome.” Septimus sounded preoccupied.

“*And* he saved the Castle,” said Jenna.

“Indeed, indeed. It was a very clever trick.”

“Trick?” Jenna spluttered indignantly. “Sep doesn’t do *tricks*. It was really brave and

clever—hey, Sep, are you okay?”

“Yeah...fine,” said Septimus, glancing back at the dunes once more.

Milo was quite used to people looking distracted when he was talking to them. “Just

think,” he said. “Just *think* how different things would have been if I had found this army

when I first began searching all those years ago. You, Jenna, would have grown up with

your real mother, not with some weird Wizards, and of course you, Septimus, would have

spent those precious, never to be recaptured, early years with your own dear parents.”

“The weird Wizards, you mean?” asked Septimus.

“Oh. Oh, no, *no*, of course I didn’t mean that. Oh, dear.” Milo sprang to his feet, glad

of a timely interruption. “Well, he *llo*. And who is *this* young lady?”

“Syrah!” gasped Septimus, also leaping up.

Milo suffered a rare attack of sensitivity. “I’ll just go and check on things,” he said,

and hurried off toward the fire.

“Hello, Syrah,” said Jenna a little shyly.

“Princess Esmeralda.” Syrah dropped into an awkward curtsy.

Jenna flashed a questioning glance at Septimus. “No, please, I’m not—”

Septimus stepped in. “Syrah, are you all right?”

Syrah looked anything but all right. She was deathly pale; the dark shadows around

her eyes looked even deeper and her hands were trembling. “I am...I

think...I am *me*.”

She sat down suddenly and began to shake violently.

“Jen,” said Septimus, kneeling beside Syrah, “could you get some water, please—and a HeatCloak too?”

“Of course.” Jenna rushed off.

“Septimus,” Syrah whispered, “the Syren...I do not understand... where...where is she?”

Septimus held out his hand. In his palm lay the silver phial, covered with a fine

frosting of ice, which shimmered in the light from his Dragon Ring.

“Here. The Syren is in here,” said Septimus.

Syrah stared uncomprehendingly at the phial. “In *there*?”

“Yes. Sealed in here,” said Septimus. “Syrah, I promise you, the Syren has gone.

Forever. You are free.”

“*Free*?”

“Yes.”

Syrah burst into tears.

The moon rose, and in the distance the two beams of the CattRokk Light shone out across

a calm sea. On his Watching platform, Miarr prowled contentedly. He looked out at the

island and, as Milo threw another log on the fire, he saw it blaze up into the night,

illuminating the group gathered around it. Miarr smiled and chewed on a dried fish head.

For the first time since Mirano’s disappearance, he felt at peace.

On the beach there was peace—but not quiet. The fire crackled and spat with the salt in

the driftwood, people chattered and Spit Fyre snuffled and snorted. Septimus had decided

that he was well enough to be moved down onto the beach. Spit Fyre was, he thought,

becoming a little miserable on his own. The dragon, complete with bucket and bandaged

tail, lay on the soft sand just below the sand dunes, gazing at the fire through half-closed

eyes, watching Beetle dispensing cups of FizzFroot just out of reach of his tongue. He

snorted, stretched his neck and tried to get a little closer. Spit Fyre liked FizzFroot.

Wolf Boy was showing Jenna, Beetle, Nicko, Snorri, Lucy and Jakey how to play

Village Chief—a fast-moving game involving shells, scooped out dips in the sand and much shouting.

Septimus and Syrah sat quietly watching the game. Syrah had stopped shivering and

had even drunk some of Jenna’s hot chocolate. But she was very pale, and against the

bright red of the HeatCloak, Septimus thought she looked almost ghostly.

“How beautiful the *Cerys* looks in the moonlight,” said Syrah, gazing out at the ship,

which was ablaze with light as the crew repaired the damaged rigging and set her to

rights. “She will be ready to set sail soon, I think?”

Septimus nodded. “In two days’ time.”

“Septimus,” said Syrah, “I do not know how to thank you. I am so happy—all I

wished for has come true. You know, I used to dream of sitting here with a group of

friends from the Castle around a fire—and now, here I am.” Syrah shook her head in

wonderment. “And soon, so very soon, I shall see Julius.”

Septimus took a deep breath. He had been dreading this moment. “Um... Syrah,

about Julius, I—”

“Hey,” Wolf Boy called over. “You two want to play Village Chief?”

Syrah turned to Septimus, her green eyes shining in the firelight. “I remember that

game. I used to love it.”

“Yep,” Septimus called back. “We’ll play.” He would tackle the Julius question in

the morning.

But it wasn’t Septimus who tackled the Julius question—it was Jenna. Later that night as

the *swish-swash* of the waves receded, the ancient roads in the sand slowly reappeared,

glistening in the moonlight, and Wolf Boy became Village Chief for the second time,

Septimus heard Jenna say to Syrah, “But I am *not* Esmeralda—really I’m not. That was

five hundred years ago, Syrah.”

Septimus was at Syrah’s side in an instant. “What does the Princess mean?” Syrah

asked him.

“She—Jenna—means that...um...oh, Syrah. I am so sorry, but what she means is

that you have been on this island for five hundred years.”

Syrah looked utterly bewildered.

Septimus tried to explain. “Syrah, you were Possessed. And you know that when

someone is Possessed, they have no sense of time passing. Their life is suspended until

the time they are—if they are lucky—DisPossessed.”

“So...are you telling me that when we get back to the Castle, five hundred years will

have passed since I was last there?”

Septimus nodded. Around the fire, a fearful hush fell—even Milo was quiet.

“So Julius is... *dead*.”

“Yes.”

Syrah let out a long, despairing wail and collapsed onto the sand.

They rowed Syrah over to the *Cerys* and laid her in a cabin. Septimus kept watch all

night, but she did not stir. And when the *Cerys* set sail for the Castle, Syrah still lay

unconscious in the cabin, so thin and insubstantial beneath the blankets that sometimes

Septimus thought no one was there.

Three days later, the *Cerys* drew up alongside Merchant Quay in the Port. The Town

Band struck up its usual cacophony, and an excited chattering came from the crowd

gathered on the quay. It was not every day that such an impressive ship came into Port

carrying a *dragon*—and it was certainly not every day that the ExtraOrdinary Wizard

came to meet a ship.

Marcia had caused quite a stir when she had arrived, and comments were flying

around the crowd.

“She’s got lovely hair, hasn’t she?”

“Look at that silk lining on her cloak—must have cost a fortune.”

“Not sure about the shoes though.”

“Isn’t that the old White Witch from the Marshes with her?”

“Ooh, don’t look, don’t *look*. It’s bad luck to see a Witch and a Wizard together!”

Marcia listened to the comments and wondered why people thought that wearing

ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes made her deaf. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a

familiar figure hanging around at the back of the crowd.

“Is that who I think it is?” she said to Aunt Zelda.

Aunt Zelda was much shorter than Marcia and had no idea who Marcia was staring

at, but she did not want to admit it. “Possibly,” she said.

“The trouble with you Witches, Zelda,” said Marcia, “is that you never give a

straight answer to a straight question.”

“And the trouble with you *Wizards*, Marcia, is that you make such sweeping

generalizations,” snapped Aunt Zelda. “Now excuse me. I want to get to the front. I want

to make sure Wolf Boy really *is* safe.”

Aunt Zelda pushed her way forward through the crowd while Marcia quickly made

her way to the back, the crowd respectfully parting for the ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

Simon Heap saw her coming, but he stood his ground. There was no way he was

going to walk away from seeing his Lucy and asking her if she still wanted to be with

him—not even Marcia Overstrand could make him do that.

“Simon Heap,” said Marcia, striding up to him. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m waiting for Lucy,” said Simon. “I’ve heard she’s on board.”

“She is indeed on board,” said Marcia.

“She *is*?” Simon’s face lit up.

“There’s no point hanging around here,” said Marcia.

“I’m sorry, Marcia,” said Simon, politely but very definitely. “I’m not leaving.”

“I should hope not,” said Marcia—then, to Simon’s amazement, she smiled. “You

get yourself right to the front. You don’t want to miss her.”

“Oh! Well, thank you. I...yes, I will.”

Marcia watched Simon Heap disappear into the crowd. Suddenly a loud voice came

from the ship. “Marcia!” Milo had spotted the distinctive purple robes.

The gangplank was lowered and the crowd cleared a path for Milo, who, resplendent

in a new set of dark red robes liberally trimmed with gold, cut an impressive figure. He

reached Marcia, bowed dramatically and kissed her hand—to the sound of some cheers

and some desultory clapping from the crowd.

Jenna watched from the *Cerys*. “Oh, he is so embarrassing,” she said. “Why can’t he

just be like a normal person—why can’t he just be...okay?”

“You know, Jen,” said Septimus, “just because Milo isn’t how you think he should

be, doesn’t mean he *isn’t* okay. It’s just that he’s okay in a Milo kind of way.”

“Hmm,” said Jenna, not entirely convinced.

Milo was leading Marcia toward the *Cerys*. “Do come aboard. I have a most

precious cargo to show you.”

“Thank you, Milo,” Marcia replied. “I have arranged for the precious cargo to be

taken straight to the Sealed Room in the Wizard Tower, where it will remain indefinitely.

Mr. Knee here will be in charge of it.”

Milo looked dumbfounded. “B-but—” he stammered. There was a yellow flash, a

faint *pop* and the distinctive shape of Jim Knee materialized. He bowed to Milo and

walked serenely up the gangplank of the *Cerys*, where he was nearly knocked over by

Lucy Gringe as she hurtled down, braids flying. “Simon!” Lucy was yelling. “Oh, *Si!*”

From the back of the crowd two late arrivals pushed forward.

“Silas, *why* are we always late?” puffed Sarah. “Oh look—there he is. Nicko,

Nicko!”

Nicko stood at the top of the gangplank, looking out for his parents, ready to meet

them at last. “Mum! Dad! Hey!”

“Oh, come on, Silas, *do*,” said Sarah.

“Oh, my...oh, Sarah, he looks so grown up.”

“He’s older, Silas. An awful lot older, if you believe what they say.”

As the hubbub died down, on the quayside a rat stood holding a sign, which read:

RATS!

ARE YOU
SICK OF SEASICKNESS?
BORED WITH BISCUITS?
WEARY OF WEEVILS?

COME TO THE CASTLE AND BE A MESSAGE RAT!

Apply at this notice. Ask for Stanley.

And for once, the rat was doing good business.

HISTORIES AND HAPPENINGS

GHOST SHIPS

Every now and then, a panic sweeps through the Port that a ghost ship is approaching.

The panic is generally unfounded, but there has been at least one occasion when it has not been.

A ghost ship is an actual ship that is inhabited by the ghosts of all crew, passengers

and livestock (even seabirds) that were on board at the moment it became Ghostly. No

one knows whether these ghosts understand what has happened to them, for they appear

to carry on with their lives as usual, sailing the ship aimlessly across the oceans. It is very

rare for a ghost ship to actually put into a port, but there is a credible story of one arriving

at the Port at the dead of night during a snowstorm some fifty years ago and leaving at sunrise.

A ship becomes a ghost ship by two methods:

A ship may anchor off one of the Spirit Islands at the Dark of the Moon. At the rising

of the sun, she will become a ghost ship—and all on board will be ghosts.

A ship may also encounter a ghost ship out at sea. The ghost ship may appear to be

asking for help or to be adrift. The Living ship will draw alongside the ghost ship to offer

assistance, and as soon as the Living ship touches the ghost ship she—and all on

board—will become Ghostly.

There have been incidents of grieving relatives who have chartered a ship in order to

catch a glimpse of their Ghostly loved ones from afar and to try to communicate with

them. Naturally it is very difficult to charter a ship for this purpose, skippers being a

superstitious breed. No Port skipper will accept such a commission since the Incident of

the *Idora*, a fishing boat chartered for just such a purpose. The *Idora* actually found the

ghost ship it was searching for but was blown alongside it and became one itself.

Beetle's uncle—then a boy of fourteen—was reputed to have been lured on board the

ghost ship that snowy night at the Port, although for years his mother refused to believe

it. In her old age she chartered a ship to go looking for her son and she never returned.

The family always believed that she had found her son's ghost ship and jumped aboard.

TERTIUS FUME

Tertius Fume had, when Living, once commanded the army of a particularly nasty minor

potentate of a small Principality that bordered on the Endless Desert. The potentate had

ambitions to be ruler of a considerably larger amount of land and so set about annexing

his neighbors. He had little success until he employed a young mercenary by the name of

Tertius Fume. Tertius Fume was on the run from his own country after an unpleasant

episode that became known as the Great Betrayal, and he was glad of a chance to

reinvent himself. He was a charismatic young man whose elaborate stories people wanted

to believe—and so very often they did. The potentate gave him his entire army to

command (not as impressive as it sounds) and Tertius Fume's tales about being the

youngest general in his own country were put to the test. Due to a combination of luck,

recklessness and the fact that all his critics had mysterious and unpleasant "accidents,"

Tertius Fume was considered successful. It was here that he encountered

his first platoon

of warrior jinn, and it was due to them that he successfully invaded four neighboring

castles, always by tunneling beneath their walls or using existing supply tunnels. He

became known as the Night Sneak. A scandal caused him to leave his post suddenly, and

some years later he arrived at the Castle.

THE LUCY GRINGE

Lucy is very proud of the fact that she now has a fishing boat with red sails named after

her. All through the last evening on the island, Jakey had gathered his courage to ask

Lucy something, but he was afraid she would just laugh and call him fishbrain. If Beetle

hadn't offered him some FizzFroot, it might never have happened.

FizzFroot was the most amazing thing that Jakey had ever tasted and it gave him an

idea. Cup in hand, he went to find Lucy, who was standing by the water's edge thinking

of Simon Heap. Nearby, the *Marauder* was drawn up in the shallows, its anchor dug into

the beach. Jakey took a deep breath and gathered all his courage—more than he had

needed for a very long time—and made the longest speech of his life.

“Lucy, I knows yer won't come with me on me boat, however much I'd like yer to,

so I wants yer to name 'er. She's *my* boat now, see, and I can give her a name that *I* like.

So yer have to pour this fizzy stuff over her and say, ‘I name this ship the *Lucy*

Gringe’—all right?”

“Oh, *Jakey*.” Lucy was lost for words.

“I'll probably just call her *Lucy* fer short,” said Jakey. “It's a nice name, *Lucy*.”

SKIPPER FRY AND THE CROWES

When Milo and his crew returned to the *Cerys*—armed to the teeth—they found Skipper

Fry and the Crowes in no state to offer any opposition. All three were unconscious in the

saloon, having found the saloon's stock of rum and drunk the lot. What Milo said about

the state of the saloon cannot be reported here and can only be excused on the grounds

that Milo had had a difficult day. Fry and the Crowes were locked in the cargo hold with

a bucket of water each and taken out when they arrived at the Port. They are now in the

Port Prison, awaiting trial.

When Jakey Fry heard the news, he was relieved—now he truly was free.

MERRIN MEREDITH (AKA DANIEL HUNTER)

Merrin spent two long nights trapped behind the wainscoting.

After he realized he was locked in, he ate his entire stock of candy. He then felt sick

and began moaning. Sarah Heap heard, but she assumed it was the ghosts of the little

Princesses that Jenna had told her about. After a while Merrin fell asleep, only to wake at

midnight and begin screaming again. Sarah sent Silas down to investigate, but halfway

down the stairs, Silas thought the better of it and came back to bed, telling Sarah it was

“cats.” Merrin fell asleep in despair; he slept all that night and for much of the next day.

He then spent the next night yelling too, and Sarah Heap had horrible nightmares about

cats.

It was late in the evening the following day when, running his hand along the panels,

counting the knots in the wood, Merrin’s fingers found the catch to open the door. Not

caring whether anyone heard or saw him, he raced up to his room in the attic, where he

ate his way through his emergency supply of licorice and Banana Bears and fell asleep

once more.

The next morning Merrin was tempted to forget about the Manuscriptorium

altogether but then thought better of it. He liked the scribe’s uniform—it made him feel

important—and besides, he needed the wages to buy more licorice.

Merrin could hardly believe his bad luck in bumping into Aunt Zelda, but he thought

he handled it pretty well. He had breezed confidently into the Manuscriptorium, expecting to be welcomed back, only to find that Jillie Djinn was no longer quite the pushover she had once been. She descended on him with demands for some kind of key, which it was true, he had hidden—but it really wasn't his fault and he didn't see what the big deal was about. He had only done it because the Ghost of the Vaults had told him it was Manuscriptorium Joke Day (an old tradition) and the newest scribe had to hide something and see how long it took to be found. The ghost had helpfully told him the codes for the Keye Safe and even suggested a hiding place—an old Hidden Chamber under the loose floorboard below the Front Office desk. Jillie Djinn didn't seem to see the joke at all—not even when Merrin gave her the Keye back. Merrin did not think it was at all fair when Jillie Djinn told him he was to be on door duty outside the Vaults until the Ghost of the Vaults could be found. It was cold and creepy and no one came to see him. And he didn't like the way the scribes snickered when he came up to the Manuscriptorium either. Merrin spent the next few weeks shivering in the chill outside the Vaults and twisting the two-faced ring on his thumb, planning revenge. He would show Jillie Djinn and he would show those stuck-up scribes too.

THE Sphere of Light

Miarr's Sphere of Light was one of the Ancient Wonders of the World. The Light is cold to the touch and its source of energy is unknown. It is thought to go back to the Days of Beyond when, legend has it, a chain of Lights encircled the earth, guiding mariners on their way. Miarr is descended from the Guardians of the Light, who in turn were descended from the mysterious Guardians of the Seas. It is not known where

the cats came into the family tree.

THE Lights OF THE ISLES OF Syren

The four lighthouses around the Isles of Syren were built by Guardians of the Seas as part

of a program to protect sailors from what were then called “Troublesome Spirits.” In each

was placed a Sphere of Light, and two Keepers were appointed to tend it.

In ancient times, many islands were InHabited by spirits. The vast majority of spirits

were merely mischievous and would do no more than Engender the odd storm for their

amusement, but some, like the Syren, were malevolent and would pass the time by luring

ships to their doom, or sailors to madness upon their island. The Syren was unusual in

that she combined a power of devastatingly beguiling song with being a Possessive Spirit,

and so four lighthouses were placed around the group of islands to mark the range of the

Syren’s song, past which it was not safe to go.

The lighthouses were very effective, and the Syren hated them. Over the years she

had contrived to get the Lights removed from three of them, along with their Keepers.

The Syren was a beguiling spirit and she had had many willing ghost or spirit

helpers—but Tertius Fume was the only one who had managed to use the Syren to his

advantage.

THE ARMY IN THE CHEST

Some merchants had spent their lives searching for the chest containing the army of jinn,

which they knew would command an astronomical price. Across the centuries, a huge

number of battered old chests containing all kinds of garbage—including empty lead

tubes—had been sold to gullible merchants for exorbitant prices. Most merchants no

longer believed the chest existed and those who continued to search were thought fools at

best and deranged at worst. It was considered such a lost cause that if someone was

setting off on an ill-advised voyage it would often be said that he or she was “searching for the army of jinn.”

Milo was, of course, one of those who were convinced of its existence. After he

married Queen Cerys, he had become obsessed with providing the unguarded Castle with

an army. But a standing army is expensive to maintain and Milo didn’t want to pay more

than he had to. Neither, it has to be said, did Queen Cerys. The army in the chest fit the

bill perfectly—no maintenance, no housing problems, no massive food bills and no

trouble on the street from a bored garrison. And so, very soon after his marriage, Milo set

off on his first voyage to search for the chest, combining many profitable ventures along

the way.

Milo was not to know that Tertius Fume had tracked down the chest some years

previously and had been trying to work out a way of getting it back to the Castle for his

own use. The ghost was tired of the sloppy way the Castle managed its affairs and he was

particularly disgusted with the fact that there was now a female ExtraOrdinary Wizard in

charge. Tertius Fume knew he could do things better, but he needed force to back him.

For him too, the army of jinn was a perfect solution.

Through the ghostly grapevine Tertius Fume had found out that Milo was searching

for the chest and he decided to use that to his advantage. It did not take long before Milo

had swallowed the bait. Not only did he buy the chest for more money than Tertius Fume

could believe, he also provided the transportation. It only remained for a little

arrangement with the Syren for Tertius Fume’s plot to come to fruition. A deal was struck

whereby, in exchange for access to the Ice Tunnels, Tertius Fume agreed to remove the

last remaining Light—which he had intended to do anyway. It was, as

Tertius Fume had

boasted to the uncomprehending Skipper Fry, “a win-win situation.” Or so he thought.

SYRAH SYARA

It was being a reluctant witness to the deal between Tertius Fume and the Syren that set

Syrah on her road to freedom—but it was a long and perilous road. Deeply unconscious,

Syrah was taken back to the Port on the *Cerys*. A few days later she was placed in the

Quiet Room in the Wizard Tower sick bay, which had previously been occupied by

Ephaniah Grebe and Hildegarde Pigeon (they were now well enough to be moved to the

main area of the sick bay). Every day Septimus visited her and told her what he had done

that day, but Syrah slept on...and on...and on.

MIARR AND MIRANO CATT

Miarr and Mirano were the last of the Catt family, which had manned (or was it catted)

the four lighthouses that guarded the Isles of Syren. A combination of isolation, a lack of

incomers and various schemes of the Syren had brought the Catt family to the brink of

extinction. Mirano had indeed been killed by the Crowes—Thin Crowe had pushed him

out of the bunkroom window. Mirano had bounced off the rocks below and sunk without

a trace. Miarr had taken the *Red Tube* to look for him but had found nothing. The strong

currents that swirled around the base of the lighthouse had taken Mirano’s body to a

deep-sea trench some miles away.

JIM KNEE

Jim Knee had had many names in his and her many existences. “Jim Knee” was not the

worst name—but it was by no means the best.

Many were the times when the turtle trader’s fourth wife wondered if she had made

the right decision to become a jinnee, but when she remembered the turtle trader, she

figured she had. Overall she had had some good existences. Cleaning out

the horse mess

in King Augeas's stables had probably been the worst; the best had been as a handmaiden

to a beautiful Princess in a Palace on the Eastern Snow Plains—until she had

mysteriously disappeared. Jim Knee still missed her and wondered where she had gone.

What the jinnee hated was its Dreaming Time in the cramped gold bottle—an

indescribable boredom combined with the unbearable urge to expand. But once the jinnee

was out in the world, Dreaming Time was forgotten and life began again. Jim Knee knew

it was too early to judge his new life, but one thing he did know—so far, it had not been

boring.

VILLAGE CHIEF: THE GAME

The game can be played by two, three, four or six players. If played on sand any higher

number of players are possible, but it must be an even number. Just add more huts to your

village.

The game is played as a series of rounds. You can decide in advance how many

rounds to play, in which case the winner will be the person with the most huts, or you can

play until someone has won all the huts.

For a normal-size game (maximum six players), you will need: forty-eight small

pebbles, beans or shells of similar sizes and wet sand. You can either play on sand left by

the outgoing tide or wet it with your WaterGnome, as Beetle did.

Use your fist to make two parallel lines of six depressions in the sand—these are the

huts. The collection of huts is known as the village. Place a family of four pebbles/shells/

beans in each hut. Allocate an equal number of huts to each player.

The aim of the game is to capture pebbles. Each family of four pebbles will give you

one hut in the next round.

How to play:

Moves are made from right to left, counterclockwise.

The first player picks up all the pebbles from one of her own huts and, going in an counterclockwise direction, drops them one by one into each consecutive hut. If the last pebble lands in a hut that already has pebbles in it, the player continues the move by picking up all the pebbles in the last hut and continuing to drop them one by one around the village. At the beginning of the game, when there are a lot of pebbles in the village, the move may continue in this way for several runs. If any hut becomes four pebbles during play, the pebbles are removed and kept by the person who owns the hut. The exception to this is if the player's final move makes a hut of four—those four pebbles then become the player's property. The game continues with each consecutive player taking a turn. All players must start their turn in their own hut. If they have no pebbles in their hut then they miss their turn and wait until it comes around again. When there are only eight pebbles left on the board, play becomes much slower. The winner of the next hut of four wins all eight pebbles, so the last hut is a double win. Each player then counts their pebbles out into huts of four around the village again to see how many huts they have won. If you have no pebbles you are out of the game. The next round of the game continues with the new huts. The more huts a player has, the easier it is to gain even more. It's a tough life.

STANLEY

Stanley was overjoyed to receive a personal message from the Princess, albeit delivered by a messenger wearing a very odd yellow hat, which he hoped was not the new Palace uniform. The message was as follows:
SHIP TO SHORE
TO: Stanley, Head of Message Rat Service, East Gate Lookout Tower,
The
Castle

FROM: The Princess Jenna Heap on board the barkentine Cerys
MESSAGE READS: Please be advised consignment of rats expected
Merchants'

Quay disembarking the Cerys. They're all yours, Stanley!

Stanley walked around in a daze of delight for some hours, clutching the message to

him— *he was still a friend of Royalty*. For a brief moment he wished that he could tell his

ex-wife, Dawnie, about it, and then he pulled himself together. It was none of Dawnie's

business—it was his business now and his alone. Actually, thought Stanley, that was no

longer completely true; he now had four orphan ratlets to think of.

Stanley went over to a little basket in the corner, where four brown furry creatures

with little pink tails were asleep. He had only found them the previous night, but he

already felt as if he had known them all his life. Sydney was the quiet one. Lydia, small

and snuffly; Faith, large and confident; Edward, boisterous and a little silly. He loved

them all a hundred times more than he had ever loved Dawnie.

Loath to go, but knowing he must, Stanley placed a large bowl of milk and some

porridge scrapings beside the basket. "Be good," he told them. "I will be back soon." He

tiptoed over to the door, hopped out of the rat flap, locked it and set off for the Port with a

spring in his step.

[About the Author and the Illustrator](#)

ANGIE SAGE was born in London and grew up in the Thames Valley, London, and

Kent. She now lives in Somerset in a very old house that has a secret tunnel below it. The

first four books in the Septimus Heap series are international bestsellers. She is also the

author of the Araminta Spookie series.

MARK ZUG has loved fantasy novels since he was a teenager. He has illustrated many

collectible card games, including *Magic: The Gathering* and *Dune*, as well as books and

magazines. He lives in Pennsylvania.

Visit www.septimusheap.com for Magykal games and more!

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.

ALSO BY ANGIE SAGE

Septimus Heap, Book One: Magyk

Septimus Heap, Book Two: Flyte

Septimus Heap, Book Three: Physik

Septimus Heap, Book Four: Queste

Septimus Heap: The Magykal Papers

Araminta Spookie: My Haunted House

Araminta Spookie: The Sword in the Grotto

Araminta Spookie: Frognapped

Araminta Spookie: Vampire Brat

Araminta Spookie: Ghostsitters

Credits

Jacket art © 2009 by Mark Zug

Jacket design by Joel Tippie

Copyright

SEPTIMUS HEAP BOOK FIVE: SYREN. Text copyright © 2009 by Angie Sage. Illustrations

copyright © 2009 by Mark Zug. All rights reserved under International and

Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been

granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this

e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded,

decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage

and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical,

now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of

HarperCollins e-books.

Adobe Digital Edition August 2009 ISBN 978-0-06-192419-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

 HarperCollins e-books

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.

25 Ryde Road (PO Box 321)
Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com.au>

Canada

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900
Toronto, ON, M5R, 3L2, Canada
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollinsPublishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollins.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.uk>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com>

Document Outline

- [Cover](#)
- [Title Page](#)
- [Dedication](#)
- [Contents](#)
- [Map](#)
- [Prologue](#)
- [1](#)
- [2](#)
- [3](#)
- [4](#)
- [5](#)
- [6](#)
- [7](#)
- [8](#)
- [9](#)

- [10](#)
- [11](#)
- [12](#)
- [13](#)
- [14](#)
- [15](#)
- [16](#)
- [17](#)
- [18](#)
- [19](#)
- [20](#)
- [21](#)
- [22](#)
- [23](#)
- [24](#)
- [25](#)
- [26](#)
- [27](#)
- [28](#)
- [29](#)
- [30](#)
- [31](#)
- [32](#)
- [33](#)
- [34](#)
- [35](#)
- [36](#)
- [37](#)
- [38](#)
- [39](#)
- [40](#)
- [41](#)
- [42](#)
- [43](#)
- [44](#)
- [45](#)
- [46](#)
- [47](#)
- [48](#)
- [49](#)
- [Histories and Happenings](#)
- [About the Author and the Illustrator](#)

- [Other Books by Angie Sage](#)
- [Credits](#)
- [Copyright](#)
- [About the Publisher](#)

Table of Contents

[Book Five](#)

[Map](#)

[Prologue:](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[22](#)

[23](#)

[24](#)

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[30](#)

[31](#)

[32](#)

[33](#)

[34](#)

[35](#)

[36](#)
[37](#)
[38](#)
[39](#)
[40](#)
[41](#)
[42](#)
[43](#)
[44](#)
[45](#)
[46](#)
[47](#)
[48](#)

SEPTIMUS HEAP

⇨ BOOK SIX ⇨

Darke



ANGIE SAGE

National Bestselling Author

SEPTIMUS HEAP
BOOK SIX
Darke



ANGIE SAGE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK ZUG

 KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

*For my brother, Jason,
with love*

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue - Banished](#)

[Chapter 1 - The Visit](#)

[Chapter 2 - Visitors](#)

[Chapter 3 - Birthday Eve](#)

[Chapter 4 - Apprentices](#)

[Chapter 5 - Runaways](#)

[Chapter 6 - Choice](#)

[Chapter 7 - The Bringer of the Book](#)

[Chapter 8 - Chemistry](#)

[Chapter 9 - Charming](#)

[Chapter 10 - Upstairs](#)

[Chapter 11 - A Darke Domaine](#)

[Chapter 12 - Boomerang](#)

[Chapter 13 - Gothyk Grotto](#)

[Chapter 14 - Dagger Dan's Dive](#)

[Chapter 15 - Doom Dump](#)

[Chapter 16 - Call Out](#)

[Chapter 17 - Witch Princess](#)

[Chapter 18 - The Emissary](#)

[Chapter 19 - The SafeChamber](#)

[Chapter 20 - Cordon](#)

[Chapter 21 - Quarantine](#)

[Chapter 22 - Ethel](#)

[Chapter 23 - Safety Curtain](#)

[Chapter 24 - Palace Things](#)

[Chapter 25 - Simon and Sarah](#)

[Chapter 26 - Absences](#)

[Chapter 27 - Bott's Bridge](#)

[Chapter 28 - Hermetically Sealed](#)

[Chapter 29 - Retreat](#)

[Chapter 30 - In the Dragon House](#)

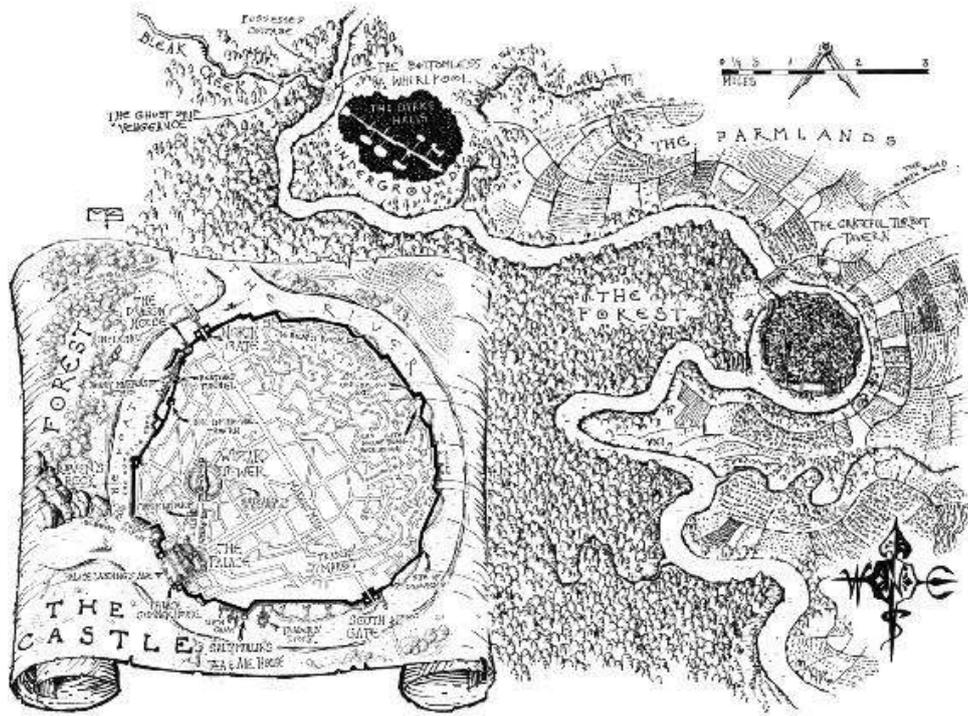
[Chapter 31 - Horse Stuff](#)

[Chapter 32 - Day of Recognition](#)

[Chapter 33 - Thieves in the Night](#)

[Chapter 34 - The Big Red Door](#)
[Chapter 35 - The Longest Night](#)
[Chapter 36 - Outside](#)
[Chapter 37 - Brothers](#)
[Chapter 38 - The Pig Tub](#)
[Chapter 39 - Descent](#)
[Chapter 40 - Annie](#)
[Chapter 41 - Bleak Creek](#)
[Chapter 42 - The Darke Halls](#)
[Chapter 43 - Dungeon Number One](#)
[Chapter 44 - The Wizard Tower](#)
[Chapter 45 - Dragons](#)
[Chapter 46 - Synchronicity](#)
[Chapter 47 - The Great UnDoing](#)
[Chapter 48 - Restoration](#)
[Chapter 49 - The Chief Hermetic Scribe](#)
[What Happened in the Darke Domaine— and Afterward](#)

[About the Author](#)
[Also by Angie Sage](#)
[Credits](#)
[Copyright](#)
[About the Publisher](#)



Prologue Banished



*I*t is a Darke and stormy night.

Black clouds hang low over the Castle, shrouding the golden pyramid at the top of the Wizard Tower in a dim mist. In the houses far below, people stir uneasily in their sleep as the rumble of thunder enters their dreams and sends nightmares tumbling from the sky.

Like a giant lightning conductor, the Wizard Tower rears high above the Castle rooftops, **Magykal** purple and indigo lights playing around its iridescent silver sheen. Inside the Tower the duty Storm Wizard prowls the dimly lit Great Hall, checking the **StormScreen** and keeping an eye on the **UnStable** window, which has a tendency to panic in a storm. The duty Storm Wizard is a little on edge. **Magyk** is not usually affected by a storm, but all Wizards know about the Great Lightning Strike of Long Ago, which briefly drained the Wizard Tower of its **Magyk** and left the rooms of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard badly scorched. No one wants that to happen again—particularly the duty Storm Wizard.

At the top of the Wizard Tower in her as yet unscorched four-poster bed, Marcia Overstrand groans as a familiar nightmare flickers through her sleep. A loud *craaaack* of lightning splits open the cloud above the Tower and zips harmlessly to earth down the duty Storm Wizard's hastily conjured **Conductor**. Marcia sits bolt upright, dark curly hair awry, trapped in her nightmare. Suddenly her green eyes open wide with surprise as a purple ghost

shoots through the wall and skids to a halt beside the bed.

“Alther!” gasps Marcia. “What are you *doing*?”

The tall ghost with long white hair tied back in a ponytail is wearing bloodstained ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes. He looks flustered.

“I really hate it when that happens,” he gasps. “Got **Passed Through**. By lightning.”

“I’m very sorry, Alther,” Marcia replies grumpily, “but I don’t see why you had to come and wake me up just to tell me that. *You* may not need to sleep anymore, but *I* certainly do. Anyway, it serves you right for being out in a storm. Can’t think why you want to do that—argh!”

Another *craaaack* of lightning illuminates the purple glass of Marcia’s bedroom window and makes Alther appear almost transparent.

“I wasn’t out there for the fun of it, Marcia, believe me,” says Alther, equally grumpily. “I was coming to see you. *As you requested.*”

“As I requested?” says Marcia blearily. She is still half in her nightmare about Dungeon Number One—a nightmare that always comes when a storm is playing around the top of the Wizard Tower.

“You requested—*ordered* would be a better way of putting it—that I track down Tertius Fume and tell you when I had found him,” says Alther.

Marcia is suddenly wide-awake. “Ah,” she says.

“Ah, indeed, Marcia.”

“So you have *found* him?”

The ghost looks pleased with himself. “Yup,” he says.

“Where?”

“Where do you think?”

Marcia throws back the bedcovers, slips out of bed and pulls on her thick woolen gown—it is cold at the top of the Wizard Tower when the wind blows. “Oh, for goodness’ sake, Alther,” she snaps as she pushes her feet into the purple rabbit slippers that Septimus gave her for her birthday. “I wouldn’t ask if I knew, would I?”

“He’s in Dungeon Number One,” Alther says quietly.

Marcia sits down on the bed rather suddenly. “Oh,” she says, her nightmare replaying itself at double speed. “Bother.”

Ten minutes later, two purple-clothed figures can be seen scurrying along Wizard Way. They are both trying to keep out of the needle-sharp rain that sweeps up the Way, **Passing Through** the leading figure and soaking the one close behind. Suddenly the first figure dives down a small alleyway, closely followed by the second. The alleyway is dark and smelly but at least it is sheltered from the near-horizontal rain.

“Are you sure it’s down here?” asks Marcia, glancing behind. She doesn’t like alleyways.

Alther slows his pace and drops back to walk beside Marcia. “You forget,” he says with a smile, “that not so very long ago, I came down here quite often.”

Marcia shudders. She knows that it was Alther’s faithful visits that kept her alive in Dungeon Number One.

Alther has stopped beside a blackened, brick-built cone that looks like one of the many disused Lock-Ups that can still be seen scattered around the Castle. Somewhat unwillingly, Marcia joins the ghost; her mouth is dry and she feels sick. This is where her nightmare always begins.

Lost in her thoughts, Marcia waits for Alther to unlock the small iron door, which is pockmarked with rust. The ghost gives her a quizzical look. “No can do, Marcia,” he says.

“Huh?”

“Wish I could,” says Alther wistfully, “but, unfortunately, you are going to have to open the door.”

Marcia comes to her senses. “Sorry, Alther.” She takes out the Universal Castle Key from her ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt. Only three of these keys were ever made, and Marcia has two of them: one of her own in her capacity as ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and one that she is keeping safe for Jenna Heap until the day she becomes Queen. The third is lost.

Making an effort to steady her hand, Marcia pushes the iron key into the lock and turns it. The door swings open with a creak that at once takes her back to a terrifying snowy night when a phalanx of guards threw her through the door and sent her tumbling into the darkness.

A foul smell of rotting meat and burned pumpkin tumbles out into the alleyway, and a trio of curious local cats screech and head for home. Marcia wishes she could do the same. Nervously she fingers the lapis lazuli amulet—the symbol and source of her power as ExtraOrdinary Wizard—that she wears around her neck and, to her relief, it is still there—unlike the last time she passed through the door.

Marcia’s courage returns. “Right, Alther,” she says. “Let’s get him.”

Alther grins, relieved to see Marcia back in form. “Follow me,” he says.

Dungeon Number One is a deep, dark chimney with a long ladder attached to the inside of the top half. The bottom half is ladder-free, lined with a thick layer of bones and slime. Alther’s purple floating form drifts down the ladder but Marcia steps carefully—very carefully—down each rung, chanting an **UnHarm** Spell under her breath, with a **Begird and Preserve** in readiness for both her and Alther—for even ghosts are not immune to the **Darke** Vortices that swirl around the base of Dungeon Number One.

Slowly, slowly, the figures descend into the thick gloom and stench of the dungeon. They are going much farther down than Marcia expected. Alther had assured her that their quarry was “only lurking around the top, Marcia.

Nothing to worry about.”

But Marcia *is* worried. She begins to fear a trap. “Where *is* he?” she hisses.

A deep, hollow laugh answers her question, and Marcia very nearly lets go of the ladder.

“There he is!” says Alther. “Look, down there.” He points into the narrow depths and, far below, Marcia sees the goatlike face of Tertius Fume leering up at them, an eerie green glowing in the darkness. “You can see him, you can do the **Banish** from here,” says Alther, lapsing into tutor mode with his expupil. “The chimney will concentrate it.”

“I know,” says Marcia tetchily. “Please be quiet, Alther.” She begins to chant the words that all ghosts dread—the words that will **Banish** them to the **Darke Halls** forever.

“I, Marcia Overstrand . . .”

The greenish figure of Tertius Fume begins to rise up the chimney toward them. “I am warning you, Marcia Overstrand—stop that **Banish** now.” His harsh voice echoes around them.

Tertius Fume gives Marcia the creeps, but she is not deflected. She carries on with the chant, which must last for precisely one minute and be completed without hesitation, repetition or deviation. Marcia knows that the slightest falter means she must begin again.

Tertius Fume knows this too. He continues his approach, walking up the side of the wall like a spider, hurling insults, counter chants and bizarre fragments of songs at Marcia to try to put her off.

But Marcia will not be deflected. Doggedly she continues, blanking out the ghost. But as she embarks upon the closing lines of the **Banish**—“your time above this earth is done, you’ll see no more the sky, the sun”—out of the corner of her eye, Marcia sees the ghost of Tertius Fume drawing ever closer. A stab of worry shoots through her—*what is he doing?* Marcia reaches the very last line. The ghost is inches away from her and Alther. He looks up, excited—almost exultant.

Marcia ends the chant with the dreaded words, “By the power of **Magyk**, to the **Darke Halls**, I you . . .”

As Marcia reaches the very last word, Tertius Fume stretches his hand up to Alther and **Merges** with his big toe. Alther recoils from the touch but is too late.

“Banish!”

Suddenly Marcia is alone in the chimney of Dungeon Number One. Her nightmare has come true. “Alther!” she screams. “Alther, where are you?”

There is no reply. Alther is **Banished**.

Chapter 1

The Visit



Lucy Gringe found the last space on the dawn Port barge. She squeezed in between a young man clutching an aggressive chicken and a thin, weary-looking woman wrapped in a woolen cloak. The woman—who had uncomfortably piercing blue eyes—quickly glanced at Lucy, then looked away. Lucy dumped her bag down by her feet to claim her space; there was no way she was going to be standing up for the entire journey to the Castle. The blue-eyed woman would have to get used to being squashed. Lucy swiveled around and looked back up at the quay. She saw the damp, lonely-looking figure of Simon Heap standing on the edge, and she gave him a brief smile.

It was a bleak, cold morning, with a threat of snow in the sky. Simon shivered and attempted a smile in return. He raised his voice against the bangs and thuds that accompanied the barge's sail being readied. "Take care, Lu!"

"And you!" Lucy replied, elbowing the chicken out of the way. "I'll be back the day after Longest Night. Promise!"

Simon nodded. "You got my letters?" he called out.

"Course I have," returned Lucy. "How much?" This was addressed to the barge boy who was collecting the fares.

"Six pence, darlin'."

"Don't call me darlin'!" Lucy flared. She fished around in her purse and dumped a large collection of brass coins into the boy's outstretched hand.

“Could buy my own boat for that,” she said.

The boy shrugged. He handed her a ticket and moved along to a travel-stained woman next to her, who was, Lucy thought, a stranger who had just arrived at the Port. The woman gave the barge boy a large silver coin—a half crown—and waited patiently while the boy made a fuss with the change. When she politely thanked him, Lucy noticed that she had a strange accent, which reminded her of someone, although she couldn’t think who. Lucy was too cold to think right then—and too anxious. She hadn’t been back home for a long time, and now that she was sitting in the boat bound for the Castle, the thought scared her a little. She wasn’t sure what kind of reception she would get. And she didn’t like leaving Simon, either.

The Port barge was beginning to move. Two dockhands were pushing the long, narrow boat away from the shore, and the barge boy was raising the worn red sail. Lucy gave Simon a forlorn wave, and the barge drew away from the quay and moved toward the fast incoming tide running up the middle of the river. Every now and then Lucy glanced back to see Simon’s solitary figure still standing on the quay, his long, fair hair blowing in the breeze, his pale wool cloak fluttering behind him like moth wings.

Simon watched the Port barge until it disappeared into the low mist that hung over the river toward the Marram Marshes. As the last vestige of the barge vanished, he stamped his feet to get some warmth into them, then headed off into the warren of streets that would take him back to his room in the attic of the Customs House.

At the top of the Customs House stairs Simon pushed open the battered door to his room and stepped across the threshold. A deep chill hit him so hard that it took his breath away. At once he knew that something was wrong—his attic room was cold, but it was never *this* cold. This was a **Darke** cold. Behind him the door slammed shut and, as if from the end of a long, deep tunnel, Simon heard the bolt shoot across the door, making him a prisoner in his own room. Heart pounding, Simon forced himself to look up. He was determined not to use any of his old **Darke** skills but some, once learned, kicked in automatically—and one of these was the ability to **See** in the **Darke**. And so, unlike most people who, if they have the misfortune to look at a **Thing**, see only shifting shadows and glimpses of decay, Simon saw the **Thing** in all its glorious detail, sitting on his narrow bed, **Watching** him with its hooded eyes. It made him feel sick.

“Welcome.” The **Thing’s** deep, menacing voice filled the room and sent a stream of goose bumps down Simon’s spine.

“G-Ger . . .” stuttered Simon.

Satisfied, the **Thing** noted the terrified expression in Simon’s dark green eyes. It crossed its long, spindly legs and began to chew one of its peeling

fingers while regarding Simon with a baleful stare.

Not so very ago, the **Thing**'s stare would have meant nothing to Simon; one of his pastimes during his residency at the Observatory in the Badlands had been staring down the **Things** that he occasionally **Summoned**. But now Simon could hardly bear to look in the direction of the decaying bundle of rags and bones that sat on his bed, let alone meet its gaze.

The **Thing** duly noted Simon's reluctance and spat a blackened nail onto the floor. A brief thought of what Lucy would say if she found *that* on the floor ran through Simon's mind, and the thought of Lucy made him just about brave enough to speak.

"Wher—what do you want?" he whispered.

"*You*," came the hollow voice of the **Thing**.

"M—*me*?"

The **Thing** regarded Simon with disdain. "Y—you," it sneered.

"Why?"

"I have come to **Fetch** you. As per your contract."

"Contract . . . what *contract*?"

"The one you made with our late Master. You are still **Bound**."

"*What?* But . . . but he's dead. DomDaniel is dead."

"The Possessor of the Two-Faced Ring is not dead," intoned the **Thing**.

Simon, assuming—as the **Thing** intended—that the Possessor of the Two-Faced Ring could only be DomDaniel, was horrified. "DomDaniel's *not* dead?"

The **Thing** did not answer Simon's question; it merely repeated its instruction. "The Possessor of the Two-Faced Ring requires your presence. You will attend immediately."

Simon was too shocked to move. All his attempts to put the **Darke** behind him and make a new life with Lucy suddenly seemed futile. He put his head in his hands, wondering how he could have been so foolish as to think that he could escape the **Darke**. A creak in a floorboard made him look up. Simon saw the **Thing** advancing toward him, its bony hands outstretched.

Simon leaped to his feet. He didn't care what happened but he was not going back to the **Darke**. He raced to the door and pulled at the bolt but it would not shift. The **Thing** was close behind him now, so close that Simon could smell the decay and taste the bitterness of it on his tongue. He glanced at the window. It was a long way down.

His mind racing, Simon backed away toward the window. Maybe if he jumped he would land on the balcony two floors down. Maybe he could grab the drainpipe. Or haul himself up onto the roof.

The **Thing** regarded him with displeasure. "Apprentice, you will come with me. Or do I have to **Fetch** you?" Its voice filled the low-ceilinged room with threat.

Simon decided to go for the drainpipe. He threw open the window, half clambered out and seized the thick black pipe that ran down the rear wall of the Customs House. A howl of anger came after him and, as Simon tried to swing his feet off the window ledge, he felt an irresistible force dragging him back into the room—the **Thing** had put a **Fetch** on him.

Even though Simon knew that there was no resisting a **Fetch**, he clung desperately onto the pipe while his feet were being pulled so hard that he felt like the rope in a tug-of-war. Suddenly the rusty metal lurking below the drainpipe's thick black paint came away in his hands, and Simon shot back into the room, pipe and all. He slammed into the bony—yet disgustingly soft—body of the **Thing** and fell to the floor. Unable to move, Simon lay looking up.

The **Thing** smirked down at him. “You will follow me,” it intoned.

Like a broken puppet, Simon was dragged to his feet. He staggered out of his room and lurched like an automaton down the long, narrow stairs. In front of him glided the **Thing**. As they emerged onto the quayside, the **Thing** became no more than an indistinct shadow, so that when Maureen from the Harbor and Dock Pie Shop glanced up from opening the shutters, all she saw was Simon walking stiffly across the quay, heading toward the shadows of Fore Street. Maureen wiped her hand across her eyes. Some dust must have got in them, she thought—everything around Simon looked strangely fuzzy. Maureen waved cheerily but Simon did not respond. She smiled and fastened open the last shutter. He was an odd one, that Simon. Always had his head in some **Magyk** book or chanting a spell.

“Pies ready in ten minutes. I'll save you a veg and bacon one!” she called out, but Simon had vanished into the side streets, and Maureen could no longer see clearly across the empty quayside.

* * *

When a person is **Fetch**ed, there is no stopping, no rest, no respite, until the person has reached the place to which he is **Fetch**ed. For a whole day and half a night Simon waded through marshes, scrambled through hedges and stumbled along stony paths. Rain soaked him, winds buffeted him, snow flurries froze him, but he could stop for nothing. Relentlessly on he went until finally, in the cold, gray light of the next day's dawn, he swum an ice-cold river, hauled himself out, staggered across the early morning dew and climbed up a crumbling wall of ivy. At the very top he was dragged through an attic window and frogmarched to a windowless room. When the door was barred behind him and he was left alone, sprawled on the bare floor, Simon no longer knew or cared where—or who—he was.

Chapter 2

Visitors



Night and a cold drizzle were falling fast when the Port barge drew up at the New Quay, a recently built stone jetty just below Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House. Accompanied by assorted children, chickens and bundles, the frazzled passengers rose stiffly from their seats and stumbled down the gangway. Many of them made their way unsteadily along the well-trodden path to the Tea and Ale House to warm themselves by the stove and fill up with Sally's winter specials: mulled Springo Ale and warm spiced barley cake. Others, longing to get home to a warm fireside, set off on the long trudge up the hill, past the Castle amenity rubbish dump, to the South Gate, which would remain open until midnight.

Lucy Gringe did not relish the thought of the walk up the hill one little bit, especially when she knew that the Port barge was probably passing by where she was headed. She glanced at the woman sitting beside her. Lucy had spent the first half of the journey trying to avoid her oddly unsettling gaze but, after her neighbor had ventured a tentative question about directions to the Palace—which was where Lucy's first errand was taking her—they had spent the second half of the journey in animated conversation. The woman now rose wearily to follow the other passengers.

"Wait a minute!" said Lucy to her. "I've got an idea . . . 'Scuse me?" she shouted at the barge boy.

The barge boy swung around. "Yeah, darlin'?"

With some effort, Lucy ignored the “darlin’.” “Where are you docking tonight?” she asked.

“With this North wind blowin’ up, it’ll be Jannit Maarten’s,” he replied. “Why?”

“Well, I just wondered . . .” Lucy gave the barge boy her best smile. “I just *wondered* if you could *possibly* let us off at a landing stage on your way there. It’s so cold tonight. And dark too.” Lucy shivered expressively and looked mournfully up at the barge boy with her big brown eyes. He was lost.

“‘Course we could, darlin’. I’ll tell Skip. Where d’you want to get off?”

“The Palace Landing Stage, please.”

The barge boy blinked in surprise. “The Palace? You sure, darlin’?”

Lucy fought down an urge to yell “Don’t call me darlin’, creep boy!” “Yes, please,” she said. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Nothin’s too much trouble for *you*, darlin’,” said creep boy, “though I wouldn’t have put you down for the Palace meself.”

“Oh?” Lucy was not sure how to take this.

“Yeah. You know that landing stage is haunted, don’t you?”

Lucy shrugged. “Doesn’t worry me,” she said. “I never see ghosts.”

The Port barge cast off from the New Quay. It made a U-turn in the wide part of the river, rocking scarily as it cut across the current and the chop of the waves whisked up by the wind. But as soon as the barge faced downstream all became quiet once more and, about ten minutes later, it was gliding to a halt beside the Palace Landing Stage.

“Here y’are, darlin’,” said the barge boy, throwing a rope around one of the mooring posts. “Have fun.” He winked at Lucy.

“Thank you,” said Lucy rather primly. She got up and held out her hand to her neighbor. “We’re here,” she said. The woman gave Lucy a grateful smile. She got stiffly to her feet and followed Lucy off the barge.

The Port barge drew away from the landing stage. “See ya!” yelled the barge boy.

“Not if I see you first,” Lucy muttered. She turned to her companion, who was gazing at the Palace in amazement. It was indeed a beautiful sight—a long, low building of ancient mellow stone with tall, elegant windows looking out over the well-tended lawns that swept down to the river. From every window, a welcoming candle flickered, making the whole building glimmer magically in the deepening twilight.

“She lives *here*?” the woman murmured in a singsong accent.

Lucy nodded shortly. Anxious to get going, she started purposefully up the wide path that led to the Palace. But her companion was not following. The woman was still on the landing stage, talking to what appeared to be an empty space. Lucy sighed—why did she always pick the weird ones? Reluctant to interrupt the woman’s one-sided conversation—which seemed to be a serious

one, for she was now nodding sadly—Lucy carried on, heading toward the lights of the Palace.

Lucy did not feel good. She was tired and cold and, above all, she was beginning to be anxious about the kind of welcome she would receive at the Palace. She put her hand in her pocket and found Simon's letters. She drew them out and squinted at the names written in Simon's large, loopy handwriting: *Sarah Heap. Jenna Heap. Septimus Heap.* She placed the one addressed to Septimus back in her pocket and kept hold of the ones addressed to Jenna and Sarah. Lucy sighed. All she wanted to do was to run back to Simon and know that it was "all right, Lucy-Lu." But Simon had asked her to deliver the letters to his mother and sister, and—whatever Sarah Heap thought of her—deliver them she would.

Lucy's companion was now hurrying after her.

"Lucy, I am sorry," she said. "I have just heard such a sad story from a ghost. It is sad, so very sad. The love of her life—and of her death—has been **Banished**. By *mistake*. How can any Wizard make such a mistake? Oh, it is a terrible thing." The woman shook her head. "Truly terrible."

"I suppose that must be Alice Nettles," said Lucy. "Simon said he'd heard that something horrible had happened to Alther."

"Yes. Alice and Alther. So very sad . . ."

Lucy did not have much time for ghosts. The way she saw it, ghosts were dead—it was being with the person you wanted to be with while you were *alive* that mattered. Which was, she thought, why she was back at the Castle right now, shivering in the bitter north wind that was blowing in off the river, tired and wishing she was wrapped up warmly in bed.

"Shall we get going?" said Lucy. "I don't know about you, but I'm frozen."

The woman nodded. Tall and thin, her thick woolen cloak wrapped around her against the wind, she stepped carefully, her bright eyes scanning the scene in front of her because, unlike Lucy, she did not see a wide, empty path. For her, the path and the lawns bounding it were full of ghosts: hurrying Palace servants, young princesses playing tag, little page boys, ancient queens wandering through vanished shrubberies, and elderly Palace gardeners wheeling their ghostly wheelbarrows. She went carefully, because the trouble with being a Spirit-Seer was that ghosts did not get out of your way; they saw you as just another ghost—until you **Passed Through** them. And then, of course, they were horribly offended.

Unaware of any ghosts at all, Lucy strode up the path at a fast pace, and the ghosts, some of whom were well acquainted with Lucy and her big boots, got smartly out of her way. Lucy soon reached the top path that encircled the Palace and she turned around to check on her companion, who was lagging behind. The oddest sight met her eyes—the woman was dancing up the path on tiptoe, zigzagging to and fro, as if she was taking part in one of the old-

fashioned Castle dances—on her own. Lucy shook her head. This did not bode well.

Eventually the woman—flustered and out of breath—joined her, and Lucy set off without a word. She had decided to take the path that led around the Palace and to head for the main front door rather than risk no one hearing her knock on the multitude of kitchen and side doors.

The Palace was a long building, and it was a good ten minutes before Lucy and the woman were at last crossing the flat wooden bridge over the decorative Palace moat. As they approached, a small boy pulled open the night door—a little door set into the main double doors.

“Welcome to the Palace,” piped Barney Pot, resplendent in a gray Palace tunic and red leggings. “Who do you wish to see?”

Lucy did not have a chance to reply.

“Barney!” came a lilting voice from inside. “*There* you are. You must go to bed; you have school tomorrow.”

Lucy’s companion went pale.

Barney looked back inside. “But I *like* doing the door,” he protested. “Please, just five more minutes.”

“No, Barney. *Bed.*”

“*Snorri?*” The faltering word came from the woman.

A tall girl with pale blue eyes and long, white-blonde hair stuck her head out of the night door and peered into the dark. She blinked, stared straight past Lucy and gasped. “Mamma!”

“Snorri . . . oh, *Snorri!*” cried Alfrún Snorrelssen.

Snorri Snorrelssen threw herself into the arms of her mother. Lucy smiled wistfully. Maybe, she thought, it was a good omen. Maybe later that night, when she knocked on the door of the North Gate gatehouse, her mother would be just as pleased to see *her*. Maybe.

Chapter 3

Birthday Eve



But *Lucy did not go* to the North Gate gatehouse that night—Sarah Heap would not allow it.

“Lucy, you are soaking wet and exhausted,” Sarah said. “I am *not* having you wander through the streets at night in that state; you’ll catch your death of cold. You need a long sleep in a nice warm bed—and besides, I want to hear all about Simon. Now let’s find you some supper . . .”

Lucy gave in gratefully. The relief she felt at Sarah’s welcome made her feel suddenly tearful. She happily allowed herself to be led along the Long Walk with Snorri and Alfrún and sat down beside the fire in Sarah Heap’s little sitting room at the back of the Palace.

That evening, as flurries of snow blew in from the Port, Sarah Heap’s sitting room was the warmest room in the Palace. Piled on the table were the remains of Sarah’s famous sausage and bean hot pot supper, and now everyone had gathered around the blazing fire, drinking herb tea. Squashed in with Lucy and Sarah were Jenna, Septimus and Nicko Heap, along with Snorri and Alfrún Snorrelssen. Snorri and Alfrún sat close together, quietly talking, while Alfrún kept hold tightly of Snorri’s hand. Nicko sat a little apart from Snorri, talking with Jenna. Septimus, Sarah noticed, was not talking to anyone but was gazing into the fire.

There was also a menagerie of animals: a large black panther by the name of Ullr, which sat by Alfrún’s feet; Maxie, an ancient, smelly wolfhound who

lay steaming gently in front of the fire; and Ethel, a stubbly, featherless duck wearing a new knitted waistcoat. Ethel sat resplendent on Sarah's lap, nibbling delicately on a piece of sausage. The duck, Jenna noted disapprovingly, was getting fat. She suspected that Sarah had knitted the new waistcoat because the old one had gotten too small. But Sarah loved Ethel so much that Jenna merely admired the red stripes and the green buttons along the back and said nothing about Ethel's expanding girth.

Sarah Heap was happy. In her hand she clasped a precious letter from Simon—a letter that she had read and reread and now knew by heart. Sarah had her old Simon back again—the *good* Simon, the Simon she knew he had always been. And now here she was, planning the party for Jenna's and Septimus's fourteenth birthdays. Fourteen was a big milestone, particularly for Jenna as Princess of the Castle, and this year Sarah had at last got her wish: the celebrations for both Jenna's and Septimus's birthdays were to be held at the Palace rather than at the Wizard Tower.

Sarah glanced up at the old clock on the chimneypiece and suppressed a feeling of irritation that Silas was not back yet. Recently Silas had been what he called "busy," but Sarah did not believe it—she knew Silas well enough to know that he was up to something. She sighed. She wished he were there to share the moment of everyone being together.

Pushing her thoughts about Silas to one side, Sarah smiled at Lucy, her daughter-in-law-to-be. Having Lucy there made her feel as if Simon was with them too, for there were moments when Lucy echoed Simon's eager, intense way of talking. One day, thought Sarah, maybe she would have *all* her children *and* Silas with her—though how they would all fit into the sitting room she was not sure. But if she ever got the chance she'd give it her best try.

Septimus too was glancing at the clock, and at 8:15 PM precisely he excused himself from the gathering. Sarah watched her youngest son, grown tall and gangly in recent months, get up from his perch on the arm of her battered sofa and pick his way through people and piles of books toward the door. She saw with pride his purple Senior Apprentice ribbons shimmer on the hem of the sleeves of his green tunic, but what pleased her most was his quiet, easy confidence. She wished he'd comb his hair more often but Septimus was turning into a good-looking young man. She blew her son a kiss. He smiled—slightly strained, Sarah thought—and stepped out of the cozy sitting room into the chill of the Long Walk, the wide passageway that ran along the length of the Palace.

Jenna Heap slipped out after him.

"Sep, wait a mo," she called after Septimus, who was striding off in a hurry.

Septimus slowed down unwillingly. "I've got to be back at nine o'clock,"

he said.

“You’ve got tons of time, then,” said Jenna, catching up and walking along beside him, matching his long strides with smaller, faster ones.

“Sep,” she said, “you know how I told you last week it was really creepy up by the attic stairs? Well, it still is. In fact, it’s worse. Even Ullr won’t go there. Look, I’ve got the scratches to prove it.” Jenna rolled up her gold-hemmed sleeve to show Septimus a flurry of cat scratches on her wrist. “I carried him to the bottom of the stairs and he totally panicked.”

Septimus seemed unimpressed. “Ullr’s a Spirit-Seer cat. He’s bound to get spooked sometimes with all the ghosts around here.”

Jenna was not to be put off. “But it doesn’t feel like ghosts, Sep. Anyway, most of the Palace ghosts **Appear** to me. I see *tons* of them.” As if to prove her point, Jenna nodded graciously—a real Princess nod, thought Septimus—at what appeared to him to be thin air. “There. I’ve just seen the three cooks who got poisoned by the jealous housekeeper.”

“That was nice for you,” said Septimus, speeding up so that Jenna had to trot to keep up with him. They traveled quickly along the Long Walk, moving from the dancing flames of each rushlight into shadows and back into the light of the next.

“So I’d see if it was ghosts,” Jenna persisted. “And it’s *not*. In fact, all the ghosts are keeping away from that part of the corridor. Which just goes to show.”

“To show what?” Septimus said irritably.

“That there’s something *bad* up there. And I can’t ask Marcia to check it out because Mum would throw a fit, but you’re almost as good as Marcia now, aren’t you? So *please*, Sep. Please just come and see.”

“Can’t Dad do it?”

“Dad keeps saying he’ll have a look but he doesn’t get round to it. He’s always off somewhere. You know what he’s like.”

They had reached the large entrance hall, the light from a forest of candles illuminating its elegant flight of stairs and the thick old doors. Barney Pot had at last gone to bed and the entrance hall was empty. Septimus stopped and turned to Jenna. “Look Jen, I’ve *got* to go. There’s loads I have to do.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Jenna sounded exasperated.

“Of course I do.”

“Huh! Not enough to come and check out what’s going on up there.”

But Septimus wore the closed expression that Jenna had seen so much of over the previous few months. She hated it. It was as if, when she looked into Septimus’s bright green eyes, there was something shielding him from her.

“Bye, Jen,” he said. “Must go. Tomorrow’s a big day.”

Jenna made a big effort to shake off her disappointment. She didn’t want Septimus to leave with bad feelings between them.

“I know,” she agreed. “Happy birthday, Sep.”

Jenna thought Septimus looked slightly surprised.

“Oh . . . yes. Thanks.”

“It’ll be such fun tomorrow,” she said, linking her arm through his reluctant one and walking him toward the Palace doors. “It’s great us having birthdays on the same day, don’t you think? It’s like we’re twins. And on the Longest Night too, it’s so special with all the Castle lit up. Like it’s especially for us.”

“Yeah.” Septimus looked distracted, and Jenna could tell all he wanted to do was to get out of the door as fast as he could. “I really *must* go, Jen. I’ll see you tomorrow evening.”

“I’ll walk you to the gates,”

“Oh.” Septimus did not sound very enthusiastic.

They made their way down the drive, Septimus hurrying, Jenna trotting along beside.

“Sep . . .” said Jenna, breathless.

“Yeah?” Septimus sounded wary.

“Dad says you’re at the same stage in your Apprenticeship as he was when he gave up.”

“Mmm. S’pose I am.”

“And one of the reasons he gave up, he said, was because he was going to have to do a bunch of **Darke** stuff and he didn’t want to bring it home.”

Septimus slowed down. “There were lots of reasons Dad gave up, Jen. Like he’d heard about the **Queste** too soon, and Mum was finding it tough on her own and he was going to have to work nights. All kinds of stuff.”

“It was the **Darke**, Sep. That’s what he told me.”

“Huh. He says that *now*.”

“He’s worried about you. And so am I.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be,” Septimus said irritably.

“But, *Sep*—”

Septimus had had enough. Impatiently he shook Jenna’s arm off.

“Jen, please—*leave me alone*. I have stuff to do and I’m going now. I’ll see you tomorrow.” With that Septimus strode off, and this time Jenna let him go.

Jenna walked slowly back across the grass, her feet crunching through a dusting of frost, and fought off tears—*Septimus hadn’t even wished her “happy birthday.”* As she wandered miserably into the Palace, Jenna could not get him out of her mind. Recently she had begun to feel like an outsider in his life—an annoying outsider from whom secrets had to be kept. In order to understand more about what Septimus was doing, Jenna had begun to ask Silas questions about his own Apprenticeship to Alther long ago, and she did not always like what she heard.

Jenna did not feel like going back to the happy group clustered around

Sarah's sitting room fire. She took a lighted candle from one of the hall tables and made her way up the wide flight of carved oak stairs that led from the Palace entrance hall to the first floor. She walked slowly along the corridor, her footsteps muffled on the threadbare carpet, nodding to the assorted ghosts who always **Appeared** when they saw the Princess. Ignoring the short, wide passageway that led to her bedroom, Jenna decided to take one more look at the attic stairs—Septimus had made her wonder if she was indeed worrying about nothing.

A rushlight burned steadily at the foot of the stairs, for which Jenna was grateful—because looking up the flight of bare, worn wooden stairs that disappeared into the darkness gave her the creeps. Telling herself that Septimus probably was right and there was nothing at all to worry about, Jenna began to climb the stairs. She told herself that if she got to the top and everything was all right, she would forget all about it, but when Jenna was one step below the top she stopped. In front of her was a deep darkness that seemed to move and shift as she looked at it. It felt as if it were *alive*. Jenna was confused—part of her was terrified and yet another part of her suddenly felt elated. She had the strangest feeling that if only she stepped up into the darkness, she would see everything she had ever wanted to see, even her real mother, Queen Cerys. And as she thought about meeting her mother, the feeling of terror began to fade and Jenna longed to step into the dark, into the best place to be in the whole world—the place she had always been searching for.

Suddenly Jenna felt a tap on her shoulder. She wheeled around and saw the ghost of the governess who **Haunted** the Palace looking for two lost princesses staring at her.

“Come away, Esmeralda, come away,” wailed the ghost. “It is **Darke** in there. Come away . . .” Exhausted by having **Caused** a tap on Jenna's shoulder, the ghost of the governess faded away and was not seen for many years hence.

Jenna's desire to step into the darkness evaporated. She turned and ran, clattering down the stairs two at a time. She did not stop running until she reached the broad, bright corridor that led to her bedroom and saw the friendly figure of Sir Hereward, the ancient ghost who guarded the double doors to her bedroom.

Sir Hereward sprang to attention. “Good evening, Princess,” he said. “Early to bed, I see. A big day tomorrow.” The ghost smiled. “It's not every day a Princess turns fourteen.”

“No,” said Jenna despondently.

“Ah, the pressure of advancing years already, I see.” Sir Hereward chuckled. “But let me tell you, fourteen is nothing to worry about, Princess. Look at me, I've had *hundreds* of birthdays—lost count of 'em in fact—and

I'm fine."

Jenna could not help but smile. The ghost was anything but fine. Dusty and faded, his armor dented, he was missing an arm, quite a few teeth and—she had recently noticed when he had removed his helmet—his left ear and a fair chunk of the side of his head. Plus, of course, he was *dead*. But that didn't seem to worry Sir Hereward. Jenna sternly told herself to stop being so miserable and enjoy life. Septimus would get over whatever it was and things would be fine again. In fact, tomorrow she would go to the last day of the Traders' Market and get him something for his birthday that would make him laugh—something more fun than the *Compleat History of Magyk* that she had already bought him from Wyvald's Witchy Bookstore.

"There, that's better." Sir Hereward beamed. "Fourteen's an exciting day for a Princess, you'll see. Now, here's a good one. This will really cheer you up. How do you put a giraffe in a wardrobe?"

"I don't know, Sir Hereward. How *do* you put a giraffe in a wardrobe?"

"You open the wardrobe door, put it in and close the door. So how do you put an elephant in the wardrobe?"

"I don't know. How *do* you put an elephant in a wardrobe?"

"You open the door, take out the giraffe and put the elephant in. Hur hur."

Jenna laughed. "That is so silly, Sir Hereward."

Sir Hereward giggled. "Isn't it? I mean, I'm sure you could fit them *both* in if you really tried."

"Yes . . . well, good night, Sir Hereward. I'll see you tomorrow."

The ancient ghost bowed, and Jenna pushed opened the grand double doors and went into her bedroom. As the doors closed, Sir Hereward resumed his post on guard, extra vigilant. Every Palace ghost knew that birthdays could be a dangerous time for a Princess. Sir Hereward was determined that nothing was going to happen to Jenna on *his* watch.

* * *

Once inside her room, Jenna could not settle—she felt a strange mixture of excitement and melancholy. Restless, she went to one of the tall windows and drew back the heavy red curtains to look out at the river. Watching the river at night was something she had loved to do ever since Silas had made her a little box bed in the cupboard in the Ramblings, where there was a tiny window that looked directly down on the water. In Jenna's opinion, the view from her grand windows at the Palace was greatly inferior to the one she had had in her cupboard—from her old perch at the Ramblings she had been able to see the tide's ebb and flow, which had always fascinated her. Very often there had been a few fishing boats tied up to one of the huge rings set into the walls far below, and she would watch the fishermen clean their catch and mend their nets. Here all she ever saw were distant boats passing back and forth and the

moonlight reflected in the water.

That night, however, there was no moon. It was, Jenna knew, the last night of the old moon, and the moon did not rise until very nearly sunrise. Tomorrow night—her birthday night—would be the Dark of the Moon, when it would not rise at all. But even without the moon, the night sky was still beautiful. The clouds had blown away and the stars shone bright and clear.

Jenna drew the heavy curtains behind her so she was in the dark, cold space between them and the window. She stood still, waiting for her eyes to become accustomed to the dark. Her warm breath began to mist the window; she rubbed the glass clear and peered out at the river.

At first sight it appeared deserted, which was not a surprise to Jenna. Not many boats went out at night. And then she caught sight of a movement down by the landing stage. Squeakily she rubbed the window once more and squinted out. There was someone on the landing stage—it was *Septimus*. He looked as if he were in conversation with someone, although there was no one to be seen. Jenna knew at once that he was talking to the ghost of Alice Nettles—poor Alice Nettles, who had lost her Alther for a second time. Since her terrible loss, Alice had **DisAppeared** and had taken to wandering around the Castle looking for Alther. She was the source of the disembodied voice that would sometimes whisper in people’s ears, “Where has he gone? Have you seen him, have you seen him?”

Jenna cupped her hands over her nose to protect the glass from her breath and stared into the night. She saw Septimus finish his conversation and walk briskly away, speeding along beside the river, heading toward the side gate that would take him out near Wizard Way.

Jenna longed to throw open the window and climb down the ivy—as she had done many times before—then run across the lawns, waylay Septimus and tell him what had just happened at the top of the attic stairs. The old Septimus would have come back with her, there and then. But not now, Jenna thought sadly. Now Septimus had more important things to do—secret things.

Suddenly aware of how cold she was, Jenna slipped out from behind the curtains and went over to the fire, where three huge logs were blazing in the ancient stone fireplace. And as she stood holding her hands out to warm in front of the crackling fire, Jenna wondered what Septimus was talking to Alice about. She knew that even if she asked him he wouldn’t tell her.

It wasn’t only Alice who had lost someone, Jenna thought sadly.

Chapter 4

Apprentices



The morning of his fourteenth birthday, Septimus was up before dawn. Quickly he cleaned and tidied the Pyramid Library—as he did every morning, even on his birthday. He found an unwrapped present from Marcia hidden under a pile of books to be filed. It was a small but very beautiful gold and silver **Enlarging Glass**. Attached to its ivory handle was a purple tag, which read: *To Septimus. Happy **Magykal** Fourteenth Birthday. With love from Marcia.* Septimus put the Glass in his pocket with a smile. It wasn't often that Marcia signed her name “with love.”

Some minutes later the heavy purple door that guarded the entrance to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's rooms swung open, and Septimus headed for the silver spiral stairs at the end of the landing, setting off on a visit he had made every day since he had returned from the Isles of Syren. Taking a chance that there were no Wizards about so early, he put the stairs into emergency mode and whizzed down to the seventh floor. Dizzy but exhilarated—there was nothing quite like an emergency run to wake one up—Septimus stepped off the stairs and walked a little unsteadily along a dimly lit corridor toward a door marked ICK BAY (the s having recently evaporated during an Ordinary Apprentice's spell that had gone wrong).

The ICK BAY door opened quietly and Septimus stepped into a dimly lit, circular room with ten beds arranged around the wall like the numbers on a clockface. Only two of the beds were occupied—one by a Wizard who had fallen down the Wizard Tower steps and broken her toe, the other by an elderly Wizard who had “felt a bit funny” the previous day. Two of the clockface spaces were taken by doors—one that Septimus had just come through and another, at the seven o'clock space, leading away from the sick

bay. In the center was a circular desk, in the middle of which sat the night duty Wizard and the new sick bay Apprentice, Rose. Rose, her long brown hair tucked behind her ears, was busy as ever, scribbling in her project book and devising new **Charms**.

Septimus approached. Rose and the Wizard gave him friendly smiles. They knew him well, for he visited every day—although usually not so early.

“No change,” whispered Rose.

Septimus nodded. He had long given up expecting to hear anything different.

Rose got up from her chair. It was her job to escort visitors to the **DisEnchanting** Chamber. Septimus followed her over to the narrow door set in the wall at the seven o’clock space. Its surface had a shifting quality to it, typical of the effect that strong Wizard Tower **Magyk** produced. Rose placed her hand on the surface and quickly withdrew it, leaving a fleeting purple handprint behind. The door swung open, then she and Septimus stepped into an antechamber. The door closed behind them and Rose repeated the process with another door in front of them. It too swung open, and this time Septimus alone walked through. He entered a small pentagonal room suffused with a deep blue light.

“I’ll leave you now,” whispered Rose. “**Call** me if there’s anything you need or . . . well, if there’s any change.”

Septimus nodded.

There was a heady smell of **Magyk** in the chamber, for within it a gentle **DisEnchanting** force was allowed to run free. The force circled counterclockwise, and Septimus could feel it warm upon his skin, tingling like drying salt water after a swim in the ocean. He stood still and breathed in deeply a few times to balance himself. For anyone with any **Magyk** in them, **DisEnchantment** is a peculiar thing to be close to, and the first few times he had entered the chamber Septimus had become extremely dizzy. Now that he was used to it he merely felt wobbly for a few moments. However, something that he had never quite got used to was the eerie sight of the **DisEnchantment** cocoon—a delicate hammock made from the softest unspun sheep’s wool—which appeared to float in midair, although it was actually suspended by invisible **Forrest Bands**, invented by a long-gone ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

Feeling as if he were walking underwater, Septimus slowly approached the cocoon, pushing through eddies of **DisEnchantment**. Swathed in the wool lay a figure so insubstantial that sometimes Septimus was afraid she might disappear at any moment. But so far Syrah Syara, the occupant of the cocoon, had resisted disappearing—although it was a known risk of **DisEnchantment**, and the longer the process went on, the greater the risk became.

Septimus looked at Syrah's bluish face, which reflected the light of the chamber and seemed almost transparent. Her brown hair had been neatly plaited, giving her a prim, doll-like appearance—so different from the wild, windblown Syrah he had first met on the Isle of Syren.

"Hello, Syrah," he said quietly. "It's me, Septimus." Syrah did not react, but Septimus knew that that did not necessarily mean she could not hear him. Many people who had successfully emerged from **DisEnchantment** were able to recount conversations that had taken place in the chamber.

"I'm early today," Septimus continued. "The sun isn't even up yet. I want to tell you that I won't be able to come and see you for the next few days." He stopped to see if his words were having any effect. There was no reaction and Septimus felt a little upset—he had half hoped that a flicker of disappointment might cross Syrah's face.

"It's my **Darke Week** coming up," Septimus continued. "And . . . um . . . I want to tell you what I'm going to be doing. Because you've done it and you know how scary it feels before you go . . . and I can't tell anyone else. I mean, I can't tell anyone who's not completed an Apprenticeship to an ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Which doesn't leave many people—well, only Marcia and you, in fact. Of course there would have been Alther before, well . . . you know what happened. Oh, I know he was a ghost and there are lots of ExtraOrdinary Wizard and Apprentice ghosts around but Alther is—I mean *was*—different. He felt real, like he was still alive. Oh, Syrah, I miss Alther. I really do. And . . . that's what I wanted to tell you—I'm going to get Alther back. I *am*. Marcia doesn't want me to, but it's *my* choice and she can't stop me. All Apprentices have the right to choose what they do in their **Darke Week** and I've chosen. I'm going down into the **Darke Halls**."

Septimus paused. He wondered whether he had told Syrah too much. If she really could hear him and understand every word he said, then all he had done was to leave her alone to worry about him. Septimus told himself not to be silly. Just because he had grown to care about what happened to Syrah, it didn't mean that she cared equally about him. In fact, he told himself, if she was aware of his visits she was more likely to feel relieved at the prospect of getting a rest from him. He grinned ruefully. Something Jenna had said to him more than once recently came back to him: "Not *everything* revolves around you, Sep."

Feeling a little awkward, he finished his visit. "So, er, good-bye then. I'll be fine and, um, I hope you will be too. I'll see you when I get back." Septimus would have liked to give Syrah a quick good-bye kiss but that was not possible. A person in the process of **DisEnchantment** must not be connected to anything that is earthbound. This was why the **Forrest Bands** holding Syrah suspended had been such a breakthrough—they **Magykally** broke the connection with earth and allowed the **DisEnchantment** to work.

Most of the time.

Septimus left the **DisEnchanting** Chamber, made his way through the antechamber and stepped out into the sick bay. Rose gave him a friendly wave, which he returned briefly and, still feeling embarrassed, he left the sick bay and walked back down the corridor, telling himself, “Not *everything* revolves around you, you dillop.”

* * *

However, that day in the Wizard Tower it seemed that, dillop or not, everything *did* revolve around him. A fourteenth birthday for an Apprentice was a special one—being twice the **Magykal** number seven—and naturally the entire population of the Wizard Tower wanted to wish Septimus a happy birthday, particularly as there was no birthday banquet to look forward to that evening. Sarah Heap’s determination to have Septimus at the Palace that night had not gone down well at the Wizard Tower.

However, as Septimus went about his morning errands—delivering requested **Charms** to various Wizards, **Finding** a lost pair of glasses, helping out with a tricky spell on floor four—he detected a melancholy undertone to all the birthday wishes. The Wizard Tower was notorious for gossip, and it seemed that every Wizard knew that Septimus was about to embark upon his **Darke Week**—the one week that separates the Ordinary from the ExtraOrdinary Apprenticeship. This was despite the fact that the timing of the **Darke Week** was meant to be a secret.

And so, along with the many “happy birthday” greetings, there were also fervent wishes for “and many more of them, Apprentice.” On his rounds Septimus was offered a varied assortment of gifts, all unwrapped—as was the tradition among Wizards in order to avoid the **Placement** of creatures, an ancient **Darke** trick that had once given Marcia some trouble. A pair of purple hand-knitted “lucky” socks, a bag of self-renewing banana chews and three **Magykal** hairbrushes were among those he accepted, but the vast majority were **SafeCharms**, all of which he politely refused.

As Septimus took the stairs down to the Wizard Tower Hall on his very last errand, he felt unsettled by the sadness beneath the birthday wishes. It was odd, he thought; it felt as if someone close to him had died or—it occurred to him as he stepped off the stairs—as if *he* were about to die. Septimus walked slowly across the soft, **Magykal** floor, reading the messages, which were wishing him not only A VERY HAPPY FOURTEENTH BIRTHDAY, APPRENTICE but also BE SAFE, APPRENTICE. He sighed—even the floor was at it.

Septimus knocked on the door of the duty Wizard’s room, which was tucked in beside the huge silver doors that led out from the Wizard Tower. Hildegard Pigeon, a young woman in pristine Ordinary sub-Wizard robes, opened it. Septimus smiled; he liked Hildegard.

“Happy birthday!” Hildegarde greeted him.

“Thanks.”

“It’s a big day, fourteen. And Princess Jenna’s birthday too.”

“Yes.” Septimus felt a bit guilty. He’d forgotten to get her a present.

“We’ll be seeing her later, apparently. About midday, Madam Overstrand said. She didn’t seem very pleased, though.”

“Marcia’s not very pleased about anything at the moment,” said Septimus, wondering why Jenna hadn’t told him about her visit to the Wizard Tower.

Hildegarde sensed that all was not well. “So . . . are you having a good day?”

“Well, yes, I suppose. I’ve just been up to the DisEnchanting Chamber. Bet you’re glad you’re not there anymore.”

Hildegarde smiled. “Too right,” she said. “But it did the job. And it will for Syrah too, don’t you worry.”

“Hope so,” said Septimus. “I’ve come for my boots.”

“Oh, yes. Hang on a mo.” Hildegard disappeared into the tiny room and emerged carrying a box with “Terry Tarsal, by appointment” written on it in gold letters. Terry had recently upgraded his image.

Septimus lifted the lid and peered inside. He looked relieved. “Oh good,” he said. “He repaired my old ones. Marcia was threatening to get him to make me a new pair in green with *purple laces*.”

“Oh dear.” Hildegarde smiled. “Not a good look.”

“No. Definitely not.”

“There’s a letter for you too,” Hildegarde handed over a creased and slightly damp envelope.

Septimus looked at it. He couldn’t place the writing but it looked oddly familiar. And then he realized why—it was a mixture of his own handwriting and his father’s.

“Um, Septimus,” Hildegarde broke into his thoughts.

“Yep?”

“I know I shouldn’t say this as it’s confidential and all that but, well . . . I just wanted to say good luck. And I’ll be thinking of you.”

“Oh. Well, thank you. Thank you, Hildegarde. That’s really nice.”

Hildegarde went a little pink and disappeared back into the duty Wizard’s room.

Septimus tucked the shoebox under his arm and headed for the silver spiral stairs, letter in hand. Only when he was back in his room on the twenty-first floor of the Wizard Tower with the door firmly closed, did he tear open the envelope and read:

Dear Septimus,

I hope you have a very happy fourteenth birthday.

I expect you are surprised to get a letter from me, but I wish to apologize for what I did to you. I have no excuse except to say that I do not think I was in my right mind at the time. I believe that my contact with the Darke made me crazy. But I take responsibility for that. On the night of your Apprentice Feast, I deliberately sought out the Darke and that is completely my fault.

I hope that one day you will forgive me.

I realize that you are well into your Apprenticeship now and will have much knowledge. But even so, I hope you will not mind your oldest brother giving you some advice: Beware of the Darke.

*With best wishes,
Simon (Heap)*

Septimus sat down on his bed and let out a low whistle. He felt spooked. Even Simon seemed to know about his **Darke Week**.

Chapter 5

Runaways



While *Septimus* sat rereading his letter, the messenger who had delivered it was suffering from an attack of cold feet. Even the two pairs of thick, stripy socks that Lucy Gringe habitually wore in the winter were no help that cold morning as she hung back in the shadows of the North Gate gatehouse, trying to pluck up the courage to announce herself to her mother.

Lucy had arrived at the Gatehouse early. She wanted to speak to her father first, before her mother ventured outside with his early-morning cocoa. Despite her father's gruff exterior, Lucy knew that Gringe would be thrilled to see her. "Dad's an old softy, really," she had told Simon before she had left. "It's Mum who'll be difficult."

But Lucy's plan had gone awry. She had been thrown by the unexpected appearance of a makeshift lean-to shelter along the side of the gatehouse, beside the road leading to the bridge. A sign on the shelter announced it to be *CAFÉ LA GRINGE*, from which came the (unfortunately) unforgettable smell of her mother's stew. This was accompanied by the equally unmistakable sound of her mother cooking—clanging saucepan lids, muttered curses, and ill-tempered thumps and thuds.

Lucy stood in the shadows wondering what to do. Eventually the rank smell of the stew drove her to a decision. She waited until her mother was looking into one of the deep stew pans and then, head held high, Lucy marched right past *CAFÉ LA GRINGE*. It worked. Mrs. Gringe, who was wondering

if anyone would notice the mouse that had fallen in overnight and suffocated, did not look up.

Gringe, a heavysset man with close-shorn hair and wearing a greasy leather jerkin, was sitting in the gatehouse keeper's lodge. He was keeping out of the chilly wind that blew off the Moat and, more importantly, out of the way of the stew. It was a quiet day. Everyone in the Castle was either at the last day of the Traders' Market—which had stayed later than usual that year—or were busy getting ready for the festivities of the Longest Night, when candles would be lit in every window throughout the Castle. And so, apart from taking toll money from a few bleary Northern Traders first thing that morning, Gringe had had nothing better to do than polish the few coins he had collected—a job he had taken over from Mrs. Gringe, now that she was, as he frequently complained, obsessed with stew.

When Gringe looked up at the newcomer, who he assumed was about to add to his meager pile of coins, he did not at first recognize his daughter. The young woman with big brown eyes and a nervous smile looked far too grown-up to be his little Lucy who, in her absence, had become ever younger in Gringe's fond memory. Even when the young woman said, "*Dad!*" a little tearfully, Gringe stared at Lucy uncomprehending, until his cold, bored brain at last made the connection. And then he sprang to his feet, enveloped Lucy in a huge hug, lifted her off her feet and yelled, "Lucy! Lucy, *Lucy!*"

A wave of relief swept over Lucy—it was going to be all right.

An hour later, sitting in the room above the gatehouse with her parents (while the bridge boy looked after the bridge and the stew looked after itself), Lucy had revised this opinion: *It was possibly going to be all right, if she was very careful and didn't upset her mother too much.*

Mrs. Gringe was in full flood, recounting for the umpteenth time the long list of Lucy's transgressions. "Running off with that *awful* Heap boy, not a care about me or your father, gone these last two years with never a word . . ."

"I did write to you," Lucy protested. "But you never replied."

"You think I got time to write letters?" asked Mrs. Gringe, insulted.

"But *Mum*—"

"I got a gatehouse to run. Stew to cook. On me *own*." Mrs. Gringe looked pointedly at both Lucy and Gringe who, to his discomfort, now seemed to be included in Lucy's wrong-doings. He stepped in hastily.

"Come, come, dear. Lucy's all grown up now. She got better things to do than live with her old mum and dad—"

"*Old?*" said his wife indignantly.

"Well, I didn't mean—"

"No wonder I look old. All that worry. Ever since she was fourteen she's bin running after that Heap boy. Sneaking out with him, even trying to *marry*

him, for goodness' sake, and getting us into terrible trouble with them Custodians. And after all that we take her back out of the goodness of our hearts and what does she do? She runs off again! And never a word. Not a word . . ." Mrs. Gringe got out a stew-stained handkerchief and began noisily blowing her nose into it.

Lucy hadn't expected it to be this bad. She glanced at her father.

Say sorry, he mouthed.

"Um . . . Mum," Lucy ventured.

"What?" came her muffled voice.

"I . . . I'm sorry."

Mrs. Gringe looked up. "Are you?" She seemed surprised.

"Yes. I am."

"Oh." Mrs. Gringe blew her nose loudly.

"Look, Mum, Dad. The thing is, me and Simon, we want to get married."

"I'd 'ave thought you'd already done *that*," her mother sniffed accusingly.

Lucy shook her head. "No. After I ran away to find Simon—and I *did* find him"—(Lucy refrained from adding "so there," as she would have done not so long ago)—"well, after I found him I realized that I wanted us to be married *properly*. I want a white wedding—"

"White wedding? Huh!" said Mrs. Gringe.

"Yes, Mum, that's what I want. And I want you and Dad to be there. And Simon's Mum and Dad too. And I want you to be happy about it."

"Happy!" Mrs. Gringe exclaimed bitterly.

"Mum . . . *please*, listen. I've come back to ask if you and Dad will come to our wedding."

Her mother sat for a while digesting this as Lucy and Gringe looked on anxiously. "You really *are* inviting us to your wedding?" she asked.

"Yes, Mum." Lucy pulled a crumpled card edged with white ribbon from her pocket and handed it to Mrs. Gringe, who squinted at it suspiciously. Suddenly she leaped to her feet and flung her arms around Lucy. "My baby," she cried. "You're getting *married*." She looked at Gringe. "I'll need a new hat," she said.

There was a sudden sound of thudding boots on the steps leading to the room and the bridge boy burst in. "Whatddyou charge an 'orse?" he demanded.

Gringe looked annoyed. "You know what to charge. I left you the list. Horse and rider: one silver penny. Now go an' get the money before they stop hangin' around waitin' for an idiot like you to ask stupid questions."

"But what if it's *just* an 'orse?" the bridge boy persisted.

"What, a runaway horse?"

The bridge boy nodded.

"Charge the horse whatever it's got in its wallet," said Gringe, raising his

eyes to heaven. “Or you can hang on to the ’orse and charge the owner when ’e catches up with it. What do *you* think?”

“Dunno,” said the bridge boy. “That’s why I come and asked.”

Gringe heaved a heavy sigh. “I better go an’ sort this,” he said, getting to his feet.

“I’ll give you a hand, Dad,” said Lucy, not wanting to be left alone with her mother.

Gringe smiled. “That’s me girl,” he said.

Gringe and Lucy found a large black horse tied up to a ring in the gatehouse wall. The horse looked at Lucy, and Lucy looked at the horse.

“Thunder!” Lucy gasped.

“Nah,” said Gringe, looking up at the clouds. “Looks more like snow to me.”

“No, Dad,” said Lucy, stroking the horse’s mane, “the horse—it’s *Thunder*. Simon’s horse.”

“Ah. So *that’s* how you got here.”

“No, Dad. I didn’t come on the horse. I took the Port barge.”

“Well, that’s good. I were a bit worried. He’s got no saddle or anything. Not safe riding like that.”

Lucy looked puzzled. She stroked Thunder’s muzzle and the horse pushed his nose into her shoulder. “Hello, Thunder,” she said. “What are *you* doing here?”

Thunder looked at her. There was an expression deep in the horse’s eyes that Lucy wished she understood. Simon would know, she thought. He and Thunder always knew what each other were thinking. Simon and Thunder . . . suddenly Lucy knew. “Simon! Something’s happened to Simon. Thunder’s come to tell me!”

Gringe looked concerned. Not more trouble, he thought. Mrs. Gringe was right. Ever since Lucy had met the Heap boy something was always going wrong. He looked at his daughter’s worried expression and, not for the first time, he wished she had met a nice, straightforward Castle boy all those years ago.

“Lucy, love,” he said gently. “It might not even be Thunder. There’re a lot of black horses about. And even if it is ’im, well, it don’t mean anything bad. In fact, it’s a stroke a luck. The horse got loose, it’s come all the way through the Farmlands and no one’s pinched it—which is a miracle—it’s found its way into the Castle and *now* it’s found you.” Gringe wanted so much to make it all right for Lucy. He smiled encouragingly. “Look, love. We’ll find ’im a saddle and all that kind of horse stuff and you can ride ’im back to the Port. Better than that smelly old barge any day.”

Lucy smiled uncertainly. She wanted everything to be all right too.

Lucy led a reluctant Thunder around to the gatehouse stable. When she left,

after giving him fresh hay and water and covering him with a warm horse blanket, Thunder tried to follow her out. Lucy quickly closed the bottom half of the stable door. Thunder stuck his great head out of the open top door and looked reproachfully at her.

“Oh, Thunder, tell me Simon’s all right. *Please,*” she whispered.

But Thunder was saying nothing.

A few minutes later Mrs. Gringe came down to check on the stew. She was just in time to see Lucy, ribbons flying, racing off into the warren of houses that backed up to the Castle walls. Convinced that Lucy was running away again, Mrs. Gringe stomped over to the nearest stew pot and poked angrily at it. She was, however, pleased to see that the mouse had incorporated nicely into the brown sludge.

Lucy was not running away. She was heading for the steps up to the path that ran along the top of the Castle walls and would take her to the East Gate Lookout Tower—the headquarters of the Message Rat Service, run by Stanley, his four ratlets (now fully grown) and their assorted friends and hangers-on.

As Lucy strode along the walls, she composed a variety of messages to Simon. By the time she breathlessly pushed open the little door of the East Gate Lookout Tower and stepped into the Message Rat Office, she had decided on something short and simple (and also cheap): *Thunder here. Are you all right? Send return message. Lu xxxxxx*

Half an hour later, Stanley had just caught the mid-morning Port barge. He was unsure whether to be flattered or annoyed that Lucy had insisted that she trusted no rat but him to take the message. After half an hour spent hiding out in a fish basket, trying to avoid the barge cat, Stanley decided he was most definitely annoyed. He was going all the way to the Port just to deliver a weather bulletin. Added to that, he had just realized who the recipient of the message was—Simon Heap was one of the Heap Wizarding family. And Stanley was of the same mind as Mrs. Gringe on this one: Heap Wizards were bad news.

Chapter 6

Choice



While Gringe was searching for “horse stuff,” Septimus was, as Marcia put it, in conference. He was in Marcia’s sitting room, sitting on a small stool beside the fire, with his blue and gold leather-bound Apprentice Diary on his knees. It was open at the page that read “**Darke Week.**”

Marcia had been dreading the **Darke Week** for some time. Even though she knew that the most powerful **Magyk**—which Septimus would be using in the next stage of his Apprenticeship—needed a personal connection with the **Darke**, it frightened her. Some ExtraOrdinary Wizards were perfectly at ease with the **Darke**. They enjoyed playing with the delicate balance between **Darke** and **Magyk**, adjusting it as a skilled mechanic would a finely tuned engine and, in the process, getting the last ounce of power from their **Magyk**. Marcia, however, preferred to use as small an amount of **Darke Magyk** as possible, relying more on her personal **Magykal** power—some purists might have called her an unbalanced practitioner of **Magyk** (although not to her face). It was, however, true that the most powerful Wizards were those in perfect balance—and this was what the **Darke Week** was all about. It was the time when the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice acquired personal experience of the **Darke** that would enable him or her to move toward a **Magykal** skill that was in harmony with everything—even the **Darke**.

Marcia had an added reason for being uneasy about Septimus’s **Darke Week**. Recently she had noticed that the Wizard Tower was requiring more **Magyk** than usual to keep everything running in perfect order. There had been a series of minor breakdowns—the stairs had suddenly stopped one day for no reason, and the floor had begun to display the odd, jumbled message.

The previous week the Wizards had had to **Fumigate** a severe outbreak of **Darke** spiders, and only the day before Marcia had needed to reset the **Password** on the doors twice. Each incident on its own would not have worried her—these things happened occasionally—but the cumulative effect had made Marcia jumpy. Which was why she now said to her Apprentice, “I know it’s your choice, Septimus, but I would rather you didn’t begin your **Darke Week** right *now*.”

Marcia was perched precariously at one end of her sofa. This was because most of the sofa was already occupied by a willowy man with a pointy beard who was curled up like a cat, fast asleep. The man’s long, elegant fingers rested delicately on the purple velvet of Marcia’s sofa, the color of which contrasted vividly with the yellow of his costume and his tall hat, which looked like a pile of ever-decreasing doughnuts crammed onto his head. This bizarre sleeping figure was Jim Knee—Septimus’s jinnee—who had gone into hibernation. He had been asleep for some four weeks now, ever since the weather had turned wintry. His breathing was slow and regular, except for a loud snore that escaped now and then.

Marcia did not welcome having to share her sofa, but she preferred it to the alternative of Jim Knee being awake. Ignoring a sudden *snurruff* from the jinnee, she opened the Apprentice Almanac—a large, ancient book bound in what had once been bright green leather—which she was balancing on her knee. Slowly she turned the parchment pages until she found what she was looking for. She peered through her new tiny gold spectacles at the closely written text.

“Luckily you became Apprentice at a time that gives you the widest choice of when to do this. You actually have up to seven weeks after the MidWinter Feast in which to undertake your **Darke Week**. Is that not right, Marcellus?” Marcia looked over her spectacles at a man sitting opposite Septimus in an upright chair, daring him to disagree.

It was only the second time that Marcia had invited Marcellus Pye to her rooms in the Wizard Tower, and she had done so out of a wish to honor an old tradition. In days past, the Castle Alchemist—which Marcellus had once been—was consulted in the timing of the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice’s **Darke Week**. The moment when an Apprentice went alone into the realm of the **Darke** was an important one, and Alchemists were known to have a much closer connection with all things **Darke**—not to mention something of an obsession with propitious timing.

The consulting of the Castle Alchemist had, naturally, lapsed with the demise of Alchemie in the Castle. But now, for the first time in many hundreds of years, there was, with Marcellus Pye, a true Alchemist available once again. After much thought, Marcia had decided to include Marcellus in the discussion. She was now regretting her decision—something told her he

was going to be awkward.

Marcellus Pye glinted spectacularly in the firelight. He was dressed in a long, black, fur-lined velvet coat, which sported an extravagant array of shiny gold fastenings. The most unusual thing about him, however, was his shoes. Long and pointy, in soft red leather, they tapered to three-foot-long thin strips of leather that ended in black ribbons, which were tied just below his knees so that he did not (very often) trip over them. The onlooker, if they managed to stop looking at his shoes for a moment, would also see that below his dark hair brushed low over his forehead—which gave him an old-fashioned appearance—he too wore a small pair of gold spectacles. He also had a book on his knees, although it was smaller than Marcia's tome. His book, written by himself, was called *I, Marcellus*. Marcellus Pye was carefully consulting the last section, titled "The Almanac," before he answered Marcia's question.

"That may be true according to the Apprentice calendar," he said. "But—"

"But *what?*" Marcia interrupted irritably.

"*Snur . . . snurruff!*"

"Goodness me, what is that noise?"

"It's Jim Knee, Mr. Pye. I told you before—he *snores*. I do wish you would listen."

"Jim Knee?"

"I *told* you—Septimus's jinnee. Ignore him. I do."

"Ah, yes. Well, well. As I was saying before I was interrupted, according to my own Almanac, which gives considerably more accurate detail, and which my Apprentice helped to—"

"*Ex-Apprentice*," said Marcia tetchily.

"I have never revoked his Indentures, Marcia," Marcellus countered, equally tetchily. "I regard him as my Apprentice."

The subject of their discussion squirmed uncomfortably.

"Those Indentures were meaningless," snapped Marcia, refusing to let the subject drop. "Septimus was not free to become your Apprentice—he was already Apprenticed to *me*."

"I think you will find he was Apprenticed to *me* before he was Apprenticed to you. About *five hundred years* before, in fact," Marcellus said with a slight smile that Marcia found intensely annoying.

"As far as Septimus was concerned," countered Marcia, "*your* Apprenticeship came later. And *Septimus* is the one who matters. In fact, he is the very reason we are both here right now—because we are concerned for his safety, are we not, Mr. Pye?"

"*That* goes without saying," Marcellus Pye said stiffly.

"And so let me repeat what I said earlier, just in case that too has slipped your mind. Septimus has a window of seven weeks in which to commence his **Darke Week**. I am worried that if he goes tonight, at the Dark of the Moon,

as you have suggested—”

“And as *he* wishes,” interrupted Marcellus.

“He wishes it because you have suggested it, Mr. Pye—don’t think I don’t know that. If Septimus embarks on his **Darke Week** tonight, he will be in greater danger than on any other night. Far better that he waits until the full moon in two weeks’ time, when it will be less risky for him and also for the . . .” Marcia trailed off. She was anxious that if Septimus entered the **Darke** at such a potent time it would unbalance the **Magyk** in the Tower even further, but she had no wish to tell Marcellus Pye her concerns—it was none of his business.

“Less risky for him and also for the *what?*” Marcellus asked suspiciously. He knew Marcia was keeping something from him.

“Nothing *you* need to worry about, Marcellus,” Marcia replied.

Marcellus was annoyed. He snapped his book closed and got to his feet. He made a slight, old-fashioned bow. “ExtraOrdinary Wizard. As you requested, I have given my opinion. I regret that it was not to your liking, but I repeat: *the Dark of the Moon is the most effective time for Septimus to embark upon his Darke Week.* It is the most effective time for him to go and, as I understand it, *effective* is what Septimus wishes it to be. He is fourteen now—today I believe.” Marcellus smiled at Septimus. “Fourteen is considered old enough to make important decisions, Marcia. I think you should respect that. I have nothing further to add and I bid you good day.” Marcellus bowed once again—deeper this time—and headed for the large purple door.

Septimus leaped to his feet. “I’ll get the stairs for you,” he said. Marcellus had had trouble with the stairs when he came up and had arrived in Marcia’s room somewhat dizzy and dishevelled.

As Septimus escorted Marcellus Pye along the landing, his old tutor looked behind him to check that Marcia had not sent some kind of eavesdropping creature to follow him. He saw nothing and said in a low voice, “Septimus, I hope you realize that I would never have advised you to go into the **Darke** at this time if I did not have something for you that I truly believe will completely protect you.” Marcellus fixed his deep brown eyes on his Apprentice—or not, depending on who you sided with. “I care about you, just as much as Madam Marcia Overstrand does.”

Septimus turned a little pink. He nodded.

Marcellus Pye continued, “I did not mention this to Marcia because I believe that even now there are things that should be kept secret from the Wizarding community. They are *such* gossips. But for you, as my Alchemie Apprentice, it is different. Come and see me this afternoon; there is something I wish to give you.”

Septimus nodded. “Thank you, Marcellus. I’ll see you later.”

Septimus helped Marcellus onto the stairs and set them moving downward

on delicate mode—normally used for elderly Wizards and visiting parents. He watched the apparently young Marcellus Pye disappear from view. He smiled—it was in the little details that Marcellus gave his true age away.

Septimus returned to his place by the fire. He and Marcia sat in silence for a while until Marcia broke it by saying, “I don’t want to lose my Apprentice. More than that, Septimus, I don’t want to lose *you*.”

“You won’t. I promise,” Septimus replied.

“Don’t make promises that you can’t be sure to keep,” Marcia told him.

A silence hung in the air.

“*Sner . . . urrruff!*”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Marcia muttered, casting an irritated glance at the jinnee. “Septimus, I didn’t want to mention this in front of Mr. Pye, but I am concerned about the recent glitches we’ve had here in the Tower. Going into the **Darke** is a two-way thing. It can open up channels for the **Darke** to come this way too.”

“I know,” said Septimus. “I’ve been practicing **Barriers** all last week.”

“Yes, indeed you have. But it’s still risky—and particularly so at the Dark of the Moon. I am asking you to reconsider your decision and go at the full moon instead.”

“But Marcellus says that this timing is my best chance to get Alther back,” said Septimus. “Probably my *only* chance.”

“Marcellus! What does he know?” snapped Marcia. And then, knowing she was not playing fair, said, “*Alther* would agree with me.”

“How can you know what Alther would think?” retorted Septimus. “You don’t even know if he *can* think anymore.”

“Oh, Septimus, *don’t*,” Marcia protested. “You don’t know how often I wish I had stopped the **Banish** in time. Not a day passes when that awful moment doesn’t come back to me. And then telling Alice . . .” She shook her head, unable to go on.

They were silent for a while and then Septimus said, “Marcia?”

“Yes?”

“You know how you are always saying that we must be honest with each other?”

“Yees?”

“*Sner . . . snurrruff . . .*”

“There’s something I want to ask you and I want you to be honest with me.”

“Of *course* I will be, Septimus.” Marcia sounded offended.

“If you were me and you had this one chance to bring Alther back—even with all the risks—would you take it?”

“But I don’t *have* that chance. I have already been into the **Darke** and therefore I am **Known**. There is no way I could get into the **Darke Halls**

now.”

Septimus got to his feet and stood by the fire. He felt he needed the advantage of some extra height. “You haven’t answered my question,” he said, looking down at Marcia.

“No, I suppose I haven’t,” Marcia replied meekly.

“So, if you were me and had this one chance to bring Alther back, *would you take it?*”

A silence ensued into which even Jim Knee’s snores dared not intrude. At last Marcia answered.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “Yes, I think I would.”

“Thank you,” said Septimus. “Then I shall go tonight. At midnight.”

“Very well,” said Marcia with a sigh. “I’ll start getting things ready.” She got to her feet, picked up the Apprentice Almanac and walked out to her study. She was back a few minutes later carrying a large iron key on a loop of black cord. “You’d better take it now, before I change my mind,” she told Septimus. “It’s the key to Dungeon Number One.”

Septimus buttoned the key into his secure pocket. It felt heavy and awkward—a weight he would rather not carry. He’d be glad when he no longer needed it, he thought.

Hoping to make Marcia feel better, Septimus said, “I’ll be okay. I shall have something to protect me.”

Marcia looked very annoyed. “If that Marcellus Pye has promised you some kind of Alchemie **KeepSafe** knickknack—he has, hasn’t he—don’t you dare believe it’s going to make a scrap of difference. *It won’t*. All it will do is lull you into a false sense of security. Alchemie stuff is nothing but smoke and mirrors, Septimus. All talk and no action. None of their stuff ever did work. It was complete *rubbish*.”

“But Marcia, I’m sure Marcellus—”

“Marcellus! Forget about Marcellus. Septimus, you must rely *only* on yourself and your own **Magyk** powers.” Marcia looked at her timepiece and sighed. “Midday already. As if it isn’t enough that I have to put up with a meddling Alchemist—any minute now there will be a meddling *Princess* at my door declaiming from that wretched book with its tiddly-squiddly type, which is the bane of every ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s life. I really could be doing without fourteenth birthdays right now.” With that, Marcia stormed off to her study.

Septimus sat for some time, looking into the fire and relishing the quiet—apart from an occasional *snurrruff*. He thought about what Marcia had said. Deep down he felt she was wrong about Marcellus—not all Alchemie was rubbish, he’d seen that for himself. But he knew Marcia would never agree. The buildup to the **Darke Week** was horrible, Septimus thought. Somehow it drove a wedge between you and everyone you cared about. He really wanted

Marcia's approval for what he was going to do but it was he who was going into the **Darke**, not Marcia. He must do it his way—not hers.

Snurrruuuuufff.

Septimus got to his feet. It was time to go and see Marcellus.

Chapter 7

The Bringer of the Book



The meddling Princess, like Septimus, had had an unusually formal birthday morning. At nine o'clock precisely, a tall woman dressed in Palace robes so ancient that they actually had long gold ribbons dangling from their sleeves banged on the Palace doors.

The duty Door Wizard was having his breakfast, so it was Sarah Heap who eventually opened them. "Yes?" she asked irritably.

"I am the Bringer of the Book," the woman announced imperiously. Without waiting to be asked, she swept inside, bringing with her a pungent smell of mothballs and the faint whiff of fish.

"Presents go on the table," said Sarah, indicating a large table already piled with assorted colorful packages. "We are not opening them until this evening."

The Bringer of the Book made not the slightest move in the direction of the table. She towered over Sarah, her height increased by great swathes of white hair piled precariously on the top of her head and secured with a wild assortment of combs. She looked at Sarah in disbelief. "But I am the *Bringer of the Book*," she said.

"I know. You already said. That's very nice; Jenna enjoys reading. Just put it on the table. Now excuse me, I really must go. You know the way out." Sarah indicated the doors, which were still thrown wide open.

"The way out?" The woman sounded incredulous. "I am not going *out*. I

have come to see the Princess. Now, my good woman, I will trouble you to announce my presence.”

Sarah spluttered indignantly, but Jenna’s timely arrival stopped any further escalation of hostilities.

“Mum!” she said, rushing in from the Long Walk. “Have you seen my—oh!” Jenna stopped and stared at the tall, imperious woman in the ancient Palace uniform. The old red and gray robes with their gold ribbons gave her the weirdest feeling, transporting her back to the frightening few days she had spent at the Palace in the ghastly Queen Etheldredda’s Time. “Who . . . who are you?” she stammered.

The Bringer of the Book swept down into a deep curtsy, her long, fragile ribbons falling gracefully to the dusty floor.

“Your Grace,” she murmured. “May I offer you my humble congratulations upon your Day of Recognition. I am the Bringer of the Book. I come to you as I came to your mother, and as my mother came to her mother before her, and as her mother came to her mother before her. I come to you to bring you *the Book*.”

Sarah felt the need to translate. “She’s brought you a book, Jenna. That’s nice, isn’t it? I’ve told her to put it on the table as we’re not opening the presents until this evening.”

The Bringer of the Book rounded on Sarah. “Mistress, I would ask you to hold your tongue. You may return to your duties—whatever they may be.”

“Now look here—” Sarah began. She was stopped by Jenna, who was beginning to understand that something important was going on.

“Mum,” said Jenna. “It’s okay. I think it’s—you know—Princess stuff.” She turned to the woman and spoke in her best Princess voice. “Thank you, Bringer of the Book,” she said. “May I introduce to you my mother, Madam Sarah Heap?”

The Bringer of the Book gave Sarah a small, perfunctory curtsy. “I apologize, Mistress Heap. I assumed from your dress that you were a menial.”

“There’s a lot of work to do around here and someone has to do it,” snapped Sarah. “You can talk to Jenna in my sitting room if you want to go somewhere warm. I’ve just lit the fire.” With that she walked off, head held high, stray wisps of straw-colored hair bouncing crossly as she strode into the Long Walk in search of Silas Heap.

The Bringer of the Book looked disapprovingly at the retreating Sarah. She did not lose the expression when she turned to Jenna. “A sitting room will *not* be suitable for this important occasion,” she said. “It is traditional for the Presentation to take place in the Throne Room. Perhaps you will be so kind as to lead the way.”

The last time Jenna had been in the Throne Room was five hundred years ago, in Queen Etheldredda’s Time. It did not hold good memories. Before

then—or, strictly speaking timewise, after—she had been in the Throne Room only once, and luckily she did not remember it. That was fourteen years ago to the very day, the day that her real mother, Queen Cerys, was shot dead. The idea of going into the Throne Room dismayed her, especially on this day of all days.

“The Throne Room is locked,” Jenna said coolly. “I do not use it.”

For the first time the Bringer of the Book regarded Jenna with something like approval. “Of course you do not use it, Princess. That is exactly how it should be. You have had no need for it until today. But today, the occasion of your fourteenth birthday, is the day of your first official engagement. Traditionally this takes place in the Throne Room—as you know.” The Bringer of the Book smiled at Jenna as though they were in on the same joke—a joke that no one else was clever enough to understand. Jenna had known girls like that at school and she hadn’t liked them. She felt the same way about the Bringer of the Book.

Jenna was about to retort that she didn’t care what the occasion was, she wasn’t going to unlock the Throne Room for anyone and anyway, she didn’t have the key, when Silas appeared. Jenna felt in need of his support.

“Dad,” she said, forgetting her Princess manners in her distress at being asked to unlock the Throne Room. “Dad, we *don’t* have the key to the Throne Room, *do* we?”

Silas surprised her. From his pocket he took a heavy, red-jeweled key and presented it to her with a small bow.

“Don’t be silly, Dad.” Jenna laughed, deliberately not taking the key. “You don’t have to bow.”

Silas looked serious. “Maybe I should now that you’re fourteen,” he said.

“*Dad?*” Jenna began to feel concerned. What was happening? It sounded as though something was about to change, and she didn’t want it to.

Silas looked uncomfortable. “Marcia told me last week about, er . . . *her.*” He waved his hand at the increasingly affronted Bringer of the Book. “She gave me the key. She said that from your fourteenth birthday forward it is possible at any time that The Time May Be Right.”

“Right for *what?*” Jenna demanded crossly. She hated it when people arranged things without telling her and then expected her to go along with it. It took her right back to her tenth birthday, when she was suddenly taken away from her family. And, as ever, Marcia was involved.

Silas was conciliatory. “You know for what, love,” he said. “For you to be crowned Queen. You are old enough now. It doesn’t mean you are going to be, just that it is possible. And that is why this lady—”

The Bringer of the Book glared at Silas.

Silas coughed. “Ahem, I mean this very, er . . . *important, very official* lady has come today. She is the hereditary Bringer of the Book. And traditionally

you receive it in the Throne Room.” Silas caught Jenna’s gaze. She looked upset. “It’s uh . . . symbolic, you see. Of, um, of what you will be one day.”

“So why didn’t you tell me?” demanded Jenna. “Or Mum?”

Silas looked upset. “I didn’t want to spoil your birthday for you or Mum. I know how you feel about the Throne Room. I’m sorry, I suppose I should have said.”

Jenna sighed. “Oh, it’s all right, Dad. I’ll do it—as long as you come and *help me with the key*. Okay?” She gave Silas a meaningful glare.

“Ah. Okay. Right. I’ll come with you.”

The Bringer of the Book objected. “This is a private ceremony. It is not suitable for a member of the public to attend,” she said.

“He’s not a member of the public,” snapped Jenna. “He’s my dad.”

“He is *not* your father.”

Jenna exploded. “No, he’s *not*. Of course he isn’t. It’s my birthday and you wouldn’t expect my *father* to be here, would you?” Jenna took Silas’s arm. “This is my *dad*. He’s here. And he’s coming with me.” With that, Jenna and Silas slowly and sedately climbed the sweeping stairs up to the first floor. The Bringer of the Book had no alternative but to follow.

They arrived outside the huge double doors that led into the Throne Room, which occupied the very center of the Palace. The doors were covered in ancient gold leaf, worn so thin that the squares of gold showed the red beneath. Jenna thought they looked beautiful—but she had no intention of opening them. “Okay, Dad?” she said.

Silas nodded. He put the key in the lock, and Jenna thought she saw a small flash of **Magyk**—at least, she hoped she did. Silas turned the key. It went halfway around and stuck.

“It’s **Jammed**,” he said. “You try it, Jenna.”

To Jenna’s relief, the key was indeed stuck fast. “It is,” she agreed. “It’s **Jammed**.”

The Bringer of the Book wore a distinctly suspicious expression.

“Would you like to try?” Jenna asked, offering her the key.

The Bringer of the Book snatched the key, pushed it into the lock and gave it a fearsome twist. Jenna could see she meant business and hoped that Silas’s spell held out. It did. Reluctantly, after a lot of vigorous twisting and poking at the lock, the Bringer of the Book returned the key.

“Very well,” she sighed. “The ReTiring Room will do just as well.”

Jenna refrained from asking why she hadn’t said that in the first place. She figured she knew the answer already. The Bringer of the Book wanted to bask in the reflected glory of the Throne Room. Jenna had met many people like her in Queen Etheldredda’s Palace, which was where she had begun to learn how to deal with them.

The ReTiring Room was intended as a personal space for the Queen to put

on her ceremonial robes and to retreat to from the Throne Room if she needed. It was dusty and dark, but Jenna liked it and often used it as a quiet place to work. With the Bringer of the Book trailing behind her, Jenna led the way into the ReTiring Room. Silas excused himself and left; this time Jenna did not object.

The ReTiring Room was long and narrow, with one tall window at the end that looked out over Wizard Way. A shabby curtain on the right side of the room covered a door that led to the Throne Room, which was impassable due to a large plank Jenna had hammered across it. The room was extremely chilly, but a fire was laid ready in the small grate. Jenna took the tinderbox from the chimneypiece and struck a yellow flame into the dry moss at the base of the fire. She used the flame to light the candles as well, and soon the room glowed with a yellow light and looked much warmer than it actually was.

The Bringer of the Book fussily settled herself at a small desk below the window. From an array of mismatched but comfortable chairs Jenna took the chair she liked to curl up and read in—a battered red and gold one with a pile of cushions and a wonky leg—and pushed it toward the fire.

It was a long and tedious three hours but at the end of it, as she stood at the Palace door, watching the Bringer of the Book sail off down the Palace Drive, her ribbons fluttering in the cold wind that was blowing in off the river, Jenna held in her hand a small red book entitled *The Queen Rules*.

Jenna went straight back up to the ReTiring Room. She closed the door with a feeling of relief to have the place to herself once more, then pulled her chair even closer to the fire and looked at the little red leather book. It was so delicate. The pale red leather was soft to the touch, well worn and rubbed—she realized with a shiver of goose bumps—by the fingers of her mother, her grandmother and her many great-grandmothers before her. The pages, edged with gold leaf, were made of delicate paper so transparent that they were printed only on one side. The spelling was bizarre and the type was tiny and full of swirls and curlicues, which was why it had taken so long for the Bringer of the Book to read—and explain—the entire contents to Jenna. But now that she was at last alone with her book, Jenna turned to the page that she wanted to reread the most:

Protocol: Wizard Tower

(N.B. Substitute P-I-W for Queen if appropriate)

After her three-hour tutorial, Jenna now knew that “P-I-W” meant Princess-in-Waiting. There were two sections that particularly interested Jenna.

SECTION I: THE RIGHT TO KNOW

The P-I-W has a Right To Know all facts pertaining to the security and

wellbeing of the Castle and the Palace. The ExtraOrdinary Wizard (or, in absentia, the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice) is required to answer all the P-I-W's questions truthfully, fully and without delay.

Jenna smiled. She liked the sound of that, but she was willing to bet Marcia didn't. She read the second section even more carefully.

SECTION II: PALACE SECURITY

It is for the P-I-W to deem if a matter relates to Palace Security. If she deems it to be so, she may Call upon the ExtraOrdinary Wizard or the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice to assist at Any Time. This Call will be given priority over all other matters at the Wizard Tower. So Be It.

Huh, thought Jenna. Sep had obviously not read *this*.

She reread the second passage, smiling at the hand-drawn, heavy red lines below the words "P-I-W," "Any Time" and "all." It seemed that she was not the only Princess-in-Waiting to have this kind of trouble. She particularly liked what was written at the foot of the page in a different but equally determined hand: "Wizards are replaceable. The Queen is not."

Jenna uncurled herself from her chair like a cat. She got up, dampened the fire and closed the door on the ReTiring Room, leaving it to settle into its stillness once more. She would go straight to the Wizard Tower and do a bit of deeming. Right now.

On her way out, Jenna bumped into Sarah who, with the help of Billy Pot and the cook, had begun to put up bunting in the entrance hall.

"Has Dolly gone?" asked Sarah.

"Who?"

"Dolly Bingle. She works in the fish shop down by the New Quay. I *knew* I'd seen her before. Funny how different she looks with a bit of gold flummery and her hair out of a fish net."

"The Bringer of the Book was *Dolly Bingle*?" Jenna was stunned.

"Yes, it was. And Dolly knows perfectly well who I am. I shall expect some cheap haddock when I next go there," said Sarah with a wicked grin.

Chapter 8

Chemistry



On the way down the Palace drive Jenna remembered her walk with Septimus the previous evening. The memory still upset her but now, with *The Queen Rules* safely in her pocket, it annoyed her too. Septimus had treated her as though she was no more than an irritating child. And here she was chasing after him again, about to give him the opportunity to behave in exactly the same way. Why did she need his opinion on what was going on in the Palace attic? He wasn't the only one who knew stuff—there was someone much nearer who would actually be glad to help.

A few minutes later Jenna was standing outside Larry's Dead Languages Translation Service. She took a deep breath and readied herself to step inside. Jenna didn't like Larry and Larry clearly didn't like her. However, she did not take this personally because, so far as she could tell, Larry didn't like *anyone*. Which made it very odd, she thought, that Beetle had not only taken a job as Larry's transcription scribe but, now that his mother had moved down to the Port, was living there too.

Bracing herself for the caustic remarks that always accompanied her entrance, Jenna put her shoulder to the shop door and shoved (the door was notoriously stiff—Larry liked people to really want to get into his shop). The door flew open with unusual ease, Jenna hurtled across the shop and crashed into a pile of manuscripts on which a tall, expensive-looking vase was precariously balanced.

Accompanied by the sound of Larry's throaty chuckle coming from the upstairs gallery, Beetle performed an impressive flying catch and saved the vase just before it crashed to the floor.

He helped Jenna to her feet. "Hey, are you all right?" he asked.

Winded, Jenna nodded.

Beetle took Jenna's arm and led her through the shop to the library at the back, saying loudly, "I have your translations ready, Princess Jenna. Perhaps you'd like to take a look?"

As they disappeared out of Larry's earshot, Beetle said, "I'm really, really sorry about the door. I didn't have time to warn you. Larry oiled it yesterday afternoon and set up the vase on top of the manuscripts. Since then he's sat upstairs in the gallery waiting for people to do exactly what you did just now. He's charged three people for breaking the vase—and they've paid."

"Three?"

"Yep. He sticks it back together after each time."

Bemused, Jenna shook her head. "Beetle, I really don't know why you want to work here—let alone *live* here. Especially as Marcia offered you a place at the Wizard Tower."

Beetle shrugged. "I love the old manuscripts and their weird languages. And I'm learning all kinds of stuff; you'd be amazed at what people bring in. Besides, I'm not **Magykal**. The Wizard Tower would drive me nuts."

Jenna nodded. The Wizard Tower would drive her nuts too. But so would working for Larry.

As if he'd read her mind, Beetle said, "You know, after working for Jillie Djinn, Larry's not so bad. And I like living on Wizard Way. It's fun. Fancy a **FizzFroot**?"

Jenna smiled. "You got one in chocolate?"

Beetle looked crestfallen. "Sorry, no. They only come in fruit flavors."

Jenna took her much-loved Chocolate **Charm** from her pocket. "We could try them with this," she said.

"Okay," said Beetle a little doubtfully. "Larry!" he called out. "I'm going for my break."

Jenna heard a gruff, "Ten minutes and *no more*," from the gallery and followed Beetle to a small, incredibly filthy kitchen right at the back of the shop.

"Happy Birthday," said Beetle. He looked embarrassed. "I . . . I've got something for you but it's not wrapped up yet. I wasn't expecting to see you until this evening."

Jenna looked embarrassed too. "Oh. Gosh. That's not why I came. I wasn't expecting anything."

"Oh. And, um, sorry about the mess," Beetle said, suddenly seeing the kitchen through Jenna's eyes. "Larry gets really angry if I clear it up. He says

mold is good for you.”

“Slime too?” asked Jenna, looking at a bag of carrots that were pooling across the floor.

Beetle felt mortified. “Let’s go to Wizard Sandwiches,” he said. “I’m owed some time.”

Some ten minutes later—after Jenna had witnessed a new and impressive Beetle telling Larry he was taking his lunch hour *now* and it was actually going to be one whole hour—they were sitting at a small window table in Wizard Sandwiches’ newly opened upstairs café. They made a striking couple. Beetle wore his blue and gold admiral’s jacket and his thick black hair was, for once, behaving just the way he wanted it to. Jenna’s gold circlet shone softly in the light of the small candle that stood in a pool of wax on their table. She sat with her red, fur-lined cloak still pulled around her, slowly warming up after the chill of the outside, while she gazed around the exuberantly painted room with its steamed-up windows. Jenna noticed with relief that no one was staring at her (the members of the Wizard Sandwiches Cooperative did not believe in hierarchical systems and acted accordingly). She felt like an everyday person—a grown-up everyday person *going out to lunch*. Even better than that, she had her happy and excited birthday feeling back.

“What would you like?” asked Beetle. He offered Jenna the menu, which was covered with Wizard Sandwiches in-jokes and colorful drawings of sandwiches but offered no clue as to what the sandwiches might contain.

Jenna picked a tall, triangular stack of small sandwiches called “Edifice.” Beetle chose a large cube-shaped sandwich called “Chemistry.” He took the menu and went up to the counter to order (Wizard Sandwiches did not believe in the servitude of waitstaff. This also kept the wage bills down.) Beetle returned carrying two WizzFizz specials, which were as near to a **FizzFroot** as it was possible to get. He set a pink and green drink in front of Jenna with a flourish.

“Minty strawberry,” he said. “It’s new.”

“Thank you,” Jenna said, feeling suddenly shy. Being out with Beetle like this felt different from being with Beetle in the everyday way she had become used to. It seemed that Beetle felt the same, as for some minutes they both looked intently out the window, although there was little to see apart from a wintry Wizard Way and a couple of people scurrying along with boxes of candles in preparation for the Longest Night illuminations.

Eventually Jenna spoke. “Actually, I wanted to ask you something,” she said.

“Did you?” Beetle felt pleased.

“Yes. I asked Sep last night and he won’t do *anything*.”

Beetle felt rather less pleased. Jenna did not notice. She carried on, “Sep’s

weird at the moment, don't you think? I've asked him a few times now and he's always made excuses."

Beetle now felt distinctly *un*-pleased. He was tired of being second best to Septimus. It was, in fact, one of the reasons why he had refused Marcia's offer of a place at the Wizard Tower.

"Edifice! Chemistry!" A shout came from the counter.

Beetle got up to collect the sandwiches, leaving Jenna with a vague feeling that she had said something wrong. He returned with a teetering stack of triangles and a huge cube.

"Wow," said Jenna. "Thank you." She tentatively took the top triangle off the pile and bit into it. It was a delicious mixture of chopped smoked fish and cucumber with Wizard Sandwiches' famous sandwich sauce.

Beetle regarded his large cube with dismay. It was one solid lump of bread made from half a loaf. In it were drilled nine holes filled with different colored jams and sauces, and from the center hole a wisp of smoke was rising. Beetle knew at once he had made a mistake; he just *knew* that when he tried to eat it, the colored gloop would run down his face and drip on the table and he would look like a kid. Why hadn't he chosen something simple?

Beetle began sawing at his cube. The multicolored gloop ran across his plate and swirled into a thick rainbow puddle. Beetle began to turn pink. His sandwich was an utter disaster.

"So . . . um, what is it you wanted Sep to do?" he asked, trying to deflect attention from the accident on his plate.

"There's something going on in the Palace. In the attic," said Jenna. "No one's allowed up there since that stuff with Dad and the **Sealed Room**—even I don't go there—but sometimes when I'm in my room I hear footsteps above my head."

"Probably rats," said Beetle, staring at "Chemistry" in dismay. "There're some big ones down by the river."

"It's *human*," whispered Jenna.

"But some ghosts make footstep noises," said Beetle. "It's one of the easiest things a ghost can **Cause**. And you have a *load* of ghosts at the Palace."

Jenna shook her head. That was what Silas and Sarah had said too.

"But Beetle, someone is using those stairs—the dust is worn away from the middle of the treads. I thought it was Mum, as she does wander around a bit at night when she can't sleep, but when I asked her about it she said she hadn't been up there for ages. So yesterday I decided to go up and have a look."

Beetle looked up from the mangled mess on his plate. "What did you see?"

Jenna told Beetle what had happened the previous evening. By the time she had finished, Beetle wore a look of consternation.

"That's not good. Sounds like you might have an **Infestation**," he said.

“What, like cockroaches or something?” Jenna was puzzled.

“No. I didn’t mean *that* kind of infestation. It’s what we used to call it in the Manuscriptorium. I suppose Wizards might have a different name for it.”

“For what?”

Beetle also lowered his voice—it wasn’t good to talk about the **Darke** in a public place. “For when something **Darke** moves into someone’s house. In fact, it sounds like something might be setting up a”—he glanced around to check that no one was listening—“a **Darke Domaine**.”

Jenna shivered. She didn’t like the sound of that at all. “What’s a **Darke Domaine**?” she whispered.

“It’s like a kind of foggy pool of **Darke**. It can get really powerful if it’s not gotten rid of. It grows by drawing strength from people, and it lures them in with promises of all the things they long for.”

“You mean there might *really* be something nasty in the attic?” Jenna looked scared. She hadn’t quite believed it until now.

From what Jenna had just told him, Beetle thought it was highly likely. “Well, yes. You know, I think you should really get Marcia to have a look.”

“But if I ask Marcia to come today, Mum will throw a fit.” Jenna thought for a moment. “Beetle, I’d really appreciate your advice first. If you say it’s a”—she too glanced around—“*you-know-what*, then I’ll go straight to Marcia. I promise.”

Beetle could not refuse. “Okay,” he said.

“Oh, *thank you*.” Jenna smiled.

Beetle took out his treasured timepiece. “Suppose I come round, let’s see . . . about half-past three. Gives me time to pick up a **Safe Charm** from the **Charm** desk at the Wizard Tower. It will still be daylight then. You don’t want to go near that kind of stuff after dark.”

It was then that Jenna remembered that the last time Beetle helped her, he had lost his job. “But what about Larry? What about your job?”

Beetle grinned. “Don’t worry, I’ll fix it with Larry. He owes me a lot of time. And Larry’s okay as long as you tell him what you’re doing. He’s nothing like Jillie Djinn, so don’t you worry about *that*. Half-past three at the Palace Gate?”

“Oh, thank you, Beetle. *Thank you*.” Jenna regarded the gooey mess on Beetle’s plate, which was beginning to fizz alarmingly. She pushed her stack of sandwiches to the middle of the table. “Let’s share,” she said. “I can’t possibly eat them all.”

Chapter 9

Charming



Beetle and Jenna emerged from the warmth of Wizard Sandwiches into the gray chill of Wizard Way. A few stray snowflakes drifted down and Jenna pulled her red fur-lined cloak tightly around her. Beetle buttoned up his admiral's jacket and wound his long woolly scarf around his neck.

"Hey, Beetle!" came a shout.

A tall, impossibly thin young man was walking toward them from the upper reaches of Wizard Way. He waved and picked up speed.

"Good morning . . . Princess Jenna," the young man said, out of breath. He bowed his head and Jenna felt embarrassed.

"Wotcha, Foxy," said Beetle.

"Wotcha, Beet," replied Foxy, stamping his feet and rubbing his hands together. His long, pointy nose glowed like a bright red triangle set in his thin, pale face and his teeth chattered. He looked cold in his gray scribe's tunic. "Ser-sausage sandwich?" he asked.

Beetle shook his head. "Not today, Foxy. Gotta go and get a **SafeCharm** from the Wizard Tower."

Foxy grinned, his slightly pointy teeth shining in the warm light from Wizard Sandwiches' windows. "Hey, don't go to the competition. You're talking to the Chief **Charm** Scribe here."

"Since when?"

"Since this morning at eight fifty-two *precisely*," Foxy replied with a grin,

mimicking his boss, Miss Jillie Djinn, Chief Hermetic Scribe, to perfection.

“Wow. Hey, congratulations,” said Beetle.

“And it would be an honor, Mr. Beetle, if you would consent to be my first commission.”

“Okey dokey.” Beetle grinned.

“We’ll just run through the formalities, shall we?”

Beetle looked uneasy. “Actually Foxy, I don’t really want to go into the Manuscriptorium.”

“No need. I have, as of this moment, in my capacity as Chief **Charm** Scribe, instigated the Manuscriptorium’s pioneering mobile **Charm** service.” Foxy took what Beetle recognized as a standard-issue scribe notebook from his book pocket and unclipped the pencil from its holder.

“Okay,” said Foxy, pencil poised. “Just a few questions, Mr. Beetle, and then I guarantee we will have the perfect **SafeCharm** for you. Unlike the WT **Charm** Desk One-**Charm**-Fits-All policy, we tailor our **Charms** to your *personal* requirements. Inside or out?”

“Um . . . inside,” answered Beetle, somewhat taken aback by Foxy’s sales patter.

“Up or down?”

“What do you mean?”

“I dunno. Sounds good though, don’t you think?”

“*Foxy.*” Beetle laughed. “For a weird moment I thought you actually knew what you were doing.”

“I *do* know what I’m doing,” protested Foxy. “Just trying to make it more exciting, that’s all. *Inside* is all I need to know.”

“What about the strength?” asked Beetle.

“Hmm . . .” said Foxy. “Forgot that. Small, medium or large . . . no, I don’t mean that.”

“Minor, major or maximum,” Beetle supplied.

“Yeah, that’s it. So waddy you want?”

Beetle glanced at Jenna. “Maximum,” said Jenna. “Just in case.”

“Okey dokey. I’ll see what we got. Delivery to place of work in one hour okay?”

“Thanks. Just ask for me. Say it’s business.”

“Will do, Beet. Sausage sandwich tomorrow then?”

“Yep. See you, Foxo.”

With that, Foxy—looking not unlike a large heron picking its way through the shallows—headed for the multicolored door of Wizard Sandwiches.

Ten minutes later Jenna was wandering through the Northern Traders’ Market. She was looking for a fun birthday present for Septimus, but she was also avoiding going home until her appointment with Beetle. Jenna knew that if

she went back to the Palace, Sarah would find her and she would end up in yet another discussion about the letters from Simon. Unlike Sarah Heap, Jenna had read her letter from Simon only once and had left it screwed up on her bedroom floor. When Sarah had asked her what he'd said, Jenna had been curt. "Sorry," she'd replied.

Every year the Castle inhabitants flocked to the Traders' Market to stock up on winter provisions of woolen cloth, candles, lanterns, salted fish, dried meats and fruits, fur and sheepskins before the Big Freeze blew in and cut off the Castle for six weeks or so. People also ate the hot pies, roasted nuts, and crumbly cakes and drank gallons of the huge varieties of spiced mulled drinks for sale. And when they were weary of shopping, they would sit and watch jugglers, fire dancers and acrobats tumbling in the roped-off space in front of the Traders' Office.

Despite the apparent chaos, the market was meticulously organized. Rigorous standards were applied to all traders, pitches were allocated under a strict licensing system and the marketplace was divided into sectors according to the kinds of goods sold. Generally the Northern Traders' Market was an orderly affair, but the final day was a frenetic time and the market was packed. Crowds of people moved from stall to stall, grabbing bargains, buying things they didn't really need "just in case," taking a last chance to buy MidWinter feast presents. The tall, pale-eyed Northern Traders cried out their wares at the tops of their voices, trying to sell all the odds and ends that no one had wanted—up until now. The urgency in their lilting singsong voices carried over the hubbub and reminded people that the MidWinter Feast was only a few days away, and then the Big Freeze was coming.

Every year of her life—bar one, the year she had turned ten—Jenna had visited the craft section, known as Makers' Mile. Makers' Mile was a relatively new section of the market; it extended out of the official market place, straggled along the road and ran around the outside of the large, brick-paved circle at the end of Ceremonial Way. As Jenna had grown older she would wander along the Mile, silently planning her perfect present list for her birthday. She had rarely received anything on the list, but it didn't take away the fun of dreaming. This year Jenna had found nothing remotely funny to give to Septimus in the main market and decided to head out along Makers' Mile for a last visit. As she elbowed her way toward it through the fur and prepared skins area and caught the overpowering smell of Foryx fur, Jenna noted wryly that the normal Castle respect for the Princess did not apply in the market.

At last she emerged into the infinitely more sweet-smelling Makers' Mile. With her old feeling of birthday anticipation, Jenna began to wander along, browsing the stalls. By the time she had walked around the circle twice, Jenna had still not found anything funny to give Septimus, but she suspected the

reason had more to do with how she was feeling about Septimus than any of the goods that were on offer. She decided to head for her favorite stall—silver jewelry and lucky charms—which she had spotted near the Makers’ Mile Tally Hut.

The stall belonged to Sophie Barley, a talented young Port jeweler. (Unlike the rest of the market, Makers’ Mile had stalls available to those who were not Northern Traders. They were mainly taken by those who lived in the Port, as Castle people preferred to buy from the market rather than sell.) Jenna was surprised to find that instead of the friendly Sophie, the stall was manned by three odd-looking women dressed in varying shades of black. Behind the stall, in an old armchair, was slumped an elderly woman with her face plastered in thick white makeup and her eyes closed. The old woman was watched over by a slight figure swathed in a muddy black cloak with a voluminous hood.

“Ooh, it’s the *Princess!*” Jenna heard an excited whisper escape from beneath the hood.

“Leave this to me, dingbat,” came the response from the fiercest-looking woman in the stall, who was clearly the boss and who—Jenna saw as she briefly glanced up—had a very nasty stare.

The boss eyeballed Jenna. “*How* may I help you?” she asked. The two other stallholders—a lanky woman with her hair piled on top of her head like a spike and a short, dumpy one with food stains down her front—nudged each other and giggled behind the boss’s back.

The last thing Jenna wanted was help. Sophie always let her browse and try on anything she liked. And Sophie certainly didn’t snatch the first thing she picked up and say, “That will be half a crown. We don’t give change. Wrap it up, Daphne,” which is what the boss-with-the-stare did with the delicate heart-shaped pendant with tiny wings that Jenna had lifted from its velvet pad.

“But I don’t want to buy it,” Jenna protested.

“So what’d you pick it up for?”

“I just wanted to look at it.”

“You can look at it on the table. We charge extra for *picking up*.”

Jenna stared at the woman. She was sure she’d seen her somewhere before—and her sidekicks too.

“Where’s Sophie?” she asked.

“Who?”

“Sophie. Sophie Barley. It’s *her* stall. Where is she?”

The boss-with-the-stare bared a row of blackened teeth. “She couldn’t make it. She’s a bit . . . *tied up* at the moment.” Her two sidekicks giggled nastily.

Jenna began to move away. The jewelry didn’t seem nearly as nice without Sophie.

“*Wait a minute!*” a high voice shouted urgently. Jenna stopped and turned.

“We’ve got some lovely **Charms**. And we don’t charge for picking up **Charms**, *do we?*”

“Shut up, Dorinda!” The boss-with-the-stare wheeled around and glared at the hooded figure standing beside the old woman. “*I’m* doing this.” The boss turned back to face Jenna and her mouth twitched into a kind of U-shape which, Jenna realized, was meant to be a smile. “We do indeed have a delightful new range of **Charms**, Princess. Very pretty. Quite *charming*, in fact.” A strange spluttering ensued, which Jenna thought was probably meant to be laughter, although quite possibly the woman was choking on something. It was hard to tell.

The boss indicated two little wooden boxes at the front of the stall. Intrigued, Jenna looked at them—they were so very different from the rest of Sophie’s jewelry. Nestled on white down inside each box was a tiny jewellike bird. The birds had a beautiful greenish-blue sheen and shimmered like the kingfishers Jenna had once loved to watch from her window in the Ramblings. Despite herself, Jenna was fascinated. She gazed at the birds, amazed at their minute feathers, which were so detailed that she could almost believe the birds were real. Tentatively she reached out a finger and stroked the plumage of one of the birds—and snatched her hand away as if it had been bitten. *The bird was real*. It was soft and warm and lay breathing terrified, fast breaths.

The old woman in the armchair snapped her eyes open like a doll that has just been sat up. “Pick up the birdie, dearie,” she said in a wheedling whine.

Jenna stepped back from the stall and shook her head.

The boss-with-the-stare swung around and glared at the old woman. “I said *leave it to me*, didn’t I?” she snapped. “Idiot!”

“*Oooh!*” A gasp of thrilled horror came from the hooded figure.

The old woman was not as decrepit as Jenna had taken her to be. She rose menacingly from her armchair and pointed a long, dirty fingernail at the boss-with-the-stare. “Never, *ever*, talk to me like that again,” she hissed.

The boss-with-the-stare went as white as the old woman’s plastered face. “Sorry, Wi—” She stopped herself hurriedly. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

Suddenly Jenna realized who the stallholders were. “Hey!” she exclaimed. “You’re—”

The boss-with-the-stare leaned forward and glared at Jenna. “Yeah—*what?*” she challenged.

Jenna decided against saying she thought the women were witches from the Port Witch Coven. “Not very nice,” she said, a little lamely. Then she made a hasty exit, leaving all five witches—for she was right—cackling uproariously. The Port Witch Coven watched Jenna disappear into the crowd.

“I knew it wouldn’t work,” Daphne—the dumpy one with the food stains—

said morosely. “Princesses are hard to catch. The Wendrons tried and they couldn’t get her.”

“Pah!” snorted the boss-with-the-stare, whose name was Linda. “The Wendrons are fools. They’ve got a few lessons to learn. And *I’m* looking forward to teaching them.” She laughed unpleasantly.

A plaintive wail came from inside the hooded figure sitting beside the old woman—who was, of course, the Witch Mother of the Port Witch Coven. “But she didn’t take the bird, she didn’t take the bird!”

“And you can shut up too, Dorinda,” snarled Linda. “Any-way, it doesn’t matter—she touched the bird, didn’t she?”

Linda leaned over the two little birds. She took a deep breath in, then breathed out, sending what looked like a long stream of gray smoke curling around them. The blanket of breath settled over the tiny boxes and the witches gathered around to watch. A few moments later fluttering could be seen, and two minute, iridescent birds flew up from their boxes. Fast as a cat, Linda snatched the birds out of the air and held them up triumphantly, one in each hand.

The other witches looked on, impressed.

From somewhere inside her tattered black robes, Linda drew out a small silver cage on a chain, as delicate and beautiful as any of the jewelry in the stall. She unscrewed the bottom of the cage, opened her right hand and slammed the cage down over the bird. Then she poked the panicking bird into the cage with a prodding finger—it was a tight fit even though the bird was tiny. Quickly Linda tipped the cage upside down and screwed the floor back on, then she swung the cage over her neck so that it hung dangling by its chain like an exotic pendant. Inside the cage the bird blinked in shock.

“Hostage,” Linda informed the other witches. They nodded, impressed, and—as they always were with Linda—slightly scared.

Linda held her left fist up to the cage and slowly unfurled her fingers. Inside her fist sat the other bird, trembling. It gave a despairing tweet at the sight of the caged bird and fell silent. Linda raised the bird up to her eyes and began to mutter in a low, threatening monotone. The bird stood on her palm, transfixed. Linda finished whatever ghastly thing she was saying and the bird flew up and hovered, looking down at the silver cage dangling from Linda’s grubby neck. Linda pointed a long-nailed finger at the fluttering scrap of blue and the bird vanished. **UnSeen**, it flew off on an erratic course, which followed Jenna’s path as she headed for the Palace.

“Lovebirds!” Linda commented scathingly. “*Love*. What rubbish.” She laughed. “But useful rubbish. I *still* have that bird in the palm of my hand.” She held out her empty hand and snapped her fingers shut. “*And* the Princess.”

Chapter 10

Upstairs



Jenna and her invisible bird reached the Palace Gate at the same time as Beetle. Beetle looked flustered.

“Thought I was going to be late,” he puffed. “Foxy . . . Chief **Charm** Scribe, my foot.”

“You mean he isn’t?” Jenna was surprised.

“Well, he is—if Jillie Djinn would only let him. Foxy said when he got back she’d taken all the **Charms** into the Hermetic Chamber for what she called *stocktaking* and wouldn’t let him have them.”

Jenna raised her eyes to heaven. “That *woman*. You’re well out of that place, Beetle.” She looked concerned. “But that means you haven’t got a **SafeCharm**.”

Beetle grinned. “That’s okay. I probably won’t need one. Anyway, I’ve got this. Foxy found it in the Pending Cupboard.” He took a small, slightly curved, flat piece of wood from the inside top pocket of his admiral’s jacket and showed it to Jenna. “Foxy reckons it’ll be more use than a **SafeCharm**. He said a sea captain came in a couple of days ago and swapped it for a love **Charm**. It’s a heartbeat thingy. You put it next to your heart like so . . .” Beetle put the **Charm** back into his top left pocket. “Foxy says that if you get really scared it knows and brings you back to the last place you were safe. Shall we get going?”

Beetle and Jenna walked up the Palace drive under a dark cloud that had

blown in from the Port. Jenna did not want to meet Sarah right then, so she took the path around the back of the Palace. By the time they reached the small door into the turret at the far end, a cold wind was blustering up from the river and fat drops of sleety rain were beginning to fall. Jenna pushed open the door and they stepped inside. The door slammed in a sudden gust, the noise echoing down the Long Walk.

It was unusually dark inside the Palace. When Nicko had at long last returned safely home, Jenna had celebrated having both Septimus and Nicko in the Castle once more by asking Maizie Smalls, who lit the torches in Wizard Way, to live at the Palace. In return for two rooms looking out on the river and supper every night, Maizie had agreed to light a candle in every room in the Palace and to light the Long Walk with rushlights. But Maizie did not start “operation light up,” as she called it, until a half hour before sunset. And there was, despite the gloom, still more than an hour to go before then.

Jenna always found the Long Walk—with its odd assortment of objects lining the walls—creepy, and that afternoon, in the failing light, she found it particularly so. So when Beetle took his old Ice Tunnel lamp (one of his mementos from his time at the Manuscriptorium) and flicked on its eerie blue light just as they passed a trio of grinning shrunken heads, Jenna shrieked out loud, then clapped her hand to her mouth.

“Sorry,” she said, a little embarrassed. “Got a bit spooked.”

“*Whoooo*,” said Beetle in a mock ghostly voice, holding the light beneath his chin and grinning.

“Oh *don’t*, Beetle—that’s even more horrible!”

Beetle swung the light away from his face and shone it down the wide, amazingly long corridor. Strong as its beam was, it did not reach the end. “Actually, I feel a bit spooked too,” he said in a half whisper. He glanced behind him. “I keep thinking something is kind of fluttering behind us . . . but I can’t see anything.”

Jenna looked around too. She had felt the same thing though she hadn’t wanted to say anything. The word *fluttering* reminded her of the two little birds lying trembling in their boxes. Loudly—to reassure herself more than anything—she said, “No, there’s nothing there.”

The **UnSeen** little bird rested a few minutes on one of the shrunken heads, its tiny wings tired with having to keep airborne for so long, and then continued following Jenna.

They walked on quickly past the door to Sarah Heap’s sitting room and a door with PALACE PAMPHLETS INC. scrawled on it in chalk, which was Silas’s office. Jenna was pleased to see both rooms were empty. They soon arrived at some narrow backstairs and climbed up to the first floor of the Palace. Here were mainly suites of private rooms at the rear of the building looking out over the river, and more public rooms—including the locked Throne Room—at the

front. The wide upstairs corridor had a hushed, subdued quality to it. Thick, dusty curtains hung down in front of many of the draughty windows and doors and down the center ran what was known as the longest carpet in the world, which had actually been made there, in the corridor, by an itinerant group of carpet weavers.

They walked silently through the muffled gloom. Jenna was not expecting to see anyone but as they went past Maizie Small's room, the door opened and Maizie rushed out.

"Oh!" said Maizie, surprised. "Oh, hello, Princess Jenna. And Beetle. I didn't expect to bump into you." Maizie cast a disapproving glance at Beetle. "Not *upstairs*."

Beetle went pink but he hoped it was too dark for anyone to notice.

"You're early, Maizie," Jenna said, rather irritated.

"It's the Longest Night tonight, Princess Jenna. I have to get every torch lit by nightfall, and I always help out with some of the displays on the Way. It's a crazy rush." Maizie took a small timepiece out of her pocket and consulted it hurriedly. "Now then, I've lit all new candles upstairs, and Mr. Pot's coming in to do the downstairs. You're all sorted." A loud spattering of sleet on one of the roof lanterns made everyone look up. "Shocking day to be out," said Maizie. "I must be off."

Beetle and Jenna walked on in an awkward silence past the wide corridor that led to the large double doors—and the ghost of Sir Hereward—guarding Jenna's bedroom. The faint figure of Sir Hereward raised his one ghostly arm in salute as they hurried by, and not long after they arrived at the foot of the attic stairs.

"Oh!" exclaimed Jenna. The entrance to the stairs was covered by an old red velvet curtain, which had been skewered to the wall by an assortment of large rusty nails. Jenna recognized Silas Heap's handiwork immediately. "Dad must have just done this," she whispered. "So he *did* listen to what I said . . ."

Beetle regarded the old curtain. "It's a bit makeshift," he said.

"That's Dad for you."

"I suppose he's put some kind of **SafetyGate** on there," said Beetle. "And he's nailed that up to hide it. **SafetyGates** do look a bit weird sometimes. Shall I have a look?"

Jenna nodded. "Yes please, Beetle."

Beetle took out his pocket knife. He unfolded the tool for pulling-long-rusty-nails-out-of-plaster and set to work doing exactly that. Immediately a great lump of plaster came off the wall and the curtain fell on his head—*crump*.

"Oof!" gasped Beetle as the curtain enveloped him in a cloud of dust and dead spiders. "Oof—eurgh. Gerroff! *Gerroff me!*"

The curtain did not do as requested and Beetle, convinced that he had been

attacked by something nasty from the attic, began stabbing at it with his pulling-long-rusty-nails-out-of-plaster tool. “Argh . . . *help!*”

“Beetle, Beetle!” yelled Jenna, trying to pull the curtain off. “Beetle, stand *still*. Stop fighting!”

Finally her voice got through. “Huh?” said the curtain.

“Beetle, please, just stay still a moment. And stop trying to kill the curtain.”

The curtain settled down and Jenna heaved it off its prey in a cloud of dust.

“*Atchooo!*” Beetle sneezed.

Jenna regarded the pile of shredded curtain on the floor. “Beetle: one. Curtain: zero.” She laughed.

“Yeah,” said Beetle, not quite so amused. He dusted off his admiral’s jacket and then tentatively waved his arm through the gap that the curtain had covered.

“There’s no **SafetyGate** there,” he said. “Or if there was, it’s come away with the curtain. I s’pose it could have been **Bonded** to it. Come to think of it, it did tingle a bit when it landed on me. That’s what made me think I was . . . well, being attacked. It wasn’t panic, you know. It felt really weird.”

“So . . . if Dad *did* put some kind of barrier up and now it’s gone, maybe we should go and tell him?” said Jenna.

“I could have a look first,” said Beetle, badly needing to do something constructive after the curtain fight.

“Well . . .”

Unwilling to let his chance to impress Jenna slip away, Beetle headed up the stairs quickly, before she had time to say no.

Jenna’s voice came after him. “Beetle, maybe you shouldn’t . . .”

Beetle stopped and turned. “It’s fine,” he said.

“It doesn’t *look* fine,” said Jenna. She could see the familiar shifting darkness hovering at the top of the stairs.

“I’ll just have a quick look so that we can tell Marcia exactly what’s going on,” said Beetle.

Jenna followed Beetle up the stairs. He stopped and barred her way. “No, Jenna,” he said rather formally. “Let me do this. You did ask me, after all.”

Jenna looked past Beetle up to the top of the stairs. “But Beetle, that weird misty stuff is still there. I’d forgotten how scary it is. I think we should get Dad, or maybe even Marcia. I really do.”

Beetle did not want to give way. “It’s all right,” he insisted. “I said I’d have a look and I will. Okay?”

There was something in the way Beetle stood that made him seem so solid, so commanding, that made Jenna step back.

“Okay,” she said reluctantly. “But please . . . be careful.”

“Of course I will.” Beetle pulled out a long chain from his admiral’s coat pocket, unclipped his timepiece and placed it in Jenna’s hand. “I’m only

going to be a few seconds; I'll just have a quick look and see what's going on. If I'm not back in . . . oh, three minutes . . . you can go and get Silas, okay?"

Jenna nodded uncertainly.

Beetle set off up the long, straight flight of stairs, aware that Jenna was watching his every move. As he drew closer to the top, a feeling of fear came over him and he stopped. In front of him, no more than three steps away, was a wall of a shifting, dancing, swirling blackness, which clearly was not just late winter afternoon darkness mixed with some old spell vapors that, deep down, Beetle had hoped it would be.

"Can you see anything?" Jenna's voice drifted up to him. It already sounded far away.

"No . . . not really."

"Maybe you should come down."

Beetle thought that too. But when he looked back and saw Jenna far below, gazing up at him expectantly, he knew he had to go on. And so, determined not to act scared in front of Jenna *again*, Beetle forced himself to take the last few steps to the top of the stairs.

At the foot of the stairs Jenna saw a few tendrils of darkness move out and curl around Beetle's feet. At the top of the stairs Beetle was overwhelmed by a sudden desire to step into the darkness. He was convinced that his father was waiting for him there. He knew he would find him if only he would step into the swirling gray mist. And so he did. He took a step forward—and disappeared.

Jenna watched Beetle go. She looked down at his timepiece and began to count the minutes. Above her a small, invisible bird noiselessly fluttered, counting long bird minutes, waiting and watching for the moment it could bring the Princess home to its imprisoned mate.

Chapter 11

A Darke Domaine



Beetle stepped into the gloom and a wave of happiness came over him. Suddenly he knew that his father was not dead from a spider bite—as his mother and a well-worn, faded letter of condolence from the Port authorities had always told him. His father was *alive*. Not only alive but here in this very place, waiting to see him—his son.

Feeling as though he was walking in lead boots beneath a dark and swirling sea, Beetle moved dreamily deeper into the gloom. Everything felt muffled and his breath came slowly. Indistinct shadows of **Things**—although Beetle did not see them as such—moved and swayed on the edge of his vision, plucking at his clothes, pushing him forward. Feeling that this was the biggest moment in his life, Beetle walked slowly, almost reverentially, knowing that all he had to do was to push open the right door and he would find the person that he always had longed to meet.

Beetle progressed along the seemingly endless corridor, passing rooms piled high with old mattresses, bedsteads and broken furniture—but not one containing Mr. Beetle. As Beetle neared the end, he heard the sound of a sneeze. His heart leaped. This was it. The sneeze belonged to his father—he *knew* it. What had his mother so often told him? *If only your father had not been allergic to just about everything, he would never have swelled up like a balloon when that spider bit him and he would still be alive today.* And here, at the end of the corridor, was his father—sneezing just like his mother said

he always did. Nervously Beetle approached the room where the sneeze had come from. The door was half open and through it he could see a figure lying on a narrow bed, the blankets pulled up around his ears. As Beetle tiptoed in, the figure shook with another violent sneeze. Beetle stopped. The words he had longed to say, but he had never had anyone to say them to, sat on the tip of his tongue. He took a deep breath and let them go.

“Hello, Dad. It’s me, B—”

“Whaa?” The figure in the bed sat up.

“You!” gasped Beetle, shocked. “*You*. But you’re not my . . .”

Merrin Meredith, hair sticking up on end, nose red raw, looked even more shocked. He sneezed violently and blew his nose on the bedsheet.

Beetle came to his senses and realized that he was not *ever* going to see his father. A great feeling of loss swept over him, which was quickly replaced by fear. His mind cleared and he suddenly knew what he had done—he had walked into a **Darke Domaine**. Beetle forced himself to stay calm. He looked at Merrin, who was a pathetic sight, hunched up in bed. His long, greasy hair straggled over a fresh crop of pimples, his thin, bony fingers played nervously with the blanket, while his swollen and discolored left thumb sported the heavy Two-Faced Ring that Beetle remembered him wearing in what he now thought of as the old days in the Manuscriptorium.

*It’s only Merrin Meredith, Beetle told himself. He’s a total dingbat. He couldn’t do a decent **Darke Domaine** in a million years.*

But Beetle could not quite convince himself of this. The scary thing was, as soon as he had walked into Merrin’s room, he had come to his senses. And if Merrin really was **Engendering** a **Darke Domaine**, then that was exactly what Beetle would have expected to happen. Merrin would be at the very center of the **Domaine**—in its eye—where all is calm and free of **Darke** disturbances. One way to test it was to step outside the room, but Beetle was loath to risk it. He knew that in a **Darke Domaine** your sense of time and space could change. In what might seem like a few steps you could actually be walking miles—sometimes hundreds of miles. And it had indeed felt like a long, long walk down the corridor. Supposing he was no longer in the Palace attic? He could be anywhere—in the Badlands, in Bleak Creek, in Dungeon Number One—*anywhere*.

Beetle decided that his only chance was to convince Merrin that his **Darke Domaine** had failed and get Merrin to walk out with him. That way he’d have a safe passage back. It would be tricky, but it might just work. Taking care not to lie—because lies can fuel anything **Darke**—Beetle took a deep breath and launched into the attack.

“Merrin Meredith, what are you doing in the Palace?” he demanded.

“*Atchoo!* I could say the same to you. Someone *else* fired you, have they? Got nothing better to do than go snooping in people’s bedrooms?”

“You’d know all about snooping,” Beetle retorted. “And as for being fired—I hear Jillie Djinn’s at last seen sense and fired *you*. What took her so long I don’t know.”

“Stupid cow,” sniffed Merrin.

Beetle did not disagree.

“Anyway, she didn’t fire me—not for long, anyway. Jillie haddock-face Djinn does what *I* say now, because I’ve got *this*.” Merrin jabbed his left thumb in the air, taunting Beetle with the Two-Faced Ring—a thick gold ring with two evil-looking faces carved from dark green jade.

Beetle looked at the ring disdainfully. “Gothyk Grotto junk,” he said scornfully.

“That shows how much *you* know, beetlebrain,” Merrin retorted. “This is the *real thing*. Those stupid scribes don’t dare mess with me anymore. I call the shots at that dump.” Merrin was enjoying boasting to Beetle. Surreptitiously, he slipped his hand under his pillow to check—for the twentieth time that day—that *The Darke Index* was still there. It was. The small but deadly book that Merrin had acquired during his time working for Simon Heap at the Observatory—and which had led him to the Two-Faced Ring—felt crumpled and slightly damp to the touch, but it gave Merrin a sudden burst of confidence. “Soon I’ll be calling the shots in the whole Castle. That stupid Septimus Heap and his pathetic dragon had better watch out, cuz anything he can do I can do ten times better!” Merrin waved his arms expansively. “There’s no way he could even begin to do *this*.”

“Do what?” said Beetle. “Hide up in the Palace attic and *sniff*?”

Beetle thought he noticed a flicker of uncertainty pass over Merrin’s face.

“Nah. You know what I mean. *This*. And I can get anyone to come here I want. Yesterday I got the prissy Princess to put her little foot in, and this morning I got the old Heap Wizard to put his stupid head in. They both got scared and ran away but it didn’t matter. We got what we needed.”

“We?” asked Beetle.

“Yeah. I’ve got backup. You want to watch out, *office boy*, because today I got *you* good and proper.” Merrin laughed. “You thought you were coming to see your stupid *dad*!”

Beetle had forgotten how obnoxious Merrin was. He fought down the urge to punch him. It wasn’t—as Jenna would no doubt have told him—worth it.

“I am here,” Beetle said, “because Princess Jenna asked me to investigate some noises in the attic. I told her it was probably rats and it turns out I was right. It’s one big *stupid* rat.”

“Don’t call me stupid,” Merrin flared. “I’ll show you who’s the stupid one here. *You*. You walked right in.”

“Into what—your smelly bedroom?” Beetle said scornfully.

Merrin began to look less confident. “Didn’t you notice anything?” he

asked.

“A load of old junk and empty rooms,” Beetle replied dismissively, careful to still speak the truth.

“That all?”

Beetle sensed he was winning. He avoided a direct answer and snapped, “Merrin, what *are* you talking about?”

Merrin’s confidence suddenly left him. His shoulders sagged. “Nothing ever goes right,” he moaned. He looked up at Beetle as if expecting sympathy. “It’s ’cause I’m not well,” he said. “I could do it if I didn’t have this horrible cold.”

“Do what?”

“None of your business,” said Merrin gloomily.

Beetle reckoned it was time to make a move. He turned to leave, hoping that he’d done enough to convince Merrin that his **Darke Domaine** had failed. “Right. I’ll be off then,” he said. “I’ll tell the Heaps where to find you.” He began to walk slowly to the door.

“No! Hey, wait!” Merrin called out.

Beetle stopped. He felt immensely relieved but did not want to show it. “Why?” he demanded.

“Please, Beetle, *please* don’t tell them. I’ve got nowhere else to go. I feel *awful* and no one even *cares*.” Merrin inspected the sheet for a space where he hadn’t blown his nose and blew noisily into it.

“And whose fault is that?”

“Oh, I expect it’s *my* fault,” said Merrin. “It always *is* my fault. It’s just not *fair*.” He twisted the Two-Faced Ring anxiously.

A sudden spatter of sleet drummed on the window. Merrin looked up pathetically. “Beetle. It . . . it’s cold outside. It’s wet and it’s nearly dark. I’ve nowhere to go. *Please* don’t tell.”

Beetle hurried on with his plan. “Look, Merrin, Sarah Heap is really nice. She won’t throw you out, not in the state you’re in.” Beetle reckoned he was telling the truth here. “She’ll take care of you until you’re better.”

“Will she?”

“Of course she will. Sarah Heap will take care of anything. Even *you*.”

Merrin had run out of dry sheet. He blew his nose on his blanket.

Beetle pressed on. “So why don’t you come downstairs with me to where it’s nice and warm?”

“All right then,” said Merrin. He coughed and fell back against his stained pillow. “Oh . . . I think I’m too weak to get up.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’ve only got a cold,” said Beetle scathingly.

“I’ve got . . . *flu*. Probably pneu . . . pneumonia in fact.”

Beetle wondered if Merrin might, for once, be telling the truth. He did actually look ill. His eyes were bright and feverish and he seemed to be

having trouble breathing.

“I’ll come with you . . . I’ll give myself up, I will,” wheezed Merrin. “But you’ll have to help me. Please.”

Reluctantly Beetle went over to the bed. It smelled of dirty, damp clothes, sweat and sickness.

“Thank you, Beetle,” Merrin murmured, gazing oddly over his shoulder into the distance. The hairs on the back of Beetle’s neck began to prickle uncomfortably and the temperature in the chilly little room dropped a few degrees lower. Merrin held out his snotty hand and as Beetle leaned forward, steeling himself to take it, Merrin sat bolt upright and grabbed hold of Beetle’s arm. Tight as a vice Merrin’s bony fingers encircled his forearm. The ring on Merrin’s thumb pressed into his flesh and began to burn into it. Beetle gasped.

“Never, *ever* call me stupid,” Merrin hissed, looking intently over Beetle’s shoulder. “*I* am not stupid—*you* are.”

Beetle felt chilled. He knew that something very nasty was standing behind him and he dared not turn around. Beetle did not reply. His throat had suddenly gone dry.

Behind Beetle was a mass of **Things**, which had sensed Merrin losing his grip on the **Darke Domaine**. Merrin had acquired them in the Badlands some eighteen months previously, when he had taken possession of the Two-Faced Ring. Once the ring reached its full power, Merrin had **Summoned** the **Things** to the Palace because he had what he called “plans.”

Merrin’s confidence had returned. “You are in my **Darke Domaine** and you know it,” he crowed. “And I *know* you know it.”

Beetle swayed. Merrin’s ring was sending stabs of pain shooting up his arm and into his head. He felt sick and very, very dizzy. He tried to pull away but Merrin held him fast. With his free hand Merrin pulled a small, dog-eared book from under the bedcovers and waved it triumphantly at Beetle. “See this? I’ve read *all* of this and I can do stuff you can’t even dream of,” he hissed into Beetle’s ear. “You wait, *office boy*. I am going to show them all in this smelly little Castle and that stuck-up Manuscriptorium that they should have been nice to me. They’re going to regret it big time. This is *my* Palace now, not the stupid Princess’s. Soon the Castle will be mine and I am going to have everything I want. Everything!” Merrin was spitting with excitement. Beetle longed to wipe the spittle off his cheek but he could not move. Merrin had a grip like a vice. “And that stupid Septimus Heap, he’ll be sorry he stole my name. I’ll get him, you’ll see. *I’m* going to be the only Septimus Heap around here. It will be *my* Wizard Tower, *my* Manuscriptorium and I’ll have a ten-times better dragon than that moth-eaten Spit Fyre he prances around on. You’ll see!”

“In your dreams,” Beetle retorted, sounding more confident than he felt.

Merrin's rant spooked him. There was such a crazy kind of power behind it that Beetle almost believed him.

Merrin did not bother to reply. With one hand keeping an iron grasp on Beetle and the other clutching his open book, Merrin began to chant the words on the page in a low, monotonous voice. A **Darke** mist began to envelope Beetle. As Merrin came toward the end of the chant, the terrible words reached down to Beetle as if he were at the bottom of a deep, dark pit. His heart raced and he could hardly breathe from the fear that came over him. His vision closed in so that all he could see was a tunnel with Merrin at the end of it, waving his book and opening his huge red mouth to say . . .

But Beetle never heard what Merrin said. With his last conscious effort he reached out and snatched the book from Merrin's grasp.

"BeGone!" yelled Merrin. And then, "Oi! Give it back!"

But Beetle didn't give it back. Beetle was gone.

Chapter 12

Boomerang



Beetle was somewhere dark and uncomfortable—very uncomfortable. He was crushed into a tiny space, his knees folded up to his chest and his arms twisted up around his head. He tried to move, but he was wedged so tightly that he felt as though he were in a vice. He fought down panic. What had Merrin done to him?

Beetle's discomfort was quickly turning into something much more nasty. Pins and needles were running down his legs and already he couldn't feel his feet. His hands buzzed and tingled. His left hand was closed tightly around the book he had snatched from Merrin and was wedged in the same corner that his head was stuck in. His elbows and knees were jammed up against something hard and they hurt—*really* hurt. But the worst thing was the overwhelming feeling, growing stronger every passing moment, that if he didn't stretch out *right now* he would go crazy.

Beetle took a few deep breaths and tried to quell his panic. He opened his eyes wide and stared into the dark, but although some light did seem to be filtering through from somewhere, he could not make sense of anything. The small amount of light helped Beetle get some control over his panic and he discovered that he could wiggle—just a little—the fingers of his right hand. Painfully he stretched them out and tapped, then scratched, the confining walls, trying to discover what they were made of. A splinter under his fingernail gave him the answer—wood. A great stab of fear shot through him

—*he was in his own coffin*. Beetle heard a wild, despairing cry like that of an animal caught in a trap and a chill ran down his spine. It took him a few seconds to realize that the cry came from him.

Beneath the sound of his heart thudding in his ears, Beetle was becoming aware of noises filtering through from somewhere outside the coffin. It was an indistinct, muffled murmuring. In his dark prison, Beetle's imagination flipped into overdrive. He'd read that **Things** murmured. Particularly when they were hungry—or was it angry? Beetle tried to remember. Did **Things** get hungry? Did they even eat? If they did, would they eat *him*? Maybe they were just angry. But angry wasn't good either. In fact, it was probably worse. But what did it matter? Right now he'd give anything to get out of the coffin, to be able to stretch out his arms and legs and to uncurl his spine. In fact, he'd happily face a thousand **Things** in exchange for just being able to stretch out to his full height once more.

Beetle groaned out loud. The murmuring grew louder and drowned out the thumping of his heart, and then one of the sides of the coffin began to shake. Beetle closed his eyes. He knew that, any minute now, a **Thing** would wrench off the side of his coffin and that would be it. If he was lucky he'd get a few seconds to uncurl himself, to straighten his twisted arms and legs—but only if he was lucky. And after that? After that it would be the end of O. Beetle Beetle. Beetle thought of his mother and suppressed a sob. *Mum, oh Mum*. She would never know what had happened to him. But maybe . . . maybe that was for the best . . . With the sound of murmuring growing more agitated, Beetle braced himself for the worst.

Suddenly the side of the coffin was ripped away. Light flooded in. Beetle fell out of the Manuscriptorium Pending Cupboard. He landed with a painful thud on the floor. Someone screamed.

“Crumbs, it's *you*,” gasped Foxy.

Beetle lay on his back, dazed. He felt like a piece of Jell-O that had been tipped out of its mold before it was properly set. Tentatively he opened his eyes and found himself looking straight up Foxy's nose—which was not Foxy's best aspect.

“Wargh?” he croaked feebly in reply.

A crowd of scribes had gathered around Beetle.

“Hey, Beetle, you all right?” asked a girl with short brown hair and a concerned expression. She knelt down and helped him sit up.

Beetle nodded slowly. “Yeah. Thanks, Romilly. I'm fine. *Now*. But I thought I was about to be . . . um, not fine.” He shook his head, trying to get rid of all the terrifying thoughts that had crowded in on him during the last few minutes.

Suddenly a horribly familiar voice rang out. “What—*atchoo*—is going on here, Mr. Fox?”

Foxy leaped to his feet. “Nothing, Miss Djinn,” he gasped. “Just a small, um, accident with something in the Pending Cupboard. A boomerang **Charm**. It . . . came back. Unexpectedly.”

The short, rotund figure of the Chief Hermetic Scribe, swathed in her navy blue silk robes, stood at the entrance to the Hermetic Chamber on the other side of the Manuscriptorium. Luckily, due to her cost-cutting measures, the lights were very dim and she could not clearly see what was happening in the shadows beside the cupboard.

Jillie Djinn sneezed again. “It seems you cannot keep control of even a simple **Charm**, Mr. Fox,” she snapped. “If there is another incident—*atchoo atchoo*—like this—*atchoooo*—I shall be forced to reconsider your recent appointment.”

“I . . . I . . .” Foxy stammered.

Jillie Djinn blew her nose loudly and with great attention to detail. It was not a pretty sight. “Why, pray, was the **Charm** not given to me for stocktaking?” she demanded.

Romilly could see that Foxy was struggling with an answer. “It’s only just come back, Miss Djinn,” she said.

“Miss Badger, I asked the **Charm** Scribe, not you,” said Jillie Djinn. “And it is from the **Charm** Scribe that I require an answer.”

“It’s only just come back, Miss Djinn,” Foxy repeated.

Jillie Djinn was not pleased. “*Atchoo!* Well, now that it is back, I require it for stocktaking. *Immediately*, Mr. Fox.”

In a panic, Foxy hissed at Beetle. “Give it here, Beet. Quick. Before she comes over to get it.”

At last Beetle understood what had happened. He put his still trembling hand into the top left pocket of his Admiral’s jacket, pulled out the tiny curved piece of polished wood and handed it to Foxy. “Thanks, Foxo,” he muttered.

The desks in the Manuscriptorium stood tall and dark under their dim lights, like winter trees at sunset. Quickly Foxy loped through them to the far side of the Manuscriptorium and gave his Chief Scribe the tiny Boomerang. Jillie Djinn took it and looked at Foxy suspiciously.

“What are all the scribes doing away from their desks?” she asked.

“Um. Well, we had a bit of trouble,” said Foxy. “But it’s all right now.”

“What kind of—*atchoo*—trouble?”

“Hmm . . .” Thinking on his feet was not Foxy’s strong point.

“Well, Mr. Fox, if you can’t explain I shall have to go and see for myself. Oh, for goodness’ sake, get out of my way, will you?” Foxy was hovering in front of Jillie Djinn as though guarding an invisible goal, but unfortunately his talents did not lie in the goalkeeping arena either. The Chief Hermetic Scribe elbowed him out of the way and headed off through the closely packed lines

of desks.

The scribes, who had gathered protectively around Beetle, watched the ball of navy blue silk trundle toward them. They bunched themselves into a tight-knit group and prepared for her attack.

“*What* is going on?” Jillie Djinn demanded. “*Why* are you not working?”

“There’s been an accident.” Romilly’s voice came from the back of the group.

“An *accident*?”

“Something fell out of the cupboard unexpectedly,” said Romilly.

“Accidents usually *are* unexpected,” Jillie Djinn observed tartly. “Enter full details along with the *exact* time of the incident in the accident log immediately— *atchoo atchoo*—and bring it to me to sign.”

“Yes, Miss Djinn. I’ll just go to the physik room for a bandage first. I won’t be long.”

“Very well, Miss Badger.” Jillie Djinn sniffed irritably. She knew something was not quite right. She tried to peer over the heads of the scribes but to her annoyance she found that the tallest scribes—corralled by the quick-thinking Barnaby Ewe, whose head always banged the doorframe—were clustering around her.

“Excuse me, Miss Djinn,” said one of them, a gangly young man with wispy brown hair. “While Miss Badger is in the physik room I wonder if you could check my calculations? I’m not sure if I’ve correctly worked out the average number of seconds that people have been late for their first appointments over the last seven weeks. I think I may have got a decimal point in the wrong place.”

Jillie Djinn sighed. “Mr. Partridge, will you never understand the decimal point?”

“I’m sure I very nearly *do* understand, Miss Djinn. If you could only run over it once more for me, I know all will be clear.”

Partridge knew that Jillie Djinn never could resist explaining the decimal point. And so, while Partridge stifled numerous yawns and Jillie Djinn began a tortuous explanation, accompanied by much nose blowing, Romilly Badger smuggled Beetle into the physik room.

The physik room was small and dingy, with a tiny slit of a window that looked out onto the Manuscriptorium backyard. Squashed into the room were a lumpy bed, two chairs and a table with a large red box on it. Romilly sat Beetle down on the edge of the bed and draped a blanket over his shoulders—Beetle was shivering with shock. Foxy came in, quietly closed the door behind him and stayed leaning against it.

“You look terrible,” he told Beetle.

Beetle managed a smile. “Thanks, Foxo.”

“Sorry, Beet. I thought it’d bring you back to the last place *you* had been

safe—didn't think it would come back to the last place *it* had been. Stupid thing.”

“Don't apologize, Foxy. That cupboard's a hundred times better than where I probably *was* headed. Just wish I'd figured it out earlier, that's all. I wouldn't have made such a racket.” Beetle grinned sheepishly. He couldn't quite remember what he'd said. He had a feeling he'd yelled out “Mum”—or even worse, “Mummy”—but he hoped that maybe it had only been inside his head.

“Nah, you were okay,” said Foxy with a smile. He turned to Romilly. “Are you all right?” he asked. “Where did you cut yourself?”

“I'm fine, Foxy,” said Romilly patiently. “I didn't cut myself. The bandage was an excuse to get Beetle out of the way.”

“Oh, I *see*. That's really clever.”

Beetle and Foxy watched Romilly open the red box, take out a large bandage and wrap it around her thumb.

Foxy looked puzzled. “But I thought . . .”

“Corroboration,” said Romilly mysteriously. “Okay, Beetle. I'll go and check if the coast is clear, then we can get you out without you-know-who seeing anything.”

Foxy held the door open for Romilly, then he quietly closed it and resumed his position leaning against it. “She's clever,” he said admiringly.

Beetle nodded. He still felt very odd, although he suspected that it was as much being back in his old place of work—a place that he had once loved—as anything Merrin had done.

“We still miss you,” said Foxy suddenly.

“Yeah. Me too . . .” mumbled Beetle.

“It's horrible here now,” said Foxy. “It's not been the same since you went. Actually, I'm thinking of leaving. And so are Partridge and Romilly.”

“Leaving?” Beetle was shocked.

“Yeah.” Foxy grinned. “D'you think Larry might want three more assistants?”

“I wish,” said Beetle.

Neither said anything for a moment, and then Foxy spoke. “So, ah, what were you doing, Beet—I mean, why did you need a **SafeCharm**? And why did it bring you back? Things must have been really scary.”

“They were. You know that Merrin Meredith kid who's been hanging around here?”

“*Him!*” spat Foxy.

“Well, he did a **BeGone**.”

“On *you*?”

“Yeah.”

“No wonder you look so rough,” said Foxy.

“Yeah. But that’s not the worst of it. He’s holed up in the Palace attic—”

“You’re kidding!”

“—and I think he’s started a **Darke Domaine**.”

Foxy stared at Beetle in disbelief. “No! No. How?”

“You know that ring he wears—that nasty Two-Faced thing? Well, I always thought it was a fake from Gothyk Grotto, but now I’m not so sure. I think it might be the real thing.”

Foxy sat down on the chair beside Beetle. He looked worried. “It could be. It kind of makes sense if it is,” he said in a low voice. “He’s got some hold over Miss Djinn. She lets him do exactly what he likes—I think she’s scared of him. The weird thing is, I know for a fact she’s fired him at least three times, but he comes back just like nothing happened—and she *never remembers*. And recently she’s started going really strange when he’s here, kind of vacant, like she’s not there anymore. It’s scary.”

“I’ll bet,” said Beetle.

“Yeah.” Foxy looked down at his feet, and Beetle knew he was about to say something that he’d had to really think about. There was a silence while Beetle waited and Foxy got his words together. “The thing is, Beet,” said Foxy eventually, “this has happened here before. Remember all the stuff with my dad?”

Beetle nodded. Foxy’s father had been the Chief Hermetic Scribe before Jillie Djinn. He had left in disgrace after becoming involved in a plot with Simon Heap—in his **Darke** days—to kill Marcia Overstrand.

“I know no one will ever believe it,” said Foxy, “but my dad never wanted to do all that bones stuff for Simon Heap. He had no idea what it was for—he really didn’t. But he said the **Darke** just pulled him in. And once you’re in, it ties you up in knots and you can’t escape—however much you try.”

Beetle nodded.

“I went to see my dad last week,” Foxy said tentatively.

Beetle was amazed. “You went to *see* him? But I thought Marcia banished him to the Far Countries.”

Foxy looked awkward. “Yes, she did. But he got so homesick. He came back secretly. He’s changed his name and he lives down in the Port now. It’s not in a very nice part of the Port, but he doesn’t mind. You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“Of course I won’t.”

“Thanks. I don’t go and see him much, just in case anyone notices, but recently I’ve been really worried about stuff here and I wanted to talk to him about it. He says it sounds bad. That Meredith kid—he’s got Jillie Djinn right *there*.” Foxy pressed his thumb into his opposite palm. “Under his thumb. Just like Simon Heap had my dad.”

“He’s been trouble right from the start,” agreed Beetle. “I remember the

first day he turned up, he was wearing that ring.”

Foxy glanced at the door. “You know, I don’t think it’s fake either,” he muttered.

“But how did he get it, Foxy? The real one belonged to DomDaniel.”

“Well, *he’s* dead.”

“But you know the ring will only come off the Other way? He *can’t* have chopped DomDaniel’s thumb off.”

“Nothing would surprise me about that little tick,” said Foxy.

“I reckon I should go to Gothyk Grotto and see if they do copies,” said Beetle. “If they don’t I’ll go and ask Marcia what she thinks.”

“Well, don’t be surprised if a couple of Wizards randomly turn up at the Grot and ask you why you want one,” warned Foxy. “I asked for a copy of a **Darke Charm** once—just to play a joke on old Partridge—and they got quite funny about it.”

A quiet *ratta-tippy-tap* sounded on the door. Beetle jumped.

“S okay,” said Foxy. “Scribe code. All clear. Time to go.”

A minute later Beetle had been bundled out of the Manuscriptorium and was standing on Wizard Way. It was surprisingly busy. The Traders’ Market had closed at sunset and people were now flocking to Wizard Way to watch the lighting of the candle displays for the Longest Night. Beetle leaned against the Manuscriptorium torch post, trying to take in the events of the previous hour or so. He saw Maizie Smalls advancing purposefully toward him. The throng parted to let her through, their upturned faces illuminated as they watched her lean her ladder against the post and nimbly climb up, her flaming TorchLighter at the ready.

The little band of children who had followed Maizie all along the Way gathered around the blackened silver base of the torch post and cheered as the Manuscriptorium torch flared up into the deepening twilight. It was a happy moment, but Beetle was not there to enjoy it. The sight of Maizie had jogged his memory and taken away the last of the fuzziness in his head.

“Jenna!” he gasped.

He set off at a run down the Way, dodging between the oncoming pedestrians, heading for the Palace.

Chapter 13

Gothyk Grotto



Halfway down Wizard Way, Beetle saw Jenna racing up the other side. With her long hair streaming out behind her, the light from the torchlights glinting off her gold circlet and her red cloak flying, she sent oncoming pedestrians jumping out of her way and left them staring after her. Above her a small, invisible lovebird desperately tried to follow the glinting circlet through the crowds as it zigzagged toward the Wizard Tower.

Beetle walked quickly across the wide thoroughfare of the Way. He still found it hard to shake off one of the rules of the Manuscriptorium that all scribes signed up for: *no running, shouting, swearing, singing or dancing in Wizard Way*. It was a rule that, during his time at the Manuscriptorium, was taken very seriously, and up until now Beetle had not broken it. But as Jenna disappeared fast toward the Great Arch that led into the Wizard Tower courtyard, he broke two of its tenets at once. He set off at a run and yelled, “Jenna! Jenna!” And then, as people stopped and stared at him, he felt that maybe he was being disrespectful, so he yelled, “Hey, *Princess Jenna*. Stop!”

Jenna did stop, not for Beetle but to push through the crowd that had gathered around Maizie Smalls, who had crossed the Way to light the very last torch. As Jenna tried to dodge around Beetle—just another body in her way—he put his arm out to stop her.

Jenna looked up, eyes blazing in anger. “Get out of my way—*oh Beetle, it’s you, it’s you!*” She threw her arms around him.

“Ooh,” said someone in the crowd. “Ooh, *look!* It’s the Princess and that boy who was the—”

“Let’s get out of here,” said Beetle, reluctantly disengaging himself. He took hold of Jenna’s arm and walked her briskly away.

“Beetle—what *happened?* You didn’t come back! I was *so* scared. How did you get *here?* Hey, *where are we going?*” Jenna demanded in rapid fire while Beetle steered her across the Way and into the shadows of The Skinny Bones’ Bob—an extremely narrow opening that led off Wizard Way and would take them into Ramblings Alley.

“We are going to Gothyk Grotto,” said Beetle.

“*Why?*” Like a stubborn pony, Jenna stopped in her tracks and shook her head. Beetle halted—when a pony stops in The Skinny Bones’ Bob, everyone stops. Jenna regarded Beetle with one of her finest Princess stares. “Beetle,” she informed him, “I am not going another step until you tell me *what is going on.*”

“I’ll tell you on the way, okay?” he said.

“What, to Gothyk Grotto—that *dump* where all the weirdos hang out?”

“Yes. *Please*, Jenna, can we get going? It smells horrible here.”

Jenna gave up. “Okay. But this had better be good.”

* * *

Jenna was entirely accurate in her description of Gothyk Grotto. It was a run-down, dark and dingy shop at the end of Little Creep Cut, somewhere in the middle of the scruffiest part of the Ramblings. As Beetle pushed open the door, the sound of a theatrical monster-style roar blared out above their heads and made Jenna—and the UnSeen bird—jump. The bird recovered itself and flew in just as the door banged closed.

Beetle and Jenna stood for a moment, trying to make sense of the place. At first it seemed to be in total darkness, but soon they noticed a few flickering candles, which were moving slowly, randomly appearing and disappearing. The unearthly sound of a nose flute drifted out from some distant place, and the stuffy air was filled with the smell of particularly pungent incense, which set Jenna sneezing. As their eyes became accustomed to the dark, Jenna and Beetle could see dim shapes of figures holding the candles as they wandered between towering stacks and teetering shelves.

Suddenly a flame flared in the gloom and they saw a tall boy lighting two candles nearby. The boy walked over and handed the candles to Jenna and Beetle with the words, “Welcome to Gothyk Grotto.”

“Wolf Boy!” gasped Jenna. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Huh?” said what sounded like Wolf Boy’s voice.

Jenna raised her candle and looked at the boy. It wasn’t Wolf Boy, but there was something about him that reminded her of him. The boy was about the

same height and build as Wolf Boy, but his hair was short and spiky and even in the dark, Jenna could see it was black, unlike Wolf Boy's light brown.

"Sorry," said Jenna. "I thought you were someone else."

"Yeah. Well, sorry I'm not Wolf Boy, whoever he is. Cool name."

"It's odd, you sound just like him. Don't you think, Beetle?"

"Just like," agreed Beetle.

"Beetle's a cool name too. Yeah. Hey. Wow. Man, you're the *Princess*. Wow. What're *you* doing here?"

"We've come to see if you sell copies of the Two-Faced Ring," said Jenna.

"You *what*?"

"We want to know," said Beetle very clearly and slowly, "if you sell—or have ever sold—copies of the **Darke** Two-Faced Ring?"

"*Huh*?"

"The **Darke** Two-Faced Ring," Beetle repeated.

"Jeez," said the boy.

"So . . . do you sell them? Have you *ever* sold them?"

"You really want to know?" The boy seemed flummoxed.

"Yes, please," said Beetle, trying to be patient. "Have you? Ever sold them? To *anyone*?"

"You'd better come this way," said the boy. "Follow me, please."

With a distinct feeling that they had done something wrong, Beetle and Jenna set off after him. Following the boy was no easy task. He wore a long black robe, which swept the ground and blended into the background, and he obviously knew his way around well enough not to need a candle as he weaved quickly between the shelves and stacks, which were set out as a double labyrinth. Jenna went first, and the only way she kept up with the boy was by following the swish of his gown over the rough wooden floorboards. They wound their way through the seemingly endless canyons of merchandise (the labyrinth was planned to lead customers past everything twice), trying to keep up with the boy at the same time as not tripping over assorted plaster bones, cheap black cloaks and tunics, false Gragull teeth (a Gragull being a mythical bloodsucking human), bottles of fake blood, buckets of heavy jewelry embellished with skulls, **Charms**, bits of dead hamster (the latest craze), stacks of books of popular spells, piles of board games, glow-in-the-dark paint, jelly insects in jars, spiderwebs, wolverine eyes and a thousand other examples of what was known in the Castle as "Gothyk Grot."

At last they emerged from the labyrinth into the back of the shop—a dusty space piled high with unopened boxes and lit by a few tall, black candles. The eerie sound of the nose flute was louder here and came from behind a small door (painted black, naturally) that was set deep into an ornate gothic arch. The boy beckoned them to follow him and headed for the door. Jenna hurried after him, tripped over a pile of cardboard skulls, and steadied herself against

the arch. It wobbled alarmingly.

The boy knocked on the door. The sound of the nose flute ceased—much to their relief—and a voice called out, “Yes?”

“It’s me, Matt. I’ve got a nine-nine-nine here. It’s the Princess and the ex-Manuscriptorium Clerk.”

“Very funny, Marcus. Get me a cup of tea, will you?”

“No, really, I *have*. And it’s the Princess, Mr. Igor. Honest.”

The voice on the other side of the door sounded irritated. “Marcus, I’ve told you about telling stories before. Now go and get me my cup of tea. Okay?”

The boy turned around to Jenna and Beetle and shrugged. “Sorry,” he said. “He gets funny at twilight. I’ll go and get him a cup of tea. He’ll see you after that.”

“But we don’t *need* to see him,” said Beetle, exasperated. “We only want to know if you have ever had any fake Two-Faced Rings.”

“Exactly. So you have to see him. It’s the rules. Sorry.” The boy grinned apologetically and disappeared back into the labyrinth.

“This is stupid,” said Jenna, “I’m not waiting here all night.” She rapped loudly on the little black door and then, without waiting for a reply, she went in. Beetle followed.

A man with a long, extremely white face ending in a wispy, pointy beard was sitting at a small desk playing a solitary card game. He did not look up but murmured, “That was quick, Marcus. Just put it down here, will you?” When no cup of tea appeared in his line of sight the man looked up. His jaw dropped. “Good ghouls!” he gasped. He leaped to his feet, scattering the cards, and bowed awkwardly. “Princess Jenna! *It is* you. I am so sorry. I had no idea . . .” He looked around. “Where’s Marcus gone? Why didn’t he say you were here?”

“Well, *Matt* said I was here,” said Jenna, confused.

“Matt, Marcus, same thing,” said the man obscurely. “Oh, please, please sit down, Princess. And you, scribe Beetle.” He waved his hand to stop Beetle from explaining. “No, don’t say anything. I know what happened. But once a scribe always a scribe, eh? Now to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? What can I do for you, eh?”

Jenna got to the point. “We need to know if you have ever sold copies of the Two-Faced Ring.”

Igor went a shade whiter. “So it *is* a nine-nine-nine. Oh dear, how very embarrassing. I do apologize. But it’s part of the terms of our licence, eh?” Igor reached below the desk and pressed a large red button. Then he looked up and smiled awkwardly. “Purely a formality of course,” he said. “Do please sit down.” He indicated two unsteady wooden chairs that were pushed up against the wall. Igor watched them gingerly sit down, not taking his eyes off them for a moment. “Well, your Grace—”

“Please, just call me Jenna,” Jenna interrupted.

“It seems a little familiar. *Princess* Jenna if I may. Eh?”

Jenna nodded.

“Well, Princess Jenna, if it had been anyone else asking this I would have to keep you in custody here until the arrival of the duty Wizard. But as it’s you, eh, I wouldn’t dream of keeping you against your wishes. Naturally.” Igor looked highly embarrassed.

“What do you mean?” asked Jenna.

“Well, it’s like this, eh? We have what we call a Notification List of certain **Darke** objects, potions, **Charms**, Spells, etcetera. Top of the list is the Two-Faced Ring. It is, as Marcus said, code nine-nine-nine. If anyone asks for something on the list, we have to notify the Wizard Tower.”

“But why?” asked Jenna.

Igor shrugged. “I don’t know, eh. The Wizard Tower doesn’t actually tell us anything. But I would guess that knowing that these things exist, and then wanting copies of them, shows a knowledge of **Darke** things that is suspicious, eh? Maybe even dangerous. Excepting yourself, Princess, of course,” he added hurriedly. “Of course you have a right to be interested in *everything*. Totally understandable—*totally*.”

“So is that a *yes* or a *no*?” asked Jenna.

“A *yes* or *no* what?” Igor looked puzzled.

“Have you ever sold copies of the Two-Faced Ring?”

Igor looked shocked. “Good ghou, *no*. Of course we haven’t. What do you take us for?”

“I’m sorry,” said Jenna. “I . . . we didn’t mean anything bad. We just needed to know.”

Igor lowered his voice. “Do not seek to know. Keep this ring from your thoughts. Take care, Princess Jenna. Do not meddle with this. Do not name it again.” He gazed at a point a few feet above Jenna’s head and a frown flitted across his brow. “Be careful, Princess,” he muttered. “Walk with the **Darke** and you do not walk alone.” He stood up and bowed solemnly. “Your traveling companions may not be what you would wish for. Marcus will see you out.”

Still feeling as though they had done something wrong, Beetle and Jenna followed Marcus—or was it Matt?—back through the labyrinth in silence. As they passed a large jar of Gragull teeth, Jenna stopped and took a set.

“How much are these?” she asked.

“Free to you,” grinned Matt—or was it Marcus?

“Oh, thank you,” said Jenna with a smile.

The boy led them out of the maze and opened the door for them.

“Excuse me,” said Jenna, intrigued, “but is your name Marcus or Matt?”

The boy grinned. “Matt.”

“So why did Igor call you Marcus?”

“Marcus is my brother. We’re identical. Igor thinks we play tricks on him and pretend we’re each other, but we don’t—that is just so lame. But Igor thinks he’s being clever and when we tell him who we are, he always calls us by the other name.” Matt shrugged. “It’s like that in here. Weird.”

“Weird,” agreed Jenna.

Accompanied by the roar of the door monster, Jenna and Beetle stepped out into the wind funnelling down Little Creep Cut. Beetle turned to her, his hair blowing into his eyes, the sharp drops of sleety rain making him blink. “So Foxy was right,” he said. “Merrin’s got the real thing. This is serious—we need to tell Marcia right away.”

Jenna wound her cloak around her, pulling the fur edging tight under her chin to keep out the rain. “I know,” she said miserably. “Mum is going to be so upset. She’s been looking forward to tonight for *ages*. It’s the first time she’s had me and Sep together for our birthdays—*ever*.”

Beetle and Jenna walked in silence back along Little Creep Cut, heading toward a large signpost that read TO THE WIZARD TOWER. Above them flew the little **UnSeen** lovebird, buffeted by the wind, stung by the rain, but now with a ray of hope that it might soon see its own true love once again.

“Beetle,” said Jenna.

“Mmm?”

“I never mentioned this to anyone before because I thought they’d think I was weird or something, but I think Merrin’s been living in the Palace for a long time.”

“*What?*” Beetle looked astonished.

“Well . . . every now and then I’ve thought I’ve seen him kind of disappearing around the corner, although I was never totally sure. I even mentioned it to Mum once, but she thought it was just a ghost. But you remember what Barney Pot told Aunt Zelda—that Merrin had ambushed him in the Long Walk? I know no one else believed him, but Barney doesn’t tell fibs. And if that *is* true, then Merrin’s been hanging around for at least eighteen months. Which is really creepy.” Jenna shivered.

“That’s horrible,” said Beetle. “The thought of him just lurking up there. Watching you. Wandering around at night—”

“Oh stop it, Beetle!” Jenna protested. “I don’t even want to *think* about it.”

They had reached the TO THE WIZARD TOWER signpost, which was illuminated by a small torch burning brightly in a holder on the top. The sign pointed down a well-lit lane known locally as Wiz Way. They turned down it and walked briskly between the neat houses, all with their Longest Night candles burning in their windows. As they progressed, Beetle noticed Jenna was becoming increasingly uneasy.

“Is this the right way?” she asked Beetle after a while.

“Of course it is.” Beetle cast Jenna a wondering glance. He knew that she knew the lanes around the Ramblings backwards.

“But . . . it doesn’t feel like it.”

“Well, it *is*. You *know* it is. It’s Wiz Way.” Beetle was flummoxed.

Jenna had stopped and was looking around, as though seeing the alleyway for the first time. Above her the **UnSeen** lovebird fluttered hopefully. It was nearly home.

“What’s wrong?” asked Beetle. He glanced up. It felt as if something was hovering above Jenna’s head, just outside his field of vision.

Jenna rounded on him angrily. “Nothing’s wrong. Stop nagging me, Beetle. I’m just not going your stupid way, that’s all!” And with that she turned and ran back along Wiz Way, then suddenly scooted to the left and disappeared into a tiny, dark alleyway—the notorious Dagger Dan’s Dive.

Chapter 14

Dagger Dan's Dive



Beetle tore after Jenna but, unlike her, he was not a natural runner. He soon lost sight of her flying red cloak as she drew ahead of him, leaping over puddles and skidding around blind corners, slipping through the twists and turns of the narrow, dark alleyway as though she had run down it a hundred times before. Doggedly Beetle followed the increasingly faint echoes of her footsteps, and soon he could hear nothing but the sound of his own boots thudding on the stones. Of Jenna there was no trace at all.

Of all the alleyways that led off Wiz Way, Dagger Dan's Dive was the worst. The twisting, narrow passage was named after a notorious mugger and cutthroat who had used it as a foolproof escape. Even if closely pursued, Dagger Dan would always get away—and mystify his pursuers—by jumping into the open drain at the alley's dead end, then creeping through the water and filth to his small boat tied up on the river by the drain's mouth.

Beetle could not understand why Jenna had chosen to run down Dagger Dan's Dive, of all places. Like him, she had grown up in the Ramblings. She had been to a Ramblings school, and she too would have passed her Ramblings Proficiency Test by memorizing the Ramblings map and undertaking three timed journeys on her own. This was the test that all children had to pass before they were allowed to become Ramblers and wander freely (or Ramble) on their own. But even for a Rambler there were forbidden alleys—and Dagger Dan's Dive was at the top of the list.

The Dive, as it was known locally, was inhabited by the more shadowy denizens of the Castle—the kind of people who one never saw out in daylight hours and hoped not to see out at night. With its decrepit overhanging buildings exuding the sickly sweet smell of rot (and worse) and the inhabitants’ habit of jostling strangers or staring from their windows at every echo of footsteps—usually armed and ready to throw a bucket of slop if they didn’t like the look of those making them—Dagger Dan’s Dive was a place no one chose to go, especially at night.

But as Jenna ran, she was oblivious to everything she knew about the Dive. Escorted by the **UnSeen** bird, she raced along, jumping over potholes, skidding around stinking piles of rubbish, ignoring catcalls and curses shouted from windows far above and even a well-aimed rotten tomato that hit the back of her cloak. Toward the end of the Dive, Jenna began to slow down, and she finally came to a halt under the dull light of a rusty lantern. She stopped to catch her breath and looked about, suddenly confused by where she found herself. Above her head the lantern squeaked as it swung mournfully above a dilapidated door studded with nails. Behind her was a boarded-up window with faded lettering above it proclaiming:

FORTUNES TOLD, FORTUNES SOLD.
ENTER HERE IF YOU BE BOLD.
POSITIVELY NO CREDIT.

A gust of wind rattled the lantern alarmingly. Jenna shivered. Where was she—and *what* was she was doing here? The long-ago chanted list of forbidden alleyways came back to her and she realized with a sinking feeling that, not only had she run down Dagger Dan’s Dive, but she was now standing outside the notorious Doom Dump, which some years ago had been the center of great excitement when it had been **Fumigated** and **Locked** by a posse of Wizards led by the ExtraOrdinary Wizard herself.

Every Ramblings child knew that Doom Dump was near the end of Dan’s Dive and Jenna, well aware that the Dive was a dead end, knew she must turn around and go back the way she had come. The thought frightened her, and she felt unwilling to move. The lantern squeaked and a spatter of rain soaked into her cloak. Jenna shook her head to get rid of an odd buzzing, muzzy feeling.

Just as Jenna was getting the courage to go back up the Dive she heard the sound of pounding footsteps coming toward her. She froze. The footsteps drew closer, and she shrank back into the shadows of Doom Dump, pressing against the wall in the hope that whoever it was coming down the alley would not see her.

To her huge relief it was Beetle who came skidding around the corner.

“Jenna!” puffed Beetle, equally relieved to see Jenna waiting for him. “What are you doing? Why’d you come down *here*?”

“I . . . I don’t know.” It was true; Jenna didn’t know why. She felt as if she had just woken up from a bizarre dream.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Beetle, glancing around uneasily. “We’ll have to go back the way we came. It’s a dead end just around the corner and you don’t want to end up *there*.”

“I know,” said Jenna, “I *know*.”

Beetle set off quickly and Jenna went to follow—but *she could not move*. She swung around to check that her cloak was not caught in something but it hung freely. She tugged at her long robe, which, to her dismay, was spattered with mud, but that was not stuck either. Trying not to panic, she lifted first one foot and then the other, and neither of them were stuck—but when she once again tried to follow Beetle, she could not move.

Jenna lost the fight against panic. “Beetle!” she yelled. “*Beeee . . . tle!*” To her horror, no sound came from her mouth. Above her the lantern fizzled out and Jenna was plunged into darkness.

Beetle had not gotten far when he realized that Jenna was not following him. He felt exasperated—what was she playing at? Annoyed now, he went back to get her, but as he once more rounded the corner he saw that the lantern above the studded door had gone out and Jenna was not there.

Beetle stopped outside the door. “Jenna?” he said in a half whisper. “*Jenna?*”

There was no reply. A cold spatter of rain fell; Beetle shivered in his Admiral’s jacket and wound his woolly scarf another turn around his neck. He wished he were somewhere else. And he wished he understood what Jenna was up to—sometimes he just could not figure her out. Assuming that Jenna had plans that she was not telling him about and had tried to get rid of him once again, Beetle grumpily set off toward the Dive’s notorious dead end. Whatever Jenna might have planned, he was not going to leave her on her own at the end of Dagger Dan’s Dive.

The dead end was deserted. Beetle’s irritation began to be replaced with concern. He peered down into the open drain, beside which someone had thoughtfully placed a rotten plank with the words “Watch Out!” scrawled on it. Beetle took out his blue light and flicked it open, then he gingerly kneeled down and peered into the drain. A bad smell hit him.

“Jenna . . . Jenna?” he called nervously, his voice sounding hollow in the darkness below.

There was no reply, for which Beetle was grateful, until a horrible image flashed in his mind—Jenna lying unconscious far below. He leaned forward

and held out his light. Deep down he saw the dark, sluggish waters of the drain half covering—*oh no*—a dark lump of something.

“Jenna!” Beetle called down, his voice echoing hollowly inside the drain.

Behind him came a cough. “Hey. Lost something?” asked a familiar voice.

“Wolf Boy!” Then Beetle looked up. “Oh, sorry. It’s *you*.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. It *is* me,” said the boy. “So who are you?”

“Beetle. You remember, at Goth—oh, I see. You must be Marcus.”

Marcus grinned. “You’ve been to the Grot, yeah? Matt still there?”

“Oh . . . yes. Yes, he is.” Beetle’s voice echoed into the drain.

“Good,” said Marcus. “I’m late for my shift. Wouldn’t come this way if I wasn’t in a hurry—it’s a shortcut over the wall.” He looked closely at Beetle. “So why’d *you* come here, then?”

Beetle pointed his blue light into the drain. “I think Jenna’s fallen in. Look.”

“Hey, cool light,” said Marcus. He peered into the drain, and Beetle played his light on the form lying far below in the water. “Nah, that’s not anyone,” said Marcus. “It’s just some old clothes and stuff.”

Beetle wasn’t so sure.

“You can go down and check if you like,” said Marcus. “See if it is—who did you say?”

“Jenna. Princess Jenna.”

Marcus whistled in amazement. “*Princess Jenna?* Hey, what’s *she* doing down here?” He peered in once more. “Well, if you think it really *is* Princess Jenna, you’d better take a look. There are some rungs going down the side—see?”

The last thing Beetle wanted to do was climb down into the stinking drain, but he knew he had no choice.

“I’ll keep watch for you,” said Marcus as Beetle carefully removed the two planks and swung himself over the edge. “I won’t let anyone do a Ransom on you.”

Beetle’s head was just visible above the manhole. “Do a *what?*” he asked.

“A Ransom. You know, when they push you in the drain and won’t let you get out until you give ’em all your stuff.”

“All your stuff?” Beetle was distracted, looking into the drain.

“Yeah.” Marcus grinned. “Not much fun running up the Dive with no clothes on, I can tell you. Be careful, the rungs are rusty.”

“Ah. Okay.” Very carefully Beetle began to climb down into the drain. The rungs were indeed rusty. They felt loose against the brickwork and as Beetle cautiously placed his boot into the slime at the bottom of the drain, the last one came away in his hand. He dropped it into the mud with a dull *thub* and shone his light along the drain.

Beetle’s blue light didn’t show much; it was made for the clean whiteness

of ice, not the brown muckiness of sludge. But it did show enough for him to see that the lump that he had feared was an unconscious Jenna was indeed a pile of old clothes. Just to make sure, Beetle waded through the muck, trying to ignore the wetness seeping into his boots, and tentatively poked at the lump with his foot. It moved. Beetle yelled. A huge rat ran out and scuttled off into the dark.

“You all right?” Marcus’s face appeared in the manhole opening.

“Yeah.” Beetle felt a little foolish. “A rat. Big one.”

“There’s a lot around here,” said Marcus. “And they’re not Message Rats, that’s for sure. It’s a whole different species, I reckon. Bite you as soon as look at you. You were lucky.”

“Ah . . .”

“I take it that’s not the Princess?” Marcus asked.

“No.”

“You don’t want to stay down too long. It’s been raining for days now. There might be a rush.”

“A what?” Beetle couldn’t hear Marcus clearly as a low thunder like the rush of blood in his head was filling his ears.

“A *rush*. Oh sheesh—hey, *look out!*”

Beetle didn’t hear a word Marcus said, but he did hear what was coming along the drain. He leaped up, grasping for the rung, only to find that it was gone. It was, he remembered, lying in the mud where he had thrown it. The roar in his ears grew louder, and the next thing Beetle knew, a hand was reaching down and Marcus was yelling, “Grab hold. Quick!”

A few seconds later Beetle and Marcus were lying on the wet cobblestones at the end of Dan’s Dive, staring down at the wall of water rushing along the drain below.

“Thanks,” gasped Beetle.

“No worries,” puffed Marcus. “Good thing Princess Jenna *wasn’t* down there.”

Beetle sat up. He ran his hands through his hair as he always did when he was worried—and immediately wished he hadn’t. Where *was* Jenna?

Chapter 15

Doom Dump



Jenna was in Doom Dump.

As she wordlessly yelled for Beetle and the lantern fizzled out, Jenna had heard the studded door creak open behind her. Terrified, she had tried to run, but her feet had stayed planted firmly outside the door. And when an arm had stretched out and a hand grabbed the back of her cloak and began to pull her inside, Jenna's feet had taken her across the threshold of Doom Dump and waited patiently while a girl, wearing witch robes that would not have looked out of place in Gothyk Grotto, **Locked** and **Barred** the door.

"Marissa!" gasped Jenna, but once again she made no sound.

"Goldfish." Marissa smirked. Mockingly she opened and closed her mouth like a fish.

Keeping her hand firmly on Jenna's cloak, Marissa shoved Jenna along the corridor of a typical long, narrow Castle house. It was totally dark, but Marissa knew her way. She threw open the first door leading off the corridor and pushed Jenna into a tunnel-like room, lit at the far end by a pair of rushlights and a tiny fire sputtering in a huge fireplace. The rushlights illuminated what at first appeared to be a comforting scene—a table around which a group of woman were seated for a meal. But Jenna felt anything but comforted. Sitting at the table was the Port Witch Coven.

All eyes were upon Jenna as Marissa delivered the unwilling addition to the party. As they reached the table—which had two empty chairs—Marissa

tightened her grip on Jenna, afraid that her prize might elude her at the last minute. This was her first test set by the Coven and she knew she'd done well. Both the **Silent** and the **FootLock** Spells had worked, but Marissa knew from past experience how elusive Princesses could be and she wasn't taking any chances.

Marissa pushed Jenna down into one of the vacant seats and took her place beside her. Jenna did not react. She stared at the table in front of her, at first because she was determined not to catch a witch's gaze and then because of a horrified fascination with what the witches were actually eating. It was, she thought, worse than Aunt Zelda's offerings—and that was saying something. At least Aunt Zelda made an effort to cook whatever weird ingredients she used until they were reasonably unrecognizable, but the bowls of squirming salted earwigs and a large dish of skinned mice covered with a lumpy, pale sauce made no effort at disguise. Jenna felt sick. She switched her gaze to the tablecloth, which was covered in **Darke** symbols and old gravy.

Linda—the boss-with-the-stare from the jewelry stall—pushed her chair back with a teeth-on-edge scrape and got to her feet. Slowly and menacingly she made her way around the table toward Jenna. Linda loomed close and Jenna could smell the musty damp of the witch's robes mixed with a stale, heavy smell of dead roses. Suddenly, as if to land a slap, Linda's arm shot out and, despite herself, Jenna flinched. But Linda's open palm traveled to a spot just above Jenna's head and snatched something out of the air.

Linda drew down her closed fist and held it in front of Jenna. She muttered a few words to reverse the **UnSeen** and snapped open her fingers. Lying in the witch's palm was the tiny shimmering bird that Jenna had—so long ago, it seemed—refused to pick up from the stall.

"There, little birdie," Linda crooned. "You have done well. You have **Brought** the Princess. You may have your reward." From inside her robes, she pulled out the tiny cage that hung around her neck, took it off and swung the cage and its prisoner in front of the terrified bird lying in her hand. "Here is your little friend. Take a look."

Both birds looked at each other. Neither made a move or a sound.

Taking everyone by surprise, Linda suddenly threw the bird in her hand into the air. At the same time, she hurled the tiny cage to the floor. She raised her foot to stamp on the cage, but the Witch Mother shouted out, "Linda! Stop that *right now!*"

Linda's foot stopped in midair.

"You made a bargain, you keep it," said the Witch Mother.

"It's only a poxy *bird*," said Linda, her foot hovering above the cage.

The Witch Mother hauled herself to her feet. "You renege on a **Darke** bargain at your peril. Remember that. Sometimes, Linda, I think you forget the Rules. It is not good for a witch to forget the Rules. Is it, Linda?" She

leaned across the table, eyeballing the witch. “*Is . . . it?*” the Witch Mother repeated menacingly.

Linda slowly lowered her foot away from the tiny cage. “No, Witch Mother,” she said sulkily.

Daphne, the dumpy witch who looked, Jenna thought, as if she had been sewn into a sack that someone had left some rotten rubbish in, got up quietly. She tiptoed up behind Linda and picked up the cage.

“You’re horrible,” Daphne bravely told Linda. “Just because you stamp on my giant woodworm all the time doesn’t mean you can go stamping on *everything*.” Daphne’s fat, mouse-stained fingers fumbled with the cage door and managed to open it. The trapped bird fell out onto the table next to a neat pile of mouse bones—which the Witch Mother was using to pick her teeth—and lay there, stunned.

Jenna watched with horror, all the while desperately trying to make a plan but unable to think of anything. She saw the hovering bird—the one that had brought her to Doom Dump—fly down to its companion and nudge it gently. The stunned bird fluttered its wings, shook its feathers and, a few moments later, both birds flew unsteadily off into a dark corner of the room. Jenna found herself envying them.

The Witch Mother turned her attention to Jenna. “Well, well,” she said with a ghastly grimace. “We have our Princess.” She looked Jenna up and down as though she were buying a horse and trying to get it cheap. “It will do, I suppose.”

“I *still* don’t see why we need one,” came a querulous voice from the shadows. It belonged to a young witch with a large towel wrapped around her head.

“Dorinda, I have already told you why,” said the Witch Mother. “I’d have thought with those ears your memory might have improved.”

Dorinda gave a loud wail. “It’s not my fault. I didn’t *want* elephant ears. And I don’t see why we want a Princess either. She’ll just spoil things. I *know* she will.”

“Shut up, Dorinda,” snapped Linda. “Or else.”

Dorinda shrank back into the shadows—it was Linda who had **Bestowed** the elephant ears upon her.

“As I told you before, Dorinda—the possession of a Princess gives a coven the right to rule all other covens,” said the Witch Mother. She turned to Marissa and patted her arm. “You made the right choice to come to us, dearie.” Marissa looked smug.

As if they had already lost interest in their new acquisition, the witches switched their attention from Jenna to the remains of their meal and carried on talking and arguing as though she was not there.

Jenna watched them suck the rest of the mouse bones clean and then pick

out the biggest earwigs and pop them into their mouths. The only thing that gave her any satisfaction was the expression on Marissa's face as she tried to force down an earwig. Marissa's old coven, the Wendron Witches, ate normal, forest-gathered food. Jenna had once had dinner there and had actually enjoyed it. That was, she remembered, the night they had tried to kidnap her.

Once supper was over, the Witch Mother called out in a rasping voice, "Nursie! Nursie! Clear the plates. *Nursie!*"

A rotund figure, whom Jenna recognized but could not place, bustled into the room carrying a bucket over the crook of her arm like a handbag. She stacked up the plates, scraping the revolting leftovers into the bucket, and staggered out, balancing the plates precariously. A few minutes later she returned with the same bucket, but this time it contained a concoction of foul-smelling Witches' Brew, which she ladled into cups for the witches. Nursie glanced at Jenna briefly, showing no interest in her, but as she left the room once again, Jenna remembered where she had seen her before. Nursie was the landlady of The Doll House—a guesthouse next door to the coven's residence in the Port, where Jenna had once had the misfortune to spend a night.

The witches slurped their Witches' Brew and continued to ignore Jenna. The Witch Mother tipped her head back and noisily drained her cup, then she patted her stomach and regarded Jenna with a satisfied sigh. Mouse and maggot casserole followed by a slug of Witches' Brew always improved her temper—the coven's new acquisition wasn't so bad, all things considered.

"Welcome, Princess," the Witch Mother said, pulling at a piece of mouse ear stuck in a gap between her teeth. "You are one of us now."

"*I am not,*" retorted Jenna silently, causing the rest of the coven to fall about laughing.

"As near as makes no difference, dearie," said the Witch Mother who, after many years of goldfish spells, was a wiz at lip-reading. "By midnight tonight you will be one of us, like it or not."

Jenna shook her head violently.

The Witch Mother rubbed her hands together and perused Jenna once more. "Yes. You'll do nicely." She gave Jenna her best smile—formed by parting her lips and showing two rows of blackened teeth. "Very nicely."

Jenna was not sure how to take this. She wasn't sure that being considered good witch material was exactly a compliment.

Linda looked irritated. "You're such a toady, Witch Mother. She'll be a rotten witch. We wouldn't even look at her if she wasn't a Princess."

The Witch Mother glared at Linda and turned to Marissa, who was rapidly becoming her new favorite. "Now, this is a special job for you, Marissa dearie. Take the Princess to the room we've prepared and make her put on her witch robe. Take all that she has away from her. You can have her nice circlet if you want, it will suit you."

“No!” Jenna gave a silent yell and her hand flew up to her head. “You are not having it. You are *not*.”

“Oh, I so *love* goldfish spells,” spluttered the witch with her hair matted into a tall spike on top of her head.

“Quiet, Veronica,” said the Witch Mother sternly. “Now, Marissa, take the Princess away.”

Marissa looked very pleased with herself. She grasped Jenna’s arm and pulled her to her feet, then she propelled her toward a heavy curtain hanging at the far end of the room. Jenna tried to resist but her feet betrayed her and took her seemingly willingly along with Marissa. As they reached the curtain the Witch Mother called out, “Bring me her nice red furry cloak when you’re done, Marissa. It gets so cold here. Shakes my old bones, it does.”

Linda glared at the departing Marissa; her long-nurtured position as Witch-Mother-in-waiting was looking precarious. She got to her feet. The Witch Mother looked up suspiciously.

“Linda, where are you going?” she asked.

Linda passed a hand wearily across her forehead. “It’s been a long day, Witch Mother. I think I’ll take a little nap. I do so want to be at my best for tonight’s . . . *proceedings*.”

“Very well. Don’t be late. We start at midnight *on the dot*.”

Gimlet-eyed, the Witch Mother watched Linda leave. She listened to the witch’s footsteps clumping loudly up the stairs; she heard the creaking of the bedroom floorboards above and the squeak of Linda’s bedsprings.

However, although Linda’s footsteps had gone upstairs to bed, Linda had not. The Witch Mother had never mastered the art of **Throwing** footsteps and consequently did not believe it was possible. But it was. When Linda left the room, her footsteps had stomped up the stairs and into her bedroom, then they had jumped up and down on her bed and squeaked the bedsprings. Linda herself, however, had some-where else to go.

Unaware of Linda’s deception, the Witch Mother surveyed the remaining three witches with an air of satisfaction. “We are on the up,” she said. “Not only are we now six in our coven, we will soon be seven—and our seventh member will be a *Princess*.”

From somewhere at the back of the house came the sound of a scream.

“Goodness me, what *is* Marissa doing to our dear Princess?” the Witch Mother said with an indulgent smile. But the Witch Mother was—as Linda often commented—getting forgetful. And what she had forgotten was that Jenna was still **Silent**.

It was Marissa’s scream.

Chapter 16

Call Out



Beetle arrived at the Wizard Tower breathless and flustered. Hildegarde opened the door to him. She looked surprised.

“What are you doing here?” she said. “You and Princess Jenna have just been the subject of a nine-nine-nine from Gothyk Grotto. You should be there waiting for the Emergency Wizard.”

Beetle fought to get his breath back. “I . . . she . . . they . . . let us go. Must see Marcia . . . now . . . urgent.”

Hildegarde knew Beetle well enough to send an express messenger straight up to Marcia’s rooms. While the messenger set the stairs on emergency and disappeared in a whirl of blue, Beetle paced the Great Hall impatiently, not daring to hope that it would have any result. He was as amazed as Hildegarde when, no more than a few minutes later, a flash of purple appeared at the top of the spiral stairs and whizzed its way down. In a moment Marcia was hurrying across to the agitated Beetle.

Marcia listened to Beetle’s story of Merrin in the Palace attic, the Two-Faced Ring, the **Darke Domaine** and finally, Jenna’s disappearance, with increasing concern.

“I knew it,” she muttered. “I *knew* it.”

Marcia heard Beetle out and then sprang into action. She sent Hildegarde up to the **Search** and Rescue Center on the nineteenth floor of the Wizard Tower to begin a **Search** for Jenna at once.

“And now,” said Marcia, “we must do a **Call Out** to the Palace. There is no time to lose.”

It was a relatively easy matter to **Call Out** all the Wizard Tower Wizards. The Tower had an extremely ancient **Magykal** intercom system that no one understood anymore, but which still worked—although Marcia did not dare use it too often. A fine spiderlike web of **Magykal** threads connected all the

private rooms and public spaces in the Tower. The control point was a tiny circle of lapis lazuli set high up in the wall beside the Wizard Tower doors. Beetle watched Marcia ball her right hand into a fist and then throw it open, letting go a well-aimed stream of **Magykal** purple that hit the center of the circle, whereupon a wafer of paper-thin lapis detached itself and floated down into Marcia's outstretched hands. Marcia pressed the flimsy circle of blue into her left palm. Then she held her hand up to her mouth and addressed her palm in an oddly flat monotone.

“Calling all Wizards, **Calling** all Wizards. This is a non-optional **Call Out**. Please make your way immediately, I repeat, *immediately*, to the Great Hall.”

Marcia's monotone sounded in every room in the Wizard Tower, as loud and undistorted as though she were there in person—much to the dismay of one elderly Wizard taking a bath.

The effect was immediate. The silver spiral stairs slowed to steady mode—a setting that allowed easy access for all—and a few seconds later, Beetle saw the blue cloaks of the first Wizards descending.

Wizards and Apprentices gathered in the Hall—the Wizards grumbling that the ExtraOrdinary Wizard had chosen to do a **Call Out** practice just as they were about to have tea, the Apprentices chattering with excitement. Beetle kept an eye on the stairs for Septimus, but although plenty of green robes were mixed in with the blue, his was not among them.

The last Wizard stepped off the stairs and Marcia addressed the crowd. “This is not a **Call Out** practice,” she said. “This is the real thing.”

A surprised murmur greeted her announcement.

“All Wizards are required to form a **Cordon** around the Palace within the next half hour. I intend to put the Palace into **Quarantine** as soon as possible.”

A collective gasp of shock echoed through the Great Hall, and the lights inside the Tower—which, if there was nothing else to do, reflected the Wizards' collective feelings—turned a slightly surprised pink.

Marcia continued. “To that effect I am asking you to exit the Tower with Mr. Beetle. En route to the Palace you will provide backup to Mr. Beetle while he **Calls Out** the Manuscriptorium Scribes.”

It was Beetle's turn to look shocked.

Marcia continued. “You will then proceed to the Palace Gate and assemble there silently please. I must impress the need for *absolute silence* upon you all. It is imperative that our target in the Palace does not realize what is happening. Understood?”

A murmur of assent ran through the Hall.

“Raise your arm, Beetle, so that they all know who you are.”

Beetle obeyed, thinking that it was pretty easy to see who he was, as he was the only one wearing an Admiral's jacket. But right then—after learning that

Merrin had been living in the Palace for nearly two years and Silas Heap had not noticed—Marcia had a poor opinion of the observational powers of the average Ordinary Wizard. She was taking no chances.

“Beetle, I now declare you to be my **Call Out** Emissary,” Marcia said rather formally. From her ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt she took a tiny scroll tied in a wisp of purple ribbon and gave it to Beetle.

The scroll lay in Beetle’s palm, surprisingly heavy for its size.

“Gosh . . .” he said.

“The scroll is a twice-tap,” Marcia informed him. “Make sure you hold it at arm’s length when it is **Enlarging**, as they can get a bit hot. Once it’s full size, all you have to do is read out what it says. Emissary scrolls are reasonably intelligent, so this one should respond to most things Miss Djinn throws at you. I have given you the adversarial model.” Marcia sighed. “I suspect you will need it.”

Beetle suspected he would too.

“Also Beetle, although the Chief Hermetic Scribe is *obliged* to let all Indentured Scribes go on a **Call Out**, she herself does not have to attend. And frankly I would prefer it if she didn’t. Understood?”

Beetle nodded. He totally understood.

Marcia raised her voice and addressed the assembled Wizards and Apprentices. “Now, please leave the Tower with Mr. Beetle in an orderly fashion.”

“But Septimus hasn’t come down yet,” said Beetle.

“No, indeed Septimus hasn’t.” Marcia sounded annoyed. “At the very moment when I should be relying on my Senior Apprentice, he has chosen to absent himself and go listening to some ridiculous *twaddle* peddled by Marcellus Pye. I shall be sending a Wizard to get him.” And, thought Marcia, to tell him that he will most certainly *not* be beginning his **Darke Week** that night.

Now Beetle understood why he was Emissary—once again, he was Septimus’s replacement. It took the shine off it a little. But only a little.

And so, while Marcia embarked on the more time-consuming Castle **Call Out**, Beetle led the Wizards and Apprentices out of the Wizard Tower. Like a gooseherd with a gaggle of disorderly geese, he took them down the wide, white marble steps, across the cobbles of the courtyard, shining and slippery with watery sleet, and through the lapis lazuli-lined Great Arch into Wizard Way.

Beetle’s entourage created quite a stir amongst the Longest Night promenaders. Even the brightest window display could not compete with the impressive sight of a Wizard Tower **Call Out**. The gold braid on his Admiral’s jacket glinting in the torchlight, Beetle walked proudly along Wizard Way at the head of a sea of blue flecked with green, and the crowds

parted respectfully to let them through. It was a wonderful moment but all he could think about was—*where was Jenna?*

On the nineteenth floor of the Wizard Tower, Hildegarde was sitting at the huge **Searching Glass**, scanning the Castle. The three portly and somewhat self-important **Search** and Rescue Wizards were annoyed at not being asked to conduct the **Search** themselves, especially as Hildegarde was only a mere sub-Wizard, but as she had been sent by the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, there was nothing they could do but proffer patronizing advice and hover irritatingly close by.

Hildegarde studiously paid them no attention. She focused all her energy on the **Searching Glass**, bringing her slowly growing **Magykal** powers to guide it. But all the **Glass** did was insist on focusing on Doom Dump, which was where Hildegarde knew that Beetle had last seen Jenna. She wasn't very good at this, she thought gloomily. Jenna was sure to be far away by now.

Chapter 17

Witch Princess



While Hildegarde was peering through the **Searching Glass** at the decrepit roof of Doom Dump, deep inside the house itself Linda was skulking in the shadows outside the scullery where Marissa had taken Jenna.

Linda needed a few minutes to get her spell ready for the upstart Marissa—a spell that would make Dorinda’s elephant ears look like a party trick. And as she went over the spell in her mind for the last time, strengthening it, making it just that *little* bit nastier (more warts), Linda heard the same scream from the scullery that the Witch Mother had heard. Preoccupied with her spell, Linda was not thinking straight. She too assumed the scream came from Jenna, so she waited a few seconds more so that Marissa could finish whatever she was doing. But as the sound of choking came through the door, Linda began to get worried. It wouldn’t do to have their Princess throttled just yet—not until they had thoroughly defeated the Wendron Witches. She threw open the scullery door and stopped in amazement. Linda was impressed. She couldn’t have done better herself.

Jenna had Marissa in a headlock—and it was a good one too, Linda noticed. In her younger days Linda had been a big fan of headlocks, although now she let her spells do the work for her.

Marissa’s face was an interesting shade of purple. “Lemme go!” she was gasping. “*Lemme . . . aaah . . . go!*”

Jenna looked up and saw Linda. Marissa was in no position to look up, but

she knew from the pointy boots with the dragon spikes up the back who it was.

“Get her . . . off me,” Marissa gasped in a hoarse whisper.

You touch her and you’ll regret it, Jenna mouthed **Silently** at Linda.

Linda looked amused. She liked fights, and one between a witch and a Princess was pretty much top of her fight wish list. Unfortunately however, there was business to attend to and she needed to get on with it before the Witch Mother came tottering along to see what was happening.

“Well *done*,” Linda told Jenna. “Very impressive. You continue like this and I might just change my mind about Princesses. Possibly. Now just keep holding her right there. *Perfect*.”

Jenna saw that Linda was eyeing Marissa like a snake working out where to strike. Something was about to happen and she could see it wasn’t going to be good—particularly for Marissa.

Linda raised her hands up to her face and then pointed both index fingers at Marissa’s head, squinting down them like a marksman. It reminded Jenna horribly of how the Hunter had once lined her up in the sights of his pistol.

“Keep her still,” Linda instructed Jenna. “Hold her *right there*.”

Marissa whimpered.

Jenna did not like the turn events had taken. Suddenly she was Linda’s accomplice. She knew that Linda was about to do something very bad to Marissa and she did not want to be part of it, but she dared not let go. If she did, Marissa would immediately turn on her—as would Linda. She was stuck.

Slowly Linda lowered her pointing fingers and, as she did so, two thin beams of brilliant blue light streamed from her eyes and rested on Marissa’s face. Then the witch began to chant:

*“Heart and brain
Flame and pain
Blood and bone
Rattle and moan
Lung and liver
Shriek and shiver . . .”*

Marissa let out a terrified wail. She knew that this was the beginning of the dreaded **Exit** spell, the spell that takes away human form and replaces it with another—forever. It was, like most of Linda’s nastiest spells, **Permanent**.

“No!” yelled Marissa. “Please, *noooooooooo!*”

Linda’s yellow incisors slipped over her bottom lip as they always did when she was concentrating. The **Exit** was long and complicated. It required a great concentration of energy, but it was already off to a good start. Linda was very pleased with the way the Princess was helping; it was so much easier with an assistant. Excited, Linda now moved into the main body of the

spell, where all Human parts of Marissa were one by one reassigned to Toad. Her voice descended to a low monotone so that the words became blurred into one long, singsong chant.

From Marissa's terror, Jenna was beginning to realize that if she kept Marissa in her headlock she would be party to something truly awful. She had to do something—but what?

Linda's menacing chant continued, the witch's voice rising ever higher. The gloom in the scullery deepened and the thin beams of light from Linda's blue-black eyes cut through the dark like needles, joining the witch with her victim.

"Princess Jenna. Please. Let me go," Marissa whispered desperately. "I'll do anything, anything you want. I *promise*."

Jenna didn't believe Marissa's promises. She had to get what she wanted while she still had the witch in her grasp—but how could she? She was **Silenced**. Very slightly she loosened the headlock. Marissa looked up, tears welling in her eyes.

"Princess Jenna. I'm sorry. I'm *really* sorry. Please help me. Please, oh *please*."

Jenna pointed to her mouth and Marissa understood. She muttered a few words and whispered, "Okay. It's gone."

Linda's voice suddenly regained its normal pitch, the chant slowed down and once more the words became gruesomely clear:

*"Pinprick bones and
Poison glands,
Warty skin
And creeping hands . . ."*

Marissa screamed. She knew the end was coming very, very soon. "*Please* let me go," she gasped.

Jenna tested her voice. "Fix the feet thing," she hissed.

Marissa gabbled something under her breath and hissed, "It's gone, it's gone. Now, please, please, *please*."

Jenna cautiously tried a small step back, taking Marissa with her—*she was free*. She released the headlock.

Chaos ensued.

Marissa sprang up and Jenna raced off past Linda, heading for the door. Mouth open, Linda stopped mid chant. Marissa hurled herself at Linda, biting, kicking and screaming, Linda fell backward under the onslaught and hit her head with a *craaack* on the stone flagged floor.

Jenna had just got out of the door and was running down the corridor when, through the gloom, she saw the large bulk of the Witch Mother teetering on her tall, spiked shoes, blocking the far end of it.

“Marissa, is that you?” the Witch Mother’s suspicious voice called out of the dark. “What’s going on down there?”

Trapped, Jenna hurtled back to the scullery, slammed the door and leaned against it, holding it shut. Marissa was sitting on Linda and, as far as Jenna could make out, trying to strangle her. At Jenna’s return she looked up in surprise.

“She’s coming,” gasped Jenna.

Marissa stared at her, uncomprehending. “Who’s coming?”

“*Her*. The Witch Mother.”

Marissa went pale. She had assumed that when Linda had tried to **Exit** her, she had been acting on the Witch Mother’s instructions. She leaped up from Linda—who gave a small moan, but did not move—and pointed at the door that Jenna was leaning against. Jenna squared up for a fight, but a fight was the last thing on Marissa’s mind. “**Lock, Stop and Bar!**” she shouted. A small but definite *click* came from the door.

“It won’t last long,” said Marissa, “not against *her*. We’ve got to get out of here.” She headed for the only window in the dingy scullery, which was set high above a table heaped with a pile of black cloth. Marissa leaped up onto the table and pushed the window open. “It’s the only way out. There’s a bit of a drop but it’s a soft landing. Here, put this on.” Marissa picked up the pile of black cloth and threw it at Jenna, who ducked. It landed on the floor beside her.

Marissa looked annoyed. “Do you want to get out or not?” she demanded.

“Of course I do.”

“Well, those are your witch robes. You’ve got to put them on.”

“Why?”

Marissa sighed impatiently. “Because you won’t get out if you don’t. The window’s **Barred** to all Cowan.”

“*Cowan?*”

“Yeah. Cowan. Non-witches. Like *you*, dumbbo.”

The door handle rattled. “Marissa?” came the Witch Mother’s voice. “What’s going on in there?”

“Nothing, Witch Mother. It’s fine. Nearly done,” Marissa called out. “*Put them on—quick,*” she hissed to Jenna. “There’s enough witch stuff in them to fool a stupid window. *Hurry!*”

Jenna picked up the robes as though she were picking up a shovel of cat poo.

The door handle rattled again, louder. “Marissa, why is the door **Locked?**” The Witch Mother sounded suspicious.

“She got out, Witch Mother. But it’s okay. I’ve got her. Nearly done!” Marissa trilled out cheerfully. To Jenna she whispered, “*Are you going to put them on or not? Because I’m going right now.*”

“All right, *all right*,” whispered Jenna. They were only clothes, she reasoned. Wearing witches’ robes didn’t actually mean anything. She threw the musty black cloak over her head, pulled it down over her own red robe and quickly did up the buttons.

“Suits you,” said Marissa with a grin. “Come on,” she beckoned Jenna up onto the table, and Jenna scrambled up. Marissa opened the window and the cold, sleety night air blew in. “Put your arm out,” she said.

Jenna went to put her arm out but her hand came up against something solid, which felt like congealed slime. “Yuck!” she gasped, and snatched it back.

The Witch Mother had surprisingly good hearing. “*Marissa?*” came her voice suspiciously through the door. “Is there someone else in there with you?”

“Just the Princess, Witch Mother,” Marissa called out and then whispered to Jenna, “*Rats—the robes aren’t enough.*”

Jenna looked down at her black witch cloak, which enveloped her like the night and made her feel very peculiar. It seemed quite enough to her. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“If you want to get out, I’m going to have to do something else.”

Jenna didn’t like the sound of that. “Like what exactly?”

The door handle rattled once again. “Marissa, I can hear voices,” the Witch Mother shouted. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing, Witch Mother! She’s got her robes on. We’ll be out soon,” Marissa called. And then to Jenna, “*Like I’m going to have to make you a witch.*”

“No way!”

“*Marissa!*” The door handle rattled angrily. “I heard the Princess. She’s not **Silent** anymore. What’s going on in there?”

“Nothing. Honestly. It was *me*, Witch Mother.”

“Don’t lie to me, Marissa. *Let me in!*” The Witch Mother rattled the door handle so violently that it fell off, bounced its way across the floor and hit Linda on the head.

“Aargh . . .” Linda groaned.

“What was *that*? If you don’t let me in *right now*, I shall **Smash** the door and then there’ll be *trouble*,” the Witch Mother yelled.

Marissa looked panic-stricken. “I’m going,” she told Jenna. “You can stay here and good luck to you. Don’t say I didn’t try. See ya!” And with that she pulled herself up to the window. She was halfway through when a loud *craaaaaack* came from the door and a long split ran through the wood from top to bottom.

“Marissa. Wait!” yelled Jenna. “Do the something else—*whatever* it is.”

Marissa’s head appeared at the window. “Okay. This is a bit yucky,” she

said, “but it’s got to be done.” She poked her head back through the window and kissed Jenna. Jenna leaped back in surprise. “Told you it was yucky.” Marissa grinned. “But you’re a witch now. You don’t belong to the Coven yet, you’d have to kiss them *all* for that.”

“No *thanks*.” Jenna grimaced.

The sound of splintering wood heralded the metal tip of the Witch Mother’s boot appearing through the door.

“Time to go, Witch,” said Marissa.

Jenna scrambled through the window and leaped into the dark. She landed on an old compost heap.

“Run!” hissed Marissa.

With brambles tearing at them, Jenna and Marissa raced through the overgrown garden, scrambled over the wall and dropped down into the back alley. Behind them the Witch Mother—her large bulk stuck in the tiny window—screamed in fury and **Sent** curses after them. The curses skittered around the garden, bounced off the walls and **ReBounded** on the Witch Mother.

The two witches tore up the dark back alley, heading toward the welcoming lights of Gothyk Grotto. As Jenna slammed the door shut behind her to the accompaniment of the door monster, she grinned. Suddenly Gothyk Grotto looked so *normal*.

Marcus approached, unfazed by the sight of two witches in the shop. It was not unusual for people to dress up on the Longest Night festivities—he had just sold all their remaining skeleton suits to the staff of Wizard Sandwiches.

“Need any help?” he asked.

Jenna threw back her voluminous witch’s hood.

Marcus gasped. “Princess Jenna, you’re *safe*. Your friend, wotsisname . . . Earwig—he was looking for you.”

The mention of earwigs made Jenna feel sick. “Beetle! Is he here?”

“Nah. He’ll be pleased you’re safe; he was going nuts. But there’s someone here from the Wizard Tower for you.” Marcus winked at Jenna. “Good luck.”

The door monster roared again and Hildegarde rushed in. She skidded to a halt and stared at Jenna and Marissa.

“It is you!” she gasped. The **Searching Glass** had told her that the fleeing witch was Jenna, but she had not believed it. Catching her breath, Hildegarde said, “Princess Jenna, you do know those robes are the real thing, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” said Jenna stonily.

Hildegarde looked disapprovingly at Jenna and the company she was keeping.

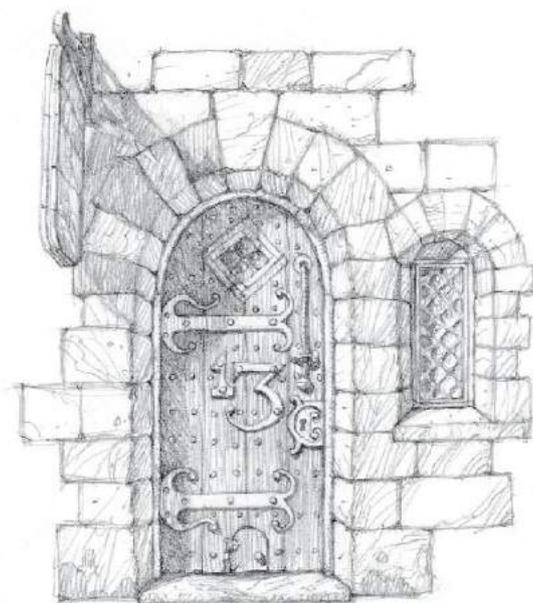
“Madam Marcia has asked me to take you straight to the Palace at once. She will be meeting you there. Witches’ robes are not appropriate attire and I suggest you take them off right away.”

Hildegarde's attitude annoyed Jenna. "No," she said. "These robes are mine and I'm wearing them."

Marissa grinned. She could get to like Jenna.

Chapter 18

The Emissary



The tide of Ordinary Wizards flowed to a halt outside a small, dimly lit storefront about a hundred yards down Wizard Way, on the right-hand side. A sign above the shop announced it to be NUMBER THIRTEEN, MAGYKAL MANUSCRIPTORIUM AND SPELL CHECKERS INCORPORATED.

Beetle stepped out of the protective pool of Wizards and looked up at his old, once loved, workplace. The windows were misted with the breath of twenty-one scribes toiling away inside, and through the strip of cloudy glass above the teetering piles of books and manuscripts he could see a yellow glow of light. But it was a gloomy window for the Longest Night—no wasteful candle displays were allowed under Jillie Djinn’s regime.

Beetle felt sorry for the scribes working while Wizard Way was abuzz, but he was pleased they were still there. He had been worried that they might have left early that night, as they always had done in his time as Front Office Clerk and General Dogsbody. But Jillie Djinn’s grip on the Manuscriptorium had tightened since Beetle left. She did not believe in leaving early—especially to have fun.

Two Wizards, sisters Pascalle and Thomasinn Thyme, stepped forward. “We are happy to be your escort, Mr. Beetle, if you need one.”

Beetle thought he could use all the help he could get. “Thank you,” he said. He took a deep breath and pushed open the door. There was a loud *ping* and the door counter clicked over to the next number. The Front Office was a

shambles and it made Beetle feel sad. The large desk, which he had kept so neat and organized, was a disgusting mess of papers and half-eaten sweets, the floor was unswept and sticky underfoot and there was a distinct smell of something small and furry having died under one of the many untended stacks of papers.

Beetle's gaze traveled around the dingy room, taking in the flimsy half-wood, half-glass panel that separated the Front Office from the Manuscriptorium itself, the ancient grayish paint peeling off the walls and the festoons of cobwebs looping down from the ceiling. He wondered if perhaps he hadn't noticed how run down it all was when he had worked there. But one thing he knew he would have noticed was the state of the small, reinforced door behind the desk that led to the Wild Book and Charm Store—it was nailed shut, with two thick planks across it. Beetle wondered how anyone managed to get in to clean. He presumed they didn't. The state of the Wild Book and Charm Store did not bear thinking about.

Suddenly the half-glass door that led into the Manuscriptorium flew open and the Chief Hermetic Scribe bustled out. She carried a large handkerchief on which, Beetle noticed, in addition to the letters CHS, her collection of qualifications were carefully embroidered around the edge in different colors. So that's what Jillie Djinn did in her long evenings alone in her rooms at the top of the Manuscriptorium, thought Beetle.

Jillie Djinn blinked in surprise at the sight of Beetle flanked by two Wizards.

"Yes?" she snapped.

Beetle had been clutching the Emissary scroll tightly, waiting for this very moment. Quickly he twice-tapped the scroll and held it at arm's length. With a faint buzz a flicker of purple ran around the edges of the scroll, a waft of heat hit him, and suddenly he was holding the full-size version. It felt surprisingly thin and delicate (because in **Magyk** matter can neither be created nor destroyed), but Beetle thought that only added to its air of mystery and importance. He caught Jillie Djinn's gaze and saw she was, for a moment, impressed—then her default expression of mild irritation quickly reasserted itself.

Beetle was determined to be scrupulously polite. "Good evening, Chief Hermetic Scribe," he said. "I am here as Emissary of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard."

"So I see," Jillie Djinn replied coolly. "And what does she want *now*?"

Getting into his official role with some relish, Beetle began to read from the words busily arranging themselves on the scroll.

"Please be informed that a Castle **Call Out** is in progress. The presence of all Indentured Scribes is **Called** for with immediate effect," he proclaimed.

Jillie Djinn went straight to major annoyance.

“You can tell the ExtraOrdinary Wizard that important work is in progress here,” she snapped. “Manuscriptorium scribes will not drop everything and rush off on the whim of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard.” From one of her many pockets she took out a small timepiece and squinted at it. “They will be available when the Manuscriptorium closes in two hours, forty-two minutes and thirty-five seconds precisely.”

Marcia Overstrand’s Emissary was having none of it. He tried—not entirely successfully—to suppress a smile as the exact words he needed scrolled up before him. Savoring the moment, Beetle slowly read them out.

“Please be advised that **Call Out** Conditions state that Manuscriptorium scribes will be available as and when required. Failure to provide them *on demand* will invalidate your Terms of Office.”

Jillie Djinn sneezed into her overqualified handkerchief. “*Why* are they required?” she demanded in an indignant splutter.

The words on the Emissary scroll continued to roll up, all gaining Beetle’s approval—he could not have put it better himself.

“Please be informed that I am not at liberty to divulge that information. Any questions or complaints relating to this matter may be addressed in writing to the Wizard Tower once the **Call Out** is stood down. You will receive an answer within seven days. I now require you to make your scribes available *immediately*. So be it.”

Jillie Djinn spun on her heel and flounced off into the Manuscriptorium, slamming the flimsy door behind her. Beetle glanced at his two escorts, who looked taken aback.

“We’d heard she was difficult,” whispered Pascalle.

“But we didn’t know she was *that* bad,” finished Thomasinn.

“She’s gotten worse,” said Beetle. “Much worse.”

From behind the partition Beetle heard a sudden burst of excited chatter, followed by the thudding of twenty-one pairs of boots as the scribes jumped down from their desks.

Above the hubbub came Jillie Djinn’s squawk, “No, Mr. Fox, this is *not* time off. You will all stay two hours, thirty-nine minutes and seven seconds later tomorrow.”

The door to the front office burst open and Foxy emerged at the head of the scribes. At the sight of Beetle he looked startled.

“Hey, Beet. I’d make yourself scarce. We’re on a **Call Out** practice and you-know-who is in a foul temper.”

“I know.” Beetle grinned, waving his scroll at Foxy. “I’ve just told her.”

Foxy gave a low whistle. He grinned too. “Wish I’d thought of that. So we’ve got the Longest Night off after all. Thanks, Beet!”

“No, Foxy. This is for real. You *are* on a **Call Out**.”

“And you’re running it? I’m impressed.”

“I’m just the messenger, Foxo.” With a flourish, Beetle twice-tapped the end of the scroll and popped the **Reduced**—and now very cold—version safely into his pocket. He raised his voice. “Outside please, everyone, and join the Ordinaries. We are to make our way to the Palace Gate, where we will assemble and await further instructions. Once outside, please be quiet—this is a silent **Call Out**. Fast as you can please—ouch! Partridge, mind where you’re putting your fat feet, will you?”

“Nice to see you too, Beetle.” Partridge grinned as he and Romilly Badger squeezed by in the crush of eager scribes. The excitement of the **Call Out** was infectious, and no one seemed to mind that they would have to work late the next day. Beetle counted the scribes out until it was just himself and Foxy left in the Front Office.

“D’you want Miss Djinn too?” asked Foxy warily. “I can go and get her if you do.”

“Thanks, Foxo, but Marcia said she’d rather not.”

“Yeah. Quite understand,” said Foxy. “Look, I gotta go and **Lock** the **Charm** cupboard. Part of the job. Not that I got any **Charms** to **Lock** up, but it doesn’t look good if I don’t.”

Beetle glanced outside. The crowd of Wizards, Apprentices and scribes were waiting, looking expectantly at him. “Be quick,” he said.

Foxy nodded and scooted off. A minute later, Foxy was back, beckoning frantically to Beetle.

“Beetle—he’s here. *Again.*”

“Who’s here?”

“Who do you think? Daniel Dingbat Hunter.”

“*Merrin?*”

“Yeah. Whateverhecallshimself. *Him.*”

Beetle asked his two Wizard escorts to take the waiting Wizards and scribes down to the Palace. “I’ll catch up with you as soon as I can,” he promised. “Okay,” he said to Foxy. “Quick. Show me.”

Very quietly Foxy pushed open the door into the Manuscriptorium and pointed inside. Beetle peered in. All he could see were the ranks of tall, empty desks, each under its own pool of dim yellow light. Of Merrin there was no sign—or, indeed, of Jillie Djinn.

“I can’t see him,” Beetle whispered.

Foxy looked over Beetle’s shoulder. “Shoot. I did see him. I *know* I did. He’s probably in the Hermetic Chamber.”

Beetle was indignant. “He shouldn’t go in *there.*”

“Try telling Miss Djinn that—he goes wherever he wants,” said Foxy gloomily as he quietly closed the door. “He’s up to something, Beet.”

Beetle nodded. That was most certainly true.

“Little toad,” said Foxy.

The little toad was indeed up to something. He was, as Foxy had suspected, in the Hermetic Chamber.

Merrin was waiting—and he didn't like it. To pass the time he was eating a long licorice bootlace pulled from the secret siege drawer of the large round table in the middle of the Hermetic Chamber. The drawer was now crammed with a stash of sticky licorice, while its rightful contents languished in the garbage bin in the yard.

Merrin was pleased with his afternoon's work. He was getting good at this **Darke** stuff, he thought. He'd used a **Darke Screen** and had walked out of the Palace right under Sarah Heap's nose, which had been fun, especially when he had deliberately trodden on her foot. And now, because Jillie Djinn had been snappy with him, he'd fixed that too. She wouldn't ever do that again, thought Merrin, as he smirked into the ancient Glass propped up against the wall.

Merrin peered into the darkness of the Glass and behind him he saw the reflection of the Chief Hermetic Scribe, sitting hunched over the table. He tried out a few more expressions in the Glass, tapped his feet impatiently and wandered over to the Abacus, where he began clicking the beads endlessly back and forth in such an irritating way that anyone else but the cowed Jillie Djinn would have yelled at him to *stop it right now!*

Merrin sighed loudly. He was bored and there were not even any scribes to annoy. He toyed with the idea of going down to the basement and smashing a few things, but the Conservation Scribe scared him. He wished the **Things** would *hurry up*. What was taking them so long? All they had to do was bring the stupid **Darke Domaine** with them—what was so difficult about that? He kicked the wall impatiently. *Stupid Things.*

Leaving Jillie Djinn staring into space, Merrin wandered out along the seven-cornered passageway and surveyed the dark and empty Manuscriptorium. It was oddly spooky without the scribes. He wouldn't be spending any time in this dump, he thought, but it would suit the **Things** nicely. It would keep them out of his way too, and he could hang out wherever he wanted. And do whatever he liked. So there.

Chapter 19

The SafeChamber



*As Beetle resumed his place at head of the **Call Out**, the person who should have been leading it was immured in the basement of a house on Snake Slipway. Not far above him, a loud knocking on the front door by a breathless Wizard went unheard.*

Septimus was listening to Marcellus Pye discussing the dangers of, and defenses against, the **Darke**. Time was ticking on. Very slowly. So far there had been at least an hour's worth of dangers, if not more.

Alchemist and Apprentice were sitting inside a tunnel-like, windowless chamber. The atmosphere was oppressive; the air was fuggy with candle wax fumes, and a faint taint of lingering **Darke** made Septimus edgy. Unlike Marcellus Pye, who sat opposite him in a comfortable tall-backed chair, Septimus was perched uncomfortably on a bumpy stone bench. Between them was a small table, thick with candle grease, on which yet another burning candle added its contribution.

Marcellus, however, looked at ease. He was in his secret **SafeChamber** with his Apprentice, instructing him in the defense of the **Darke**, and that—as far as he was concerned—was how things should be. A **SafeChamber** was something every self-respecting alchemist always possessed, but never admitted to. In what Marcellus now called “his first life” as an alchemist, five hundred years in the past, he had installed his **SafeChamber** between two adjoining rooms in the basement of his house. It occupied the space so

cleverly that none of the subsequent inhabitants had ever noticed the few feet lost from each room.

Marcellus had constructed the chamber himself—he had had no other choice. In the days of the Castle alchemists, one of the drawbacks of the profession had been that it was impossible to get a builder. Once a builder knew that a job was for an alchemist, he would suddenly become very busy, or fall off a ladder and “break a leg,” or have to go away to a distant relative’s sickbed. Whatever the excuse, he would certainly never be seen again. The reason for this was that the perils of working for an alchemist had become legend among Castle builders, passed down from Master to Apprentice: “Never work for an alchemist, lad,” (or lass, but usually lad). “As soon as the job’s done, you’ll surely be found floating facedown in the Moat to keep the secrets of what you’ve just built. However much gold they offer you, it just isn’t worth it. Believe me.” Although this wasn’t true for all alchemists, it has to be said that there was some basis for this belief.

Marcellus Pye possessed many talents but building was not one of them. The outside of the chamber was passable because Marcellus had covered his rough brickwork by putting up great sheets of wooden paneling in both the affected rooms. However, the inside of the chamber was a mess. Marcellus had not realized how hard it was to build walls that went up straight—and stayed that way—so the walls grew closer and closer together, almost meeting at the top. Once he had installed the false wall behind which he kept his most arcane treasures, the **SafeChamber** was no more than a claustrophobic corridor.

Septimus was almost lulled into a trance by the flickering of a multitude of candles perched in the various nooks and crannies provided by Marcellus Pye’s unusual approach to bricklaying. The chamber was streaked black with the soot from their flames, and thick rivulets of wax ran down the walls, glistening in the yellow light. The only thing that kept Septimus from drifting off was the way the bricks in the wall pressed their sharp corners into him as though they were jabbing at him with angry fingers. Every now and then he would wriggle uncomfortably and lean against another, slightly different, pointy bit.

“Stop fidgeting and pay attention, Apprentice,” said Marcellus Pye sternly from his comfortable chair. “Your life may—indeed, it most probably *will*—depend upon it.”

Septimus suppressed a sigh.

At last Marcellus got down to the reason that Septimus had come to see him. “You will, I presume, be attempting to retrieve Alther Mella’s ghost from the **Darke Halls** tonight?”

“Yes. Yes . . . I’m going to the **Darke Halls**. At midnight.” As he said the words Septimus felt a thrill of excitement mixed with fear. Suddenly it all

began to feel very real.

“And you will seek to enter the **Darke Halls** through the Dungeon Number One **Portal**?”

“Yes, I will. Isn’t that the only place where you can get in?” Septimus asked.

Marcellus Pye looked quizzical. “Not at all,” he said. “But it *is* the only place you can get to in time for midnight tonight. There are other **Portals**, some of them extremely effective for matters like this, where you might find your timing is less important. However, none are in the Castle.”

Leaving Septimus to wonder why Marcia hadn’t told him about these other, possibly more effective **Portals**, Marcellus took the candle from the table and got up from his chair with a small groan. Looking like the old man he really was, the alchemist shuffled along the length of the chamber to the false wall at the end, which was, Septimus noticed, paneled like the room outside. Marcellus pressed his hand onto one of the panels, slid it to one side and reached into the space behind. Septimus heard the clink of glass on glass, the rattle of small dried things in a metal box, the thud of a book, then a relieved, “Got it!”

As Marcellus shuffled back, Septimus very nearly leaped to his feet and ran for it. The light from his candle threw dramatic shadows onto the alchemist’s face, and as he advanced toward Septimus, hand outstretched, Marcellus looked exactly as he had when Septimus had first seen him—a five-hundred-year-old man grabbing at him, pulling him through a glass into a secret world below the Castle. It was not a good moment. It unsettled Septimus more than anything else had in the tense buildup to his **Darke Week**.

Unaware of the effect he had had, Marcellus Pye resumed his place next to Septimus. He looked pleased. “Apprentice, I have in my hand something that will give you safe passage through the **Portal** and into the **Darke**.”

He unclasped his fist to reveal a small, dented tinderbox. Septimus felt horribly disappointed. What was Marcellus thinking? He owned his own tinderbox and it was a lot better looking than that one. And it probably worked better too—Septimus prided himself on being able to get a fire going in fifteen seconds. He and Beetle had had a fire-start competition not long ago and he had won best of five.

Marcellus handed him the tinderbox. “Open it,” he said.

Septimus did as he was asked. Inside were the usual components of a tinderbox—a small, pronged wheel, a flint, some thin strips of cloth infused with the Castle’s well-known, highly flammable wax and some dried moss.

Septimus had had enough. Marcia’s parting shot came back to him: “Alchemie stuff is nothing but smoke and mirrors, Septimus. All talk and no do. None of their stuff ever did work. It was complete *rubbish*.”

Septimus got to his feet. Marcia was right—as usual. He *had* to get out of

the oppressive little chamber dripping with candle wax, fusty with **Darke** secrets. He longed to be part of the everyday Castle world once more. He wanted to run through the streets, breathe the cold fresh air, see the myriad of Castle lights twinkling in the windows, watch people as they promenaded back and forth admiring—or not—their neighbors' lights. But more than anything, he wanted to be with people who weren't fussy five-hundred-year-old alchemists who thought you were still their Apprentice.

Marcellus had other ideas. "Sit down, Apprentice," he said sternly. "This is important."

Septimus remained standing. "No, it's not. It's an old tinderbox. That's all. You can't fool me."

Marcellus Pye smiled. "It seems I already have, Apprentice. For this is not what it appears to be."

Septimus sighed. Nothing ever was where Marcellus was concerned.

"Patience, Apprentice, patience. I know this chamber is cramped, I know it is stuffy and foul, but what I am going to show you can only be revealed here. It will not survive outside the **Darke** for long." Marcellus looked up at Septimus, his expression serious. "Septimus, I cannot—I *will* not—let you venture defenseless into the **Darke**. Sit down. Please."

With another sigh, Septimus reluctantly sat down.

"You see," said Marcellus, picking up the tinderbox, "like all **Darke Disguises**, this is not what it appears to be. As you too must be when you go into the **Darke**."

"I *know*. **Masks, MindScreens, Bluffs**—I've done all that stuff with Marcia."

"Well, of course you have." Marcellus sounded conciliatory. "That is no more than I would expect. But there are some things to which even the ExtraOrdinary Wizard does not have access. That's what we alchemists are—or *were*—for. We kept in touch with the **Darke**. We went where Wizards did not dare."

This was no more than Septimus had suspected, given Marcia's warnings about alchemists, but this was the first time he had heard Marcellus admit to it.

Marcellus continued. "As an Alchemie Apprentice it is only right that you too should know how to work with the **Darke**. It is all very well the Wizards sticking their heads in the sand like one of those birds . . . oh, what are they called?"

Septimus was not sure. "Chickens?" he suggested.

Marcellus chuckled. "Chickens will do nicely. Like chickens, they peck at what is in front of them but they do not understand what it truly is. Sometimes they call it something else, like **Other**, or **Reverse**, but that does not change anything. **Darke** remains **Darke** whatever you call it. So now, Apprentice,

you must decide whether to take your first step into the **Darke** the Alchemie way—and see what is really inside the tinderbox—or the Wizard way, and see no more than an old flint and some dried-up moss. Which is it to be?”

Septimus thought of Marcia and he knew what she would say. He thought of Beetle and he really wasn't sure what he would say. And then he thought of Alther. Suddenly Septimus had the oddest feeling that Alther was sitting right next to him. He turned and thought he saw a momentary flash of purple, a suggestion of a white beard. Then it was gone, leaving Septimus with the certain knowledge that he would never see Alther again unless he said, “The Alchemie way.”

Marcellus smiled with relief. He had been extremely worried at the thought of Septimus venturing into the **Darke** in the customary *just think good thoughts and it will be all right* Wizard style. The old Alchemist was also just a little triumphant. He had, for the moment, won his Apprentice back.

“Very wise,” Marcellus said. “Now you stop being a chicken and embark on your first conscious step into the **Darke**. Septimus, you understand that this is only to be taken if you truly wish to do it. Do you?”

Septimus nodded.

“Then say it.”

“Say what?”

“That you want to do this. Say ‘I do.’”

Septimus hesitated. Marcellus waited.

There was a long pause. Septimus had the heady sensation of being about to step over a threshold that even Marcia had not crossed.

“I do,” he said.

As though someone had thrown a switch, all the candles in the chamber went out. The temperature plummeted.

Septimus gasped.

“We must not be afraid of the **Darke**.” Marcellus's voice came through the fumes of extinguished candles. Septimus heard the Alchemist click his fingers. At once the candles burst back into flame, but the chamber remained cold—so cold that Septimus could see clouds of breath misting the air.

Marcellus now had Septimus's full attention. “Apprentice, your first step is to choose a name to use when you are dealing with the **Darke**. Wizards—if they venture this far—usually reverse their whole name, but they do not realize how dangerous this is. You will never be free of the **Darke** if you do this, you can always be **Found**. We Alchemists know better. We take the last three letters from our name and reverse them. I suggest you do that.”

“S—U—M,” Septimus said.

Marcellus smiled. “*Sum*: I am. Very good. If you have to use your name, this is what you say. It is close enough to pass for the truth, but not true enough for you to be **Found**. Now we get to the reason we are here:

Apprentice, do you wish to take on the **Darke Disguise**?”

Septimus nodded.

“Say it,” prompted Marcellus. “I cannot take you through these steps on a mere nod of the head. I must be clear that you wish to proceed.”

“I do,” said Septimus, his voice trembling a little.

“Very well. Apprentice, place the tinderbox over your heart, like so . . .”

Septimus held the tinderbox over his heart. It sent a stab of cold right through him like a dagger of ice.

Marcellus continued his instructions. “Keep your hand stone still—no more fidgeting. Good. Now repeat these words after me.”

And so the old Alchemist began, using **Reverse** words that Septimus had never heard before, words that he suspected Marcia too had never heard. They chilled him more than the icy press of the tinderbox, more than the freezing air inside the chamber. By the time Septimus had spoken the last words—“*I dnammoc siht ot eb: draug sum*”—his teeth were chattering with cold.

“Open the box,” said Marcellus.

At first Septimus thought the tinderbox was empty. All he could see was the dull gray metal of the insides, and yet when he looked closely he was not sure that it *was* metal that he was seeing. It looked misty, as though something was there and yet not there. Tentatively, as though something might bite, he put his finger into the box. His finger told him that there was indeed something in the tinderbox—something soft and delicate.

“You have found it.” Marcellus looked pleased. “Or rather, it has found you. That is good. Now take it out and put it on.”

Feeling as though he was playing a “let’s pretend” game with Barney Pot, Septimus pinched his thumb and forefinger together and got hold of something elusive, barely there. It felt like pulling spiderwebs from a jar—spiderwebs that the spider in the jar did not want him to have. Septimus pulled hard, and as he raised his hand high he saw that he was drawing a long stream of gossamer-thin fabric from the tinderbox.

Marcellus Pye’s dark eyes shone with excitement in the candlelight. “You’ve done it . . .” he whispered, sounding very relieved. “You’ve found the **Darke Disguise**.”

The **Darke Disguise** reminded Septimus of one of Sarah Heap’s floaty scarves, although Sarah favored brighter colors. This was an indeterminate color that Sarah would have condemned as dull; it was also much larger than any scarf that Sarah possessed. Septimus kept on pulling it from the tinderbox, and the **Darke Disguise** kept on coming, falling in fine, weightless folds across his lap, tumbling down to the floor. Septimus began to wonder how long it actually was.

Marcellus answered his unspoken question. “Its length will be right for whatever you need. Now, Apprentice, a word of advice. I suggest you pull a

thread from it now—it is easily done—and keep it with you. It will be as strong as a rope and, in my experience, it can be useful to have something a little **Darke** that comes easily to hand when one is venturing into these realms.”

Not for the first time, Septimus wondered what secrets Marcellus had in his past. But what he said made sense. He pulled a thread from the loose weave and began to wind it into a neat coil.

Marcellus looked on approvingly. “Confidently done. Remember, the **Darke** power of this exposed thread will begin to evaporate after about twenty-four hours. Do not keep it in your Apprentice belt; you do not want to upset any **Charms** or **Spells**. A pocket will do.”

Septimus nodded—he’d figured *that* out for himself.

“Now I suggest you return the **Darke Disguise** to the tinderbox,” said Marcellus. “Any time spent out, even in here, dilutes its power a fraction.”

As instructed by Marcellus, Septimus spoke the words “I knaht uoy, esaelp eriter,” and the **Darke Disguise** evaporated into the tinderbox like a wisp of smoke.

Marcellus regarded his Apprentice with satisfaction. “Very good indeed. It obeys you well. Just before you enter the **Darke Portal**, open the box and instruct it so—‘ehtolc Sum.’ Now that it **Knows** you it will stick to you like a second skin. Take care not to wear it away from the **Darke**, as it will soon dissolve into nothing, which is why I have to show it to you in this chamber. Use it well.”

Septimus nodded. “I will,” he said.

“And one last thing.”

“Yes?”

“The **Darke Disguise** may corrupt **Magyk**. Do *not* take this box into the Wizard Tower.”

Septimus was dismayed. “But . . . what about my Dragon Ring?”

“You are wearing the ring. It is part of you, and the **Darke Disguise** will protect all parts of you.” Marcellus smiled. “Do not worry, it will shine as brightly as ever for you, Apprentice, although others will not see it.”

Septimus looked at his ring, which was glowing in the gloom of the **SafeChamber**. He was relieved. He would feel lost without it.

Marcellus issued his last instruction. “When you return with Alther—as I know you will—you must bring the **Disguise** straight back here to store it. Understand?”

“I understand,” said Septimus. “Thank you. Thank you very much, Marcellus.” Carefully he put the tinderbox in the deepest, most secret pocket of his Apprentice tunic. “I’ll see you later. At the party,” he said.

“Party?” asked Marcellus.

“You know—my birthday party. With Jenna. At the Palace.”

“Ah, yes. Of course, Apprentice. I forget.”
Septimus rose to go. This time Marcellus Pye did not stop him.

Chapter 20

Cordon



Night had fallen while Septimus had been marooned in the **SafeChamber**. He stepped out into the cold, crisp air and headed up Snake Slipway, pulling his cloak tight and walking fast to try and rid himself of the chill that seemed to have settled into his bones. At the end of the slipway he took the Rat Run, a well-trodden alley that led straight to the middle of Wizard Way.

The Longest Night was one of Septimus's favorite times. As a boy soldier in the Young Army, Septimus had looked forward to it; even though he had had no idea at the time that the day was also his birthday, it had felt special. He had loved seeing all the candles placed in every window in the Castle. The practice had been frowned on by the Supreme Custodian and his cronies, but it was too ancient a custom to dislodge and it had become a small symbol of resistance. That particular meaning had been lost on the young Septimus—all he knew was that seeing the lights made him feel happy.

But now the Longest Night had a much greater significance for him: it was a symbol of hope and renewal—the anniversary of his rescue from the Young Army by Marcia. Despite the task ahead of him that night, Septimus strode along the Rat Run with the familiar feeling of excitement and happiness running through him. A few cold specks of sleet settled briefly on his upturned face as he smiled at the ancient houses, all with a single, brave candle burning in each window. He breathed in the fresh air, ridding himself of the cloying fumes of the old Alchemist's house and pushed away his

feelings of guilt about Marcia and what he knew she would see as disloyalty with Marcellus.

Septimus was determined to do what *he* felt was right. It was his fourteenth birthday—a day recognized throughout the Castle as the beginning of independence. He was no longer a child. He was his own person and he made his own decisions.

A few streets away, the Drapers Yard Clock began to chime. Septimus counted six and picked up speed. He was late. He'd promised to be with his mother by six.

As Septimus hurried into Wizard Way he found that things were not quite as he had expected. The Way was crowded—as it usually was on the Longest Night—but instead of people wandering along, chatting and pointing out some of the more interesting windows (for the last few years there had been a serious outbreak of competitive tableaux in many of the shop fronts) everyone was standing quite still, gazing toward the Palace. That was in itself strange enough, but what really worried Septimus was the anxious silence.

"I'm surprised you're not down there too, Apprentice," a voice somewhere near his elbow said. At the word "Apprentice" several heads turned toward Septimus.

He looked around to find Maizie Smalls, who lived up—or was it down?—to her name, standing beside him. She looked worried. "You know, at the **Cordon**. Around the Palace," she elaborated.

"**Cordon?** Around the *Palace*?"

"Yes. I do hope my cat's all right. Binkie hates changes to his routine. He's an old cat now, you see, and—*oh . . .*"

But Septimus had gone. He was off, heading for the Palace. He made his way through the crowd faster than he'd expected. As soon as anyone saw that it was the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice pushing past or treading on their toes, they stepped back respectfully—apart from Gringe, who stopped him and growled, "Better get a move on, lad. Bit late, aren't you?" But he let him go when Lucy protested, "Leave it, Dad. Can't you see he's in a hurry?"

Septimus looked gratefully at Lucy and pushed on, catching as he went a glance of Nicko talking to Lucy's brother, Rupert. But there was no time to lose saying hello to Nicko; Septimus was desperate to get to the Palace.

By the time he had reached the Palace Gate, Septimus knew that Gringe was right; he was indeed late—too late. Stretching across the Palace lawns, a few yards inside the Gate, was the **Cordon**: a long line of Wizards, Apprentices and scribes, encircling the Palace, each holding a piece of purple cord that linked them to the next person. From the stillness and the concentration of those forming it, Septimus knew the **Cordon** was complete. Septimus had never seen a **Cordon** for real, although the Wizard Tower occasionally held practices in the courtyard and some Apprentices had once—

to Gringe's disgust—placed a **Cordon** around the North Gate gatehouse as a joke. Septimus knew that, ideally, all in the **Cordon** would have been holding hands, like children in the popular Castle game “Here We Go Around the Wizard Tower,” but in order to encircle the longest building in the Castle, each person forming the **Cordon** needed to use a piece of **Magykal Conducting Cord**, a length of which all Wizards, Apprentices and indentured scribes always carried with them.

Septimus stood at the front of the subdued crowd watching the **Cordon**, trying to work out what was going on. Being on the outside of something **Magykal** was an unfamiliar feeling for Septimus—and he didn't like it at all. But he soon began to realize that he had had a narrow escape. If he had been a few minutes earlier, Marcia would have expected him to take part, and with the **Darke Disguise** deep in his secret pocket, he would not have dared. The relief of not having to explain that to Marcia almost made up for missing out on a historic piece of **Magyk**—*almost*.

Septimus could not resist a closer look. He slipped through the Palace Gate and walked slowly across the grass. As he drew nearer he saw four figures inside the **Cordon** making their way rapidly toward the Palace doors. One was, of course, Marcia. The second, Septimus realized with a stab of something that could have been jealousy, was *Beetle*. Beetle was taking the place that should have been his. And there were two others following behind. One he was pretty sure was Hildegarde and the other was a witch. *What was going on?*

Septimus had stopped at what he thought would be a safe distance from the **Cordon**. He realized he must have muttered something, because the sick bay Apprentice, Rose, who was part of the **Cordon**, turned around. She smiled at Septimus and mouthed, “Shh. It's silent.”

“Why?” Septimus mouthed. Rose shrugged and made an *I have no idea* face.

Septimus felt beside himself with frustration. A thousand questions ran through his mind. What had happened—had Silas done something stupid? Where was Jenna? Where were his parents? Were they safe? And then an awful thought occurred to him: Was this something to do with the whatever-it-was in the attic that Jenna had asked him to look at the previous evening? *Was this all his fault?*

Septimus set off along the outside of the **Cordon**. The air was cold, and a sparse fall of sleety snow was drifting down, landing on the winter cloaks of the Wizards and scribes, settling briefly on woolly hats and bare heads alike before melting away. Already the hands holding on to the cords (gloves were not permitted, as they broke the **Connection**) looked red and cold, and some of the younger Apprentices, who in their excitement had rushed out without their cloaks, were shivering.

Keeping watch on the Palace as he went, Septimus tried to think what it was that Jenna had said the night before. *There's something bad up there*—that was all he could remember her saying. But he knew that he hadn't given her a chance to tell him anything else. He scanned the Palace for clues to what was happening. It looked the same as ever, solid and peaceful in the winter's night—but then something caught his eye. A candle in an upstairs window went out. Septimus stopped behind a line of elderly Wizards wearing an assortment of colorful scarves and woolly hats and stared up at the Palace windows. Another candle died, and then another. One by one, like dominoes slowly falling, *click . . . click . . . click*, the candles were being snuffed out. Septimus knew that Jenna had been right—something bad *was* up there.

“You wouldn't help Jenna because you were so uptight about keeping your stupid head clear for your **Darke Week**, and *now* look what's happened,” he told himself angrily. “And you went off to some **Darke** Alchemie chamber when you know Marcia didn't want you to, and so now you've missed taking part on the most amazing **Magyk** you are ever likely to see. That, dillop brain, is what getting close to the **Darke** does. It makes you think only of yourself. It takes you away from people you care about. And now you don't have anyone to talk to and it *serves you right*.”

Septimus veered away from the **Cordon** and its **Magykal** camaraderie and headed off into the night. He had reached the riverbank and was jogging toward the Palace Landing Stage when the ghost of Alice Nettles suddenly **Appeared** to him. Since Alther's **Banishment**, Alice didn't **Appear** anymore, but she made an exception for Septimus. Alice was the only ghost Septimus knew who always seemed to react to the weather and tonight, even though he knew she could not feel the cold, she looked frozen.

“Hello, Alice,” he said.

“Hello, Septimus,” said Alice in a faraway voice. She turned to Septimus and, for the first time ever, the ghost of Alice Nettles reached out to a human being. She put her hands on Septimus's shoulders and said, “Bring my Alther back, Apprentice. Bring him back.”

“I'll do my best, Alice,” Septimus replied, thinking how cold Alice's touch was.

“You will go tonight?” she asked.

The key to Dungeon Number One—and the beginning of his **Darke Week**—hung heavy in his pocket. But the **Cordon** had thrown all of Septimus's plans into confusion. He had absolutely no idea what was going on or what Marcia would be doing at midnight. He hesitated.

Alice looked anxiously at Septimus. “You do not answer, Apprentice.”

Septimus saw the stricken look in Alice's eyes and he made a decision. He may have let Jenna down but he was not going to do the same with Alice. He would enter Dungeon Number One whether Marcia was there or not. “Yes,

Alice. I will go and get Alther.”

A slow smile dawned on Alice’s face. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Septimus left Alice wandering along the Landing Stage, gazing dreamily at the river. He walked slowly along the riverbank, plunged into gloom. Never—not even in the Young Army—had Septimus felt so alone. He realized how he had become used to being in the very center of things, to being an integral and important part of the **Magykal** life of the Castle. Now that he suddenly found himself on the outside of the **Magykal** circle—literally—he felt bereft.

Septimus trudged through the long grass right at the edge of the riverbank, while the dark, cold waters of the river ran silently by. Tiny snowflakes drifted down and settled on his thick woolen cloak, and the grass felt crisp with frost beneath his feet. As he walked Septimus felt the presence of the Palace looming up on his left side. Like the scene of a horrible accident, his eyes felt drawn to it. And every time he glanced up with a feeling of dread, he saw yet another window go dark, and he could not help but imagine that Jenna was still in there, trapped somewhere.

He plowed on along the riverbank, convinced he could have stopped whatever was happening to the Palace if only he had helped Jenna when she had asked him. But it was all too late. Jenna wasn’t here to ask him now. He was on his own—and he had only himself to blame.

Septimus reached the gate that led through the tall hedge into the Dragon Field. He pushed it open. There was only one creature left for him to talk to—his dragon, Spit Fyre.

Chapter 21

Quarantine



Inside the Palace, unaware of the events silently unfolding around her, Sarah Heap was perched precariously at the top of a stepladder in the Palace entrance hall. By the light of a beautiful chandelier (it had taken Billy Pot ten whole minutes to light all of its candles) Sarah was busy nailing up a banner that read HAPPY 14TH BIRTHDAY JENNA AND SEPTIMUS above the archway that led into the Long Walk. She was not pleased to hear the sound of approaching footsteps outside.

“Botheration,” Sarah muttered under her breath. She knew that one set of footsteps belonged to Marcia Overstrand—somehow Marcia always managed to walk everywhere as though she owned the place. Sarah struggled irritably with the unwieldy banner above her head. Trust Marcia to arrive early, she thought. Well, she would have to make herself useful until the party started. Goodness knows there was plenty to do. *Oops*. She could hold the stepladder steady for a start.

The sound of the footsteps changed from cinder scrunches on the path to purposeful *tippy-taps* of purple python on wood as they crossed the bridge over the ornamental moat. They were followed by equally purposeful—but less proprietary—thuds of the footsteps of Marcia’s companions.

The Palace doors were pushed open and the *tippy-taps* strode across the stone floor of the entrance hall. They halted below Sarah’s ladder.

“Sarah Heap,” Marcia announced.

Why, Sarah wondered crossly, did Marcia have to sound so officious? She turned around, hammer raised, the last two nails held between her lips.

“Mrgh?” said Sarah, finally deigning to look down at her visitors. “Ah, hrr Brrr n Hrrrr,” she said, actually pleased to see two of Marcia’s companions, Beetle and Hildegarde, although less pleased to see the young witch they had with them. She took the nails out of her mouth. “You’re early,” she said. “But I could do with some help. There’s always more to do than you think to get a party ready.”

“Mum,” said the young witch.

Sarah nearly dropped her hammer. “Goodness, Jenna. It’s *you*. I didn’t know this was going to be a fancy dress party.”

“Mum, it’s *not*, but—” Jenna began, wanting to explain before Marcia jumped in with both feet.

Sarah looked disapproving. “Well, I don’t know why you are walking around in that *witch stuff*,” she said. “You really shouldn’t. It’s not nice.”

“Sorry. It’s been a bit of a rush. But—”

“You’re telling me. We’re not nearly ready for the party, and now—”

“Mum, listen—”

“The party’s cancelled,” said Marcia.

Sarah dropped the hammer, narrowly missing Marcia’s right foot. “*What?*” she said angrily.

“Canceled. You and everyone inside the Palace have five minutes to leave.”

Sarah was down the ladder in a flash. “Marcia Overstrand, how *dare* you?”

“Mum,” said Jenna. “Please listen, it’s important, something has—”

“Thank you, Jenna, I’ll handle this,” said Marcia. “Sarah, it is my job to ensure the safety of the Palace. There’s a **Cordon** encircling the building and I am now putting it in **Quarantine**.”

Sarah looked exasperated. “Look here, Marcia, there is no need to go to such extremes. I don’t know what Septimus or Jenna have been telling you about the party, but you really mustn’t take any notice. Their father and I will be here and we have no intention of letting things get out of hand.”

“It seems they already *have* got out of hand, Sarah,” said Marcia. She put her hand up to stop Sarah’s protests. “Sarah, listen to me, I am *not* talking about the party. And may I say, the fact that you and Silas have been here appears to have been no safeguard against anything *whatsoever*. Indeed, I am surprised—and not a little disappointed—that Silas has allowed this to happen.”

“It’s only a little birthday party, Marcia,” Sarah said snappily. “Of *course* we’ve allowed it to happen.”

“Sarah, for goodness’ sake, *listen* to what I am saying. I am *not* talking about the birthday party,” Marcia replied, equally snappily. “And you can stop waving that hammer around too.”

Sarah looked at the hammer in her hand as though she was surprised to find it there. She shrugged and placed it on the stepladder.

“Thank you,” said Marcia.

“So what are you talking about?” Sarah demanded.

“I am talking about your *lodger* in the attic.”

“What lodger? We don’t have lodgers,” Sarah said indignantly. “Things may be a bit tough sometimes but we haven’t had to rent the Palace out as a guesthouse quite yet. And even if we did, I hardly think we need your permission, thank you very much.” Sarah folded up the stepladder with an angry *bang* and began to heave it into the Long Walk. Beetle stepped forward and took it from her.

“Thank you, Beetle,” said Sarah, “that’s very sweet of you. Excuse me, Marcia, I have things to do.” With that she began gathering up the remains of streamers that were scattered across the floor.

“Mum,” said Jenna, handing her some fallen streamers. “Mum, please. There’s something horrible here. We have to—”

But Sarah was not in a mood to listen. “And you can take that witch cloak off right now, Jenna. It smells awful—just like the real thing.”

Marcia raised her voice. “This is my final warning. I am about to **Quarantine** this building.” She got out her timepiece and laid it on her palm. “You have five minutes from *now* to vacate the premises.”

This was too much for Sarah. She stood up and, hands on hips, hair angrily awry, she raised her voice even louder. “Now look here, Marcia Overstrand, I have had *quite* enough of you barging in on my daughter’s birthday—and my son’s too, as it happens—and tearing everything apart. I will thank you to *go away and leave us in peace.*”

Hildegarde had been watching Marcia’s handling of the proceedings with dismay. Before her promotion to the Wizard Tower, Hildegarde had been on door duty at the Palace. She knew Sarah Heap well and she liked her a lot. Hildegarde stepped forward and laid her hand on Sarah’s arm.

“Sarah, I’m very sorry, but this is extremely serious,” she said. “There really *is* someone in your attic and he has, so it seems, set up a **Darke Domaine** in there. Madam Marcia has placed a protective **Cordon** around the Palace to prevent the **Domaine** escaping and now, for the safety of all of us in the Castle, she needs to place the Palace in **Quarantine**. I’m so sorry this had to happen today of all days, but we dare not leave it a moment longer. You do understand, don’t you?”

Sarah stared at Hildegarde in disbelief. She wiped a hand across her forehead and sank into a battered old armchair. A faint groan came from the chair, and Sarah sprang to her feet. “Oh, sorry, Godric,” she said, apologizing to the very faded ghost who had fallen asleep in the chair some years ago. The ghost slept on.

“Is this true?” Sarah asked Marcia.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, if only you’d listen.”

“You haven’t been trying to *tell* me anything,” Sarah pointed out. “You have been issuing instructions. As usual.” She looked around, worried. “Where’s Silas?”

Her question was answered by the sound of running footsteps above. Silas Heap, blue Ordinary Wizard robes flying as, two at a time, he raced down the sweeping stairs that led down to the entrance hall was yelling, “Everyone—get out, *get out!*”

Silas skidded to a halt at the foot of the stairs and, for the first time in his life, he looked pleased to see Marcia. “Marcia,” he puffed. “Oh, thank goodness you’re here. My **SafetyGate** has been broken. It’s got out of the attic. It’s upstairs now and it’s filling the place up—*fast*. We’ve got to get a **Quarantine** put on. Marcia, you need to do a **Call Out**, get a **Cordon** around if we’ve got time—”

“All done,” Marcia told Silas briskly. “The **Cordon** of Wizards is in position.”

Silas was stunned into silence.

Marcia got down to business. “Is there anyone else in the Palace?”

Sarah shook her head. “Snorri and her mother have gone off on their boat. The Pots have gone to see the lights. Maizie’s out lighting up, Cook’s gone home with a cold, and no one’s arrived for the party yet.”

“Good,” said Marcia. She glanced up to the top of the wide flight of stairs, which led to a gallery from which the upstairs corridor ran the length of the Palace. Along the gallery, the rushlights were burning as usual, but the dimming of the light where the corridor stretched away both to the left and right told Marcia that the more distant lights were being extinguished. The **Darke Domaine** was getting closer.

“Everyone will exit the premises,” she said. “*Now!*”

“Ethel!” gasped Sarah. She raced off and disappeared into the Long Walk.

“Ethel? Who on earth is Ethel?” Marcia glanced up to the gallery. The flame on the farthest rushlight began to dim.

“Ethel’s a duck,” said Silas.

“A *duck?*”

But Silas was gone, racing off in pursuit of Sarah—and Maxie, who he just remembered he had left sitting by the fire that morning.

Up on the gallery the first rushlight had gone out and the flame on a second, nearer rushlight was faltering. Marcia looked at Jenna, Beetle and Hildegard. “It’s moving fast. If I don’t do the **Quarantine** now, this is going to get out. And frankly, I am not sure that our **Cordon** will hold it. We are very widely spaced. And I certainly won’t have time to **Raise** a **Safety Curtain**.”

“You *can’t* leave Mum and Dad,” gasped Jenna.

“I have no choice. They’re putting the whole Castle at risk—for a *duck*.”

“*You can’t do that!* I’m going to go and get them.” With that Jenna raced off. Hildegarde darted after her and grabbed her witch’s cloak.

Jenna spun around angrily. “Let go!”

The cloak felt horrible to the touch, but Hildegarde doggedly hung on. “No, Princess Jenna, you mustn’t go. It’s too risky. *I’ll* go. They’ll be in Sarah’s sitting room, yes?”

Jenna nodded. “Yes, but—”

“I’ll get them out of the window.” Hildegarde glanced at Marcia, calculating how long it would take to get to Sarah’s sitting room. “Give me . . . count me to a hundred and then do it. Okay?”

Marcia looked up at the landing. A wall of darkness now blocked any view of the corridors. She shook her head. “Seventy-five.”

Hildegarde gulped. “Okay. Seventy-five.” And she was gone.

“One,” began Marcia. “Two, three, four . . .” She signed to Beetle and Jenna to leave. Jenna shook her head.

Beetle took Jenna’s arm. “You must leave,” he said. “Your parents would not want you to stay. Hildegarde will get them out.”

“No. I can’t go without Mum and Dad.”

“Jenna, you have to. You are the Princess. You must be safe.”

“I’m sick of being *safe*,” she hissed.

But Beetle backed out of the Palace doors, taking Jenna with him. Once outside he took a small, fat tube from his pocket. “I’ve got the **Flare**,” he called to Marcia.

Marcia gave him a thumbs-up. “Thirty-five, thirty-six . . .”

“What **Flare**?” asked Jenna.

“To **Activate** the **Cordon**. Just in case.”

“In case what?”

“Well, in case the **Quarantine** doesn’t work. In case something escapes.”

“Like Mum and Dad, you mean?” Jenna said, wrenching her arm from Beetle’s grasp.

“No. In case something **Darke** escapes.”

But Jenna was not there to hear. Witch cloak flying, she was racing off along the small path that ran around to the back of the Palace. Beetle sighed. He wished Jenna would take off the witch cloak. She didn’t seem like Jenna anymore.

Feeling wretched, Beetle waited between the two burning torches on either side of the bridge. Through the open Palace doors he saw the pile of abandoned birthday presents, the discarded streamers, the HAPPY BIRTHDAY banner, all looking oddly out of place now as Marcia—purple robed and intense—paced back and forth, continuing her count. Beetle saw the last

rushlight at the top of the stairs flicker and go out and the wall of **Darkenesse**—not nighttime darkness but something thicker, more solid—begin to move down toward the pacing figure below.

Beetle watched Marcia like a hawk, terrified of missing her signal. The ExtraOrdinary Wizard was backing toward the door now. She was still counting, going on for as long as she dared in order to give Hildegarde the best possible chance.

“One hundred and four, one hundred and five . . .”

With every step backwards that Marcia took, the **Darkenesse** advanced. It reminded Beetle of a giant cider press he had once visited where you could stand inside and watch the pressing plate move down toward you. It had terrified Beetle at the time—and now it terrified him all over again.

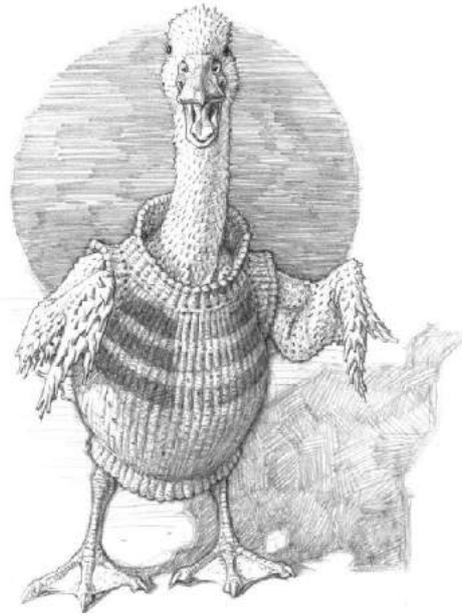
The descending roof of **Darkenesse** reached the chandelier, and suddenly all the candles sputtered out. Beetle saw Marcia raise her right hand. He pushed the **Ignite** pin into the side of the **Flare**, held the **Flare** at arm’s length and was blown off his feet by the sudden blast of light that shot into the sky. A gasp of “oohs” came from the crowd beyond, but from the **Cordon** came the quieter sound of a sustained humming, as though the Palace were surrounded by a gigantic swarm of bees. The **Cordon** was now **Active**. Marcia leaped outside, slammed the thick wooden doors shut, laid a hand on each door and began the **Quarantine**.

The **Magyk** was so strong that even Beetle—who was not a very **Magykal** person—could see the purple shimmering haze of **Magyk** playing around the doors and, as sound of the humming from the huge circle of Wizards, Apprentices and scribes filled the air, the **Magyk** spread out from the doors, creeping across the darkened windows of the Palace, **Quarantining** everything that lay within in a thin veil of purple.

Beetle hoped that what lay within did not include Hildegarde, Sarah and Silas. Or Jenna.

Chapter 22

Ethel



Sarah, forget that contrary duck and get out!” Silas was yelling.

Silas and Hildegarde were anxiously hopping up and down on the path outside Sarah’s open sitting room window. Maxie was whining fretfully. Inside Sarah was frantically searching for Ethel.

“I can’t just *abandon* her,” Sarah shouted back, hurling a pile of wash off the sofa and throwing the cushions onto the floor. “She’s hiding because she’s *frightened*.”

“Sarah, *get out!*”

To Hildegarde’s dismay, Silas clambered back in through the open window. Maxie went to follow; Hildegarde pulled the protesting wolfhound away.

“Mr. Heap, Mr. Heap!” she called in through the window. “Come back, *please!* No, Maxie. *Down.*”

Inside the room Silas was propelling a reluctant Sarah toward the open window. “Sarah,” he told her, “duck or no duck, it is time to go. Come *on.*”

Sarah gave one last try. “Ethel, dear,” she called out, “Ethel, where are you? Come to Mummy!”

An exasperated Silas maneuvered Sarah out the window. “Ethel is a *duck*, Sarah, and you are *not* her mummy. You have eight children to be mummy to, and they all need you more than that duck does. Now *get out!*”

A moment later, much to Hildegarde’s relief, both Silas and Sarah were standing beside her. Suddenly the candle flickering in the room next door to

Sarah's went out. Quickly Hildegarde reached up to close the window.

"Quack!" A flurry of movement came from underneath a pile of old curtains propped up beside the door and a yellow beak poked out.

"Ethel!"

Neither Silas, who was distracted by the sudden appearance of Jenna rounding the corner at the far end of the Palace, nor Hildegarde, who was pulling down the window, were quick enough to stop Sarah leaping back inside. Hildegarde was, however, quick enough to stop Silas clambering in after Sarah.

"No, Mr. Heap. Stay here," she said firmly, hanging on to Silas's sleeve just to make sure. "Mistress Heap, please come back, *oh no*—"

As Sarah scooped Ethel out from the pile of curtains, the door to her sitting room crashed open. A wave of **Darkeness** flooded inside, and Sarah screamed a terrified, piercing scream that Jenna would never forget. Sarah clutched her duck to her, mouth wide open in a shriek, and was lost to human sight. As the **Darkeness** swirled toward the open window, Hildegarde had no choice but to slam the window shut and put a rapid **Anti-Darke** on it just to make sure nothing escaped.

"Sarah!" Silas yelled, banging on the window. "*Saraaaaaah!*"

Jenna arrived, breathless. "Mum!" she gasped. "Where's Mum?"

Unable to speak, Silas pointed into the room.

"Get her out, Dad, *get her out!*" yelled Jenna.

Silas shook his head. "It's too late. Too late . . ." As he spoke the candle on the little table beside the window guttered and went out. Sarah's sitting room was **Darke**.

There was a stunned silence on the path outside the window. With reluctance, Hildegarde broke it. "I think," she said softly, "I think we should go now. There's nothing we can do."

"I'm not leaving Mum," said Jenna stubbornly.

"Princess Jenna, I am so sorry, but there is nothing we can do for her now," Hildegarde said gently. "Marcia has instructed that we go outside the **Cordon**."

"I don't care what Marcia has instructed," snapped Jenna. "*I'm not leaving Mum.*"

Silas put his arm around Jenna. "What Hildegarde says is true, Jenny," he said, using his old baby name for her, something Jenna had not heard for years. "Your mum would not want us to stay here. She would want us—and you in particular—to be safe. Come on."

Jenna shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. But she stopped resisting and allowed Silas to lead her away.

The subdued party walked slowly across the grass, which was becoming dusted with white as the sleet began to turn to snow in the cold of the

encroaching night. They headed toward the silent circle of Wizards, scribes and Apprentices holding their purple **Cords**. Suddenly the sky lit up with a *whoosh*. Jenna jumped.

“It’s all right,” said Hildegarde. “It’s only the signal to the **Cordon** to **Activate**.” At that a strange humming sound, like a mass of bees on a warm summer’s day, drifted toward them. It was oddly unsettling—bees did not belong to a dark winter’s night with snowflakes falling.

Jenna looked back at the Palace—*her* Palace, as she now thought of it. Every night, since Alther had been **Banished**, she would walk down the river and talk to the forlorn ghost of Alice Nettles. She and Alice would look up at the Palace and Alice would say how beautiful it looked now that every window had a light in it, and Jenna would agree. But now, like Alther, the lights were gone—every one of her candles snuffed out. It reminded Jenna of how the Palace had been when she had first moved in with Silas and Sarah, but there was one important difference: there had always been one window with a light in it—Sarah’s sitting room, where they had sat every evening. Now there was nothing.

All eyes were upon them as Hildegarde, Silas, Jenna and Maxie walked slowly toward the **Cordon**. Hildegarde chose a spot between two scribes, Partridge and Romilly Badger, who were holding either end of the **Cord** in front of the entrance to Sarah Heap’s herb garden. Somehow Partridge had managed to share his **Cord** with Romilly, rather than have a Wizard spacer between them, as was recommended practice. On either side of Romilly and Partridge, the circle of Wizards, scribes and Apprentices, linked with various lengths of purple cord, stretched out into the night. All were making the long, low drone that prepared the **Cord** for Marcia to raise the **Safety Curtain**.

Romilly and Partridge nodded at Jenna but neither smiled—they had both seen what had happened. Resolutely they continued their low drone.

Silas stepped forward.

“Don’t touch!” yelled Hildegarde, somewhat frazzled and—after his leap into the sitting room—not entirely trusting Silas to be sensible.

Silas looked annoyed. “I wasn’t *going* to,” he said indignantly. “We can’t touch the **Cord**,” he whispered to Jenna. “It will break the **Magyk**.”

“So how are we supposed to get out?” Jenna asked irritably.

“It’s all right, Princess Jenna,” Hildegarde said soothingly. “We can get out, but there’s a particular way of doing it. We need some of this . . .” Hildegarde reached into her sub-Wizard belt for her own piece of **Conducting Cord**. She drew it out and held up a very short length of purple cord. “Oh,” she said. “I don’t think that’s long enough.”

“Standard sub-Wizard length,” said Silas. “Enough for one person only.” He took a much longer length from his Ordinary Wizard belt. “Use mine. I may as well do *something* useful. Now, this is what we do; we all stand really

close together and—*Maxie come back!*”

Jenna raced after Maxie and dragged him back; the wolfhound regarded her with big, brown, accusing eyes. She held Maxie close and Silas proceeded to encircle them all with his purple **Conducting Cord**. A few minutes later, a walking parcel of three people and a wolfhound shuffled toward the **Cord** held by Partridge and Romilly. Any other time Jenna would have giggled her way along, but now it was all she could do to blink back tears—every step took her away from Sarah, marooned in the **Darke**. She glanced back at the Palace and saw that a **Magykal** shimmer of purple had crept over it like a veil, **Quarantining** everything within. She wondered if Sarah knew what had happened. She wondered if Sarah now knew anything at all . . .

Silas meanwhile was carefully tying both ends of his **Conducting Cord** to the main **Cordon Cord**, without actually touching it himself. Partridge and Romilly obligingly lifted their **Cord** like a jumping rope and the parcel of people and wolfhound shuffled underneath the **Cord** and out the other side.

“Well, that’s it,” sighed Silas. “We’re out.”

“*Mum’s not,*” said Jenna as they set off slowly through the kitchen garden, along Sarah’s neat paths that wound through the herb beds.

“I know,” Silas said quietly. “But she won’t be there forever, Jenna.”

“How do you know that?” asked Jenna.

“Because I am not going to let that happen,” said Silas. “We are going to help Marcia figure this out.”

“Marcia is the one who made all this happen,” Jenna said, annoyed. “If she hadn’t tried to boss Mum around and if she had bothered to explain things, then Mum would have had time to get out.”

“And if your mother hadn’t gone running off after a duck she would have had time to get out too,” Silas pointed out. “But that is beside the point,” he added quickly, noticing Jenna’s stormy expression. “We need to get to the Wizard Tower. Marcia will need all the help she can get.”

They walked out the door in the kitchen garden wall and stepped into the small alleyway that ran along the back, going toward Wizard Way to the left and to the river to the right. Silas led the way with Maxie; Jenna and Hildegard followed in silence. At the end of the alleyway Jenna stopped.

“I’m not going to the Wizard Tower,” she said angrily. “I’m sick of Wizards. And I’m sick of Wizards messing everything up—especially on my birthday.”

Silas looked at her sadly. He didn’t know what to say. Jenna seemed so irritable nowadays, and whatever he said was never quite right—and, he thought, it didn’t help that she was dressed in that awful witch costume, either. He rummaged in his pocket, brought out a large brass key and handed it to her.

“What’s that for?” asked Jenna.

“Home,” said Silas. “Our place in the Ramblings. I’ve been fixing it up. Making it just how your mum always wanted it to be. It . . . it was going to be a surprise for her next birthday. She’s always wanted to go home. But now . . . well, now *you* at least can go home.”

Jenna looked at the key lying heavy and cold in her palm. “That’s not home, Dad. Home is where Mum is. Home is *there*.” She pointed back at the Palace, the top row of **Darke** attic windows just visible over the alley wall.

Silas sighed. “I know. But we’ll need somewhere to sleep for now. I’ll meet you there later—Big Red Door, There and Back Again Row. You know the way.”

Jenna nodded. She watched Silas walk briskly away, heading toward Wizard Way.

“Shall I come with you?” asked Hildegarde, who had kept a discreet distance behind Jenna and Silas. And then, receiving no answer, asked, “Jenna—Princess Jenna, are you all right?”

“No. And *no*,” Jenna said sharply, cutting Hildegarde short before her sympathy got too much for her. She turned and ran back up the alley.

Hildegarde decided not to follow. Princess Jenna needed some time on her own.

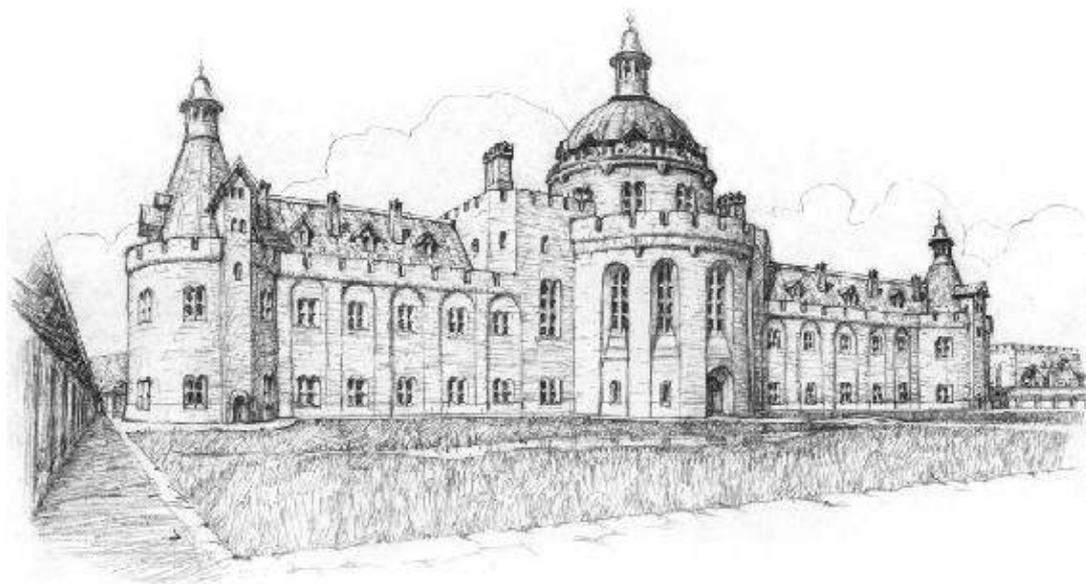
Jenna followed the alley back up past the kitchen garden wall, around the dogleg turn that skirted the edge of the Dragon Field, and headed toward the river. The freezing night air bit into her as she ran, and she pulled her witch’s hood up over her head to keep warm. The dark, dull shine of the river came into view and, breathless now, she slowed to a walking pace. The alley came to an end at a small, neglected jetty, which Jenna wandered onto. At the very end of the jetty she sat down on the damp and mossy wooden boards, wrapped her cloak around her and gazed at the sluggish black waters flowing silently beneath her feet. And there she sat, thinking of Sarah imprisoned in the Palace, wondering what was happening to her. She remembered childhood stories, **Darke** tales told around the fire late at night when she was meant to be asleep, tales told by visiting Wizards to the Heaps’ crowded room in the Ramblings, of people emerging after years inside a **Darke Domaine**, their eyes wild and empty, their minds gone, their voices babbling gibberish. She remembered the whispered discussions on what could have reduced people to such a state, all kinds of ghastly details that came into people’s heads late at night. And she could not help but think that all these terrible things could now, *at that very moment*, be happening to *her mum*.

Jenna sat, silent tears dripping down her neck, gazing out at the river. Flakes of snow began to settle on her witch’s cloak, and the cold coming from the water set her shivering, but she did not notice. All she wanted was to find Septimus and tell him what had happened.

But where was he?

Chapter 23

Safety Curtain



Marcia and Beetle crossed the **Cordon** using the same method that Silas had, although with greater efficiency. Once they were on the other side, Marcia stood back and looked at the Palace. She saw the purple **Magykal** shimmer covering it and the two torches on the outside of the main doors, which were still lit. Her **Quarantine** had worked. There was, however, no sign of Hildegarde, Sarah or Silas. Marcia felt worried. She scanned the inscrutable windows of the Palace and concentrated hard. Her heart sank. There was no escaping it—she **Felt** the presence of two humans inside the building. It did not bode well for Sarah and Silas—or was it Hildegarde and Silas—or Sarah and . . . Marcia briskly told herself to stop worrying. She would find out soon enough.

Marcia now began the next stage of isolating the Palace from the rest of the Castle. This was the stand down, from which the raising of the **Safety Curtain** would follow. She picked the two nearest members of the **Cordon**: Bertie Bott, Ordinary Wizard and dealer in used (or pre-loved, as Bertie liked to say) Wizard cloaks, and Rose, the sick bay Apprentice. To each one she said the prearranged stand-down password. Immediately they stopped their low hum. Rose sent the password around to her right, and Bertie sent it to his left. Like a retreating wave, the low drone faded and was replaced by the whispering of the password. Soon silence had fallen. It spread to the crowds who had gathered at the end of Wizard Way, waiting expectantly for the next

stage. Word was that the **Raising** of a **Safety Curtain** was worth watching.

At first it did not seem particularly promising. Each person in the **Cordon** was now busy knotting his or her **Cord** to their neighbor's. They laid their joined **Cord** on the ground, making sure it had no twists or kinks in it, and walked carefully away so as not disturb the delicate **Magyk**—for **Magyk** involving so many participants was a fragile thing. Within minutes of Marcia giving the password, a huge circle of **Cord** lay on the ground like a purple snake encircling the Palace. Beetle, who was feeling rather melancholy after Jenna's outburst, thought the fragile **Cord** looked sad as it lay abandoned in the trampled grass.

Meanwhile, the Wizard Way audience had drifted in through the Palace Gate in order to get a closer look. People waited patiently, with only the occasional smothered cough giving their presence away. They watched as the ExtraOrdinary Wizard knelt down and placed her hands a few inches above the **Cord**. Nudges and excited glances were exchanged—now at last something was happening.

Totally unaware of her audience, Marcia was concentrating hard. She felt a faint current of **Magyk** running unimpeded through the **Cord**, which told her that everyone had let go. Now for the difficult part, she thought. Still kneeling, Marcia kept her hands low and close to the **Cord**. What she had to do now required a huge amount of energy. She took a long, deep breath in. Beetle, who was watching Marcia intently, had never seen anyone breathe in for so long. He half expected Marcia to blow up like a balloon and float away. Indeed her cloak seemed to him to be moving outward as if it really was filling with air.

Beetle was actually stepping back in case Marcia did indeed go *pop*, when she at last stopped breathing in. Now she began to breathe out, her lips pursed as though she were blowing on hot soup. From her mouth came a shimmering stream of purple, which was drawn to the **Cord** like iron filings to a magnet. The stream of purple kept on coming; it settled on the section of **Cord** in front of Marcia and grew steadily brighter. When it was so bright that Beetle had to look away, Marcia at last stopped breathing out.

Now came the part that demanded real skill. Marcia placed her hands in the brilliant light and very slowly she began to raise her hands. Behind her the crowd gave a subdued murmur of appreciation as the blinding purple light began to move upward, following her hands while still remaining anchored to the **Cord**. Slowly, carefully, biting her lip in concentration, Marcia drew up the light, taking care not to pull it too fast, which could create weak spots or even holes in what was now a shimmering purple curtain. Beetle saw Marcia's muscles trembling with the effort, as though she were lifting a tremendously heavy weight. The curtain of light followed Marcia as, arms painfully outstretched, she got up from her knees and staggered awkwardly to

her feet. Beetle resisted his instinct to help her up, knowing well enough not to break Marcia's immense concentration, which reduced her brilliant green eyes to pinpoints of light in her pale skin.

Suddenly, what everyone in the audience had been waiting for happened. With a shout of something long and complicated—that later no one could remember—Marcia threw her arms into the air. There was a loud *whoosh*, and a curtain of blindingly bright purple light shot as high as the very tips of Marcia's fingers, then raced off along the **Cord** with the zipping fizz of fire along a fuse.

A loud and appreciative "ooh" rose from the crowd, which seemed to startle Marcia. She swung around and glared at the assembled throng.

"*Shh!*" she hissed.

Abashed, the crowd fell silent. Some began to sidle away, but the more knowledgeable stayed, knowing that the best was yet to come.

Marcia had set the curtain of light racing off in one direction only—to her right. The reason for this was that she wanted to be present at the place where the light joined up. The join in a **Safety Curtain** was a delicate thing, and although some Wizards, for dramatic effect, would have sent the light racing off in both directions and hope that it successfully melded somewhere on the other side of the Palace, Marcia was more careful. She also disapproved of drama; she thought it devalued **Magyk** and encouraged people to see it as an entertainment—hence her irritation with the crowd.

Now the wait began for the return of the purple fire. It took a while. The nearly seven-foot-high purple curtain had to travel all around the Palace and, at the back of the building, where there had been too many people on the **Cordon**, down through the garden too—fairly close, in fact, to the hedge that divided the Dragon Field from the Palace garden.

Spit Fyre slept through the oncoming rush, but his **Imprintor** and Pilot, Septimus Heap, was wide-awake. He had been expecting a **Safety Curtain**, as he knew Marcia did not do things by halves. At the sight of the swathe of **Magykal** purple moving behind the top of the Dragon Field hedge, Septimus looked gloomily at the oncoming purple wall, admiring its evenness and brilliance. Marcia had clearly performed a textbook piece of **Magyk**—and *he* had not been part of it. Septimus watched the **Safety Curtain** travel on its way, and then he went back to the Dragon House, unwilling to face Marcia just then. He knew what she would say. It would be exactly what he would say to an Apprentice of his own if he or she ever missed something like this. And he didn't want to hear it.

At last the crowd saw the purple curtain reappear on the other side of the Palace. Conscious of the disapproving presence of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, they greeted it with a restrained murmur of excitement and watched with

bated breath as one end of the shimmering curtain traveled toward the other.

Later some said that the **Closing** of the **Safety Curtain** was an anticlimax, but others said it was the most amazing thing they had ever seen. It depended—like many things in life—on what you expected to see. All saw the meeting of the two sheets of light and the violent flash that accompanied it, but those who truly looked saw, for a few amazing seconds, the history of the Castle played out before them. The **Safety Curtain** was ancient **Magyk** (which always involved some form of breath control) and had been used by Castle Dwellers in a more primitive form even before the advent of the very first ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Before the Castle Walls had been built, a **Safety Curtain** had often been put around the Castle at the dark of the moon in an effort to keep out marauders from the Forest. It hadn't worked too well at first but every time it was used it grew stronger. And like the ancient pictures on the walls inside the Wizard Tower, deep inside it were echoes and snatches of wild moments in its long existence. As the **Curtains** met and melded together, it was possible to briefly see wonderful things within the shifting lights: fierce horsemen galloping through, screaming witches riding upon giant wolverines, giant tree fiends hurling Gargle Toad bombs; all played their brief part in breaching—and thus strengthening—the **Safety Curtain**. And then they were gone. The **Magykal Curtain** settled into a completely fused circle. The moving quality of the purple light changed to a steady glow and all was still.

Those who had glimpsed these visions stood stunned for a few seconds, then broke into excited chatter. Marcia rounded on the crowd.

“Quiet!” she shouted.

The chatter died away instantly.

“This is serious **Magyk**. I have put this **Safety Curtain** in place to *protect* you, not to give you ten minutes of free entertainment.”

“We're paying for it now!” shouted one brave soul from the safety of the crowd.

Marcia glared in the direction of the heckler and her voice took on an edge of steel. “You must understand that I have placed the **Safety Curtain** there to protect us *all* against a **Darke Domaine** that has engulfed the Palace.” She paused to let this information sink in and saw, with some satisfaction, the crowd's mood become suitably serious and worried.

“I ask you to respect it. This is for your safety. For the safety of the Castle.”

The crowd was silent. A small girl at the front—whose hero was Marcia and who longed one day to be a Wizard—said in a very small voice, “Madam Marcia . . .”

Despite somewhat creaky knees, Marcia squatted down. “Yes?”

“What if the **Darke 'maine** gets out?”

“It won't,” Marcia said confidently. “You mustn't worry, you will be

perfectly safe. The Palace is **Quarantined**. The **Safety Curtain** is there just in case.” She stood up and addressed the crowd. “I can do nothing more until sunrise. Tomorrow, at first light, I shall **Fumigate** the Palace and all will be well. I bid you good night.”

There were a few murmurings of “thank you” and “g’night ExtraOrdinary” as people wandered off to find their way home—somehow the lights in Wizard Way no longer seemed interesting. Marcia watched the crowd disperse with some relief. It worried her to have too many people near something as powerful as a **Safety Curtain**. The various Wizards, scribes and Apprentices also began to wander off to their homes.

“Mr. Bott!” Marcia called out as the rotund purveyor of cloaks scuttled off for his dinner.

“Drat,” Bertie muttered under his breath. But he dared not ignore the boss, as Marcia was known in the Wizard Tower. “Yes, Madam Marcia?” he said with a slight bow.

“No need for that, Mr. Bott,” snapped Marcia, who hated any sign of what she called bowing and scraping. “You will take the first watch at the fusion point. It is, as I am sure you know, always a possible weak spot. I will send a relief at midnight.”

“*Midnight?*” gasped Bertie, his stomach already rumbling at the thought of the sausages, mash and gravy that his wife always prepared on the Longest Night and was surely waiting for him at home.

Unlike Bertie Bott, Rose seemed loath to leave. She was gazing up at the **Safety Curtain** in wonder. “I’ll take the watch, Madam Marcia,” she offered.

“Thank you, Rose,” said Marcia. “But I have already asked Mr. Bott.”

Bertie ran a limp hand across his forehead. “Actually, Madam Marcia, I do believe I am feeling a little faint,” he said.

“Really?” said Marcia. “Well, if Rose takes your turn without any supper, she *will* faint. Whereas you, Mr. Bott, have plenty of . . . *reserves*.”

Rose took courage from Marcia’s half smile as she regarded the discomfited Bertie Bott. “I would love to take the watch, Madam Marcia,” she persisted. “Truly, I would. The **Safety Curtain** is amazing. I have never seen anything like it.”

Marcia gave in. She liked Rose and did not want to dent her enthusiasm. And after the conspicuous absence of her own Apprentice, Marcia appreciated some enthusiasm. “Very well, Rose. But go back to the Wizard Tower and have something to eat first. Take at least an hour. Then you may return and take Mr. Bott’s watch. Now, Mr. Bott, what do you say to Rose?”

“Thank you, Rose,” said Bertie Bott meekly.

Bertie watched Rose and Marcia walk off into Wizard Way and sighed. He stamped his feet in the chill air and drew his cloak around him as another flurry of snow came in from the river. It was going to be a very long hour.

Chapter 24

Palace Things



While Merrin wandered around the Manuscriptorium, intimidating Jillie Djinn and writing rude words on the scribes' desks, the events he had set in motion were beginning to unfold.

At the top of the Palace, a **Thing UnLocked** the door of a tiny, windowless room at the end of Merrin's corridor.

"It . . . is . . . time," it said.

Muddy, disheveled and aching all over from being **Fetch**ed, Simon Heap slowly got to his feet.

"Follow," came the **Thing's** hollow voice.

Simon did not move.

"Follow."

"No," croaked Simon, his throat painfully dry from lack of water.

The **Thing** leaned nonchalantly against the doorframe and looked at Simon with what might have been a mixture of amusement and boredom. "If you do not follow, the door will be **Locked**," it intoned. "It will be **Locked** for a year. After a year has passed, the only person able to **UnLock** it will be your mother."

"My *mother*?"

"She will be pleased to see you again, no doubt." The **Thing** made a noise like a strangled chicken, which Simon knew was, in **Thing** terms, a laugh. "Even though you will be no more than a pile of slimy rags in her attic."

“*In her attic?* Is that where I am?” asked Simon, who had no memory of the **Fetch**.

“You are in the Palace.” The **Thing** moved back through the doorway. “If you do not follow *now*, I shall shut the door. Then I shall **Lock** it.” The door began to close. Simon imagined Sarah Heap pushing it open some time in the future—maybe years later.

“Wait!” He ran out of the room.

Simon followed the **Thing** as it moved in its peculiar crablike shuffle along the attic corridor and descended *cler-clump cler-clump* the same narrow stairs that Jenna and Beetle had climbed that afternoon. Simon dreaded what he was going to find. Were his parents prisoners of the **Thing** too—or worse? And what about Jenna? He knew that if any of them saw him with the **Thing**, they would assume this was *his* doing. They would blame him for everything. Simon felt a wave of his old self-pity come over him but he pushed it away. He only had himself to blame, he told himself sternly.

The **Thing** shambled surprisingly swiftly along the wide upstairs corridor and Simon followed in its wake, feeling as though he were wading through molasses. He took this as a good sign; he had been told that this was what walking through the **Darke** felt like but he had never noticed before.

An oppressive silence pervaded the Palace. Even the nighttime ghosts who regularly haunted the Palace were quiet and stilled, except for one—a governess—who was in a complete panic. Her intermittent screams cut through the air and sent shivers down Simon’s spine. Many of the ghosts had been making their regular evening promenade along the corridor, hoping for a glimpse of the Princess, when the **Darke** had unexpectedly descended. They were now stuck, unable to move through the thickness of the **Darke**, and Simon could not help but **Pass Through** them. Every time he felt the soft waft of chill, slightly stale, air he felt sick. But one ghost that Simon did not **Pass Through** was Sir Hereward—Sir Hereward **Passed Through** *him*.

During the onset of the **Darke Domaine**, Sir Hereward had remained faithfully at his post outside Jenna’s bedroom, his sword at the ready. What it was at the ready for, Sir Hereward was not sure, but the ghost was not going to be caught napping by a little bit of **Darke**. But as the **Darke** deepened and infiltrated every last nook, every last cranny, even Sir Hereward got twitchy. Twice the ghost had felt *something* go into Jenna’s room—he had heard the telltale groan of the door and the squeak of the curtain rings as the curtain was pushed aside—but twice his sword had run through nothing but air. Sir Hereward longed for some light to see by and a good clean fight with something real. So when Simon’s human footsteps crept by, creaking the ancient floorboards, disturbing the air in a way that ghosts and **Things** do not, Sir Hereward ran up the passageway that led to Jenna’s room and ambushed Simon with a bloodcurdling yell of, “*Have at you, Sirrah!*”

“Argh!” yelled Simon, totally spooked. The **Thing** looked back briefly and continued its crab walk toward the gallery at the top of the main stairs. Simon resolutely followed the **Thing**, but Sir Hereward was not going to let his enemy escape so easily. He chased after him, aiming sword swipes at him as he went. Simon felt as if he were being attacked by a demented windmill. Again and again, Sir Hereward’s sword came swishing down on him. Even though Sir Hereward’s sword had no substance, it was a highly unpleasant sensation having a ghostly sword slashing through him. Indeed such was the anger of the ghost wielding it, that the sword actually **Caused** a sound—a sharp *whoosh*—as it sliced through the air. Simon knew that if Sir Hereward’s sword had been real, he would no longer be in one piece, or quite possibly even two or three. It was not a comforting thought.

“You sir, I know who you are!” *Whoosh whoosh*.

Sir Hereward’s surprisingly powerful boom of a voice filled the thick silence—and stunned the governess into welcome silence.

“I see your Heap hair”—*whoosh*—“and your scar. The Princess has told me all about you”—*whoosh whoosh*. “You, Sirrah, are the black sheep Heap”—*whoosh*. “You are the wicked brother who kidnapped your own defenseless sister!” *Whoosh whoosh whoosh* Sir Hereward raged.

Doggedly Simon kept going, following the **Thing** while he tried to work out what on earth he was going to do. But it is hard to think when a one-armed ghost is unleashing a string of abuse and a torrent of well-aimed sword swipes.

Sir Hereward did not let up. “Do not”—*whoosh*—“think you can escape justice, you cur! I will have revenge!” *Whoosh whoosh*. “How could you treat a young Princess in such a”—*whoosh*—“dastardly fashion?”

Simon thought it best to ignore the ghost and keep going, but this only seemed to anger Sir Hereward more. “Sirrah! You run like the coward you surely are”—*whoosh*. “Stand and fight like a man!” *Whoosh whoosh whoosh!*

Suddenly Simon had had enough. He stopped and turned to face his tormentor. “I *am* a man,” he said, “which is more than I can say for *you*.”

Sir Hereward lowered his sword and looked at Simon with disgust. “A cheap jibe, Sir, but no more than I would expect. Stand and fight your ground.”

Simon felt very weary. He spread out his hands to show he had no weapon. “Look, Sir What-ever-your-name-is, I do not want a fight. Not right now. There’s quite enough going on here without that, don’t you think?”

“Hah!” scoffed Sir Hereward.

“And I am truly sorry about Jenna—*Princess* Jenna. I did a terrible thing and I would do anything to undo it, but I cannot. I have written to ask her to forgive me and I hope one day she will. I can do no more than that.”

“Silence!” the **Thing** commanded.

Sir Hereward peered into the **Darke** and saw the faint shadow of the **Thing**. But the **Thing** did not see—or hear—the ghost. Sir Hereward had chosen only to **Appear** to Simon; he was far too experienced to risk **Appearing** to anything **Darke**.

“You scum, Heap,” said Sir Hereward, waving his sword around once more. “You have brought **Darke Things** into the Palace.”

Simon felt exasperated. Why did people—and even ghosts—always think the worst of him? “Look, you silly old fool,” he snapped, “will you just get this into your head? I *hate* this **Darke** stuff.”

The **Thing**—a paranoid entity at the best of times—took this badly. “Silence!” it shrieked.

Sir Hereward took it no better. “How dare you insult me, you blaggard!”

Simon was reckless now. He turned on Sir Hereward. “I’ll insult you if I choose, you stupid—*aaaaaaaaaargh!*” The **Thing’s** hands were suddenly gripping Simon’s neck, pushing his windpipe back toward his spine.

“You mock me at your peril,” hissed the **Thing**.

“*Garrrrr . . .*” Simon was choking. The smell of decay filled his nostrils and the **Thing’s** long, filthy fingernails cut into his skin.

Shocked, Sir Hereward lowered his sword.

“When I tell you to be silent, you *will* be silent,” Sir Hereward heard the bullying **Thing** hiss to his victim. “If you will not be silent when I command it, I shall ensure that you will be silent *forever*. Understand?”

Simon just about managed to nod his head.

The **Thing** let go. Simon reeled back and fell, retching, onto the carpet.

“Oh *dear*,” muttered Sir Hereward.

The **Thing** stood over Simon. “Get up. Follow,” it ordered.

Sir Hereward watched Simon drag himself to his feet and, clasping his bruised neck, stagger after the **Thing** like a naughty puppy. The ghost began to think that perhaps things were not quite what he had taken them for—and, quite possibly, that Simon Heap was not what he had taken him for either. Determined to find out what was going on, Sir Hereward set off after Simon.

Taking advantage of the fact that the **Thing** could not hear him, the ghost said, “Look here, Heap, I want some answers.”

Simon looked at the ghost in despair. Why wouldn’t he *go away*? Didn’t he see he had enough trouble right then?

“Now, this is just between you and me, Heap.” He caught Simon’s anxious glance at the **Thing**. “Don’t worry, I do not **Appear** to **Things**. It can’t hear me.”

Simon looked at the ghost and saw a brief, conspiratorial smile. A small ray of hope flitted across his mind.

“Heap, I want to get some facts straight. I do not want any lies. Just nod or shake your head. Got that?”

Easier said than done, thought Simon. He felt as if his head might fall off. Cautiously, he nodded.

The motley procession of the stooping, ragged **Thing**, followed by the battered young man in his muddy, torn robes and the one-armed ghost moved slowly along the corridor. The ghost began his questions.

“Did you come to the Palace of your own free will?”

Simon shook his head—very carefully.

“Do you know why you are here?”

A slow shake.

“Do you know where the Princess is?”

Yet another slow shake.

“We must find her. And to find her we must rid the Palace of this . . . this *infestation*.” Sir Hereward sounded disgusted. “Do you agree, Heap?”

With some relief, Simon nodded. It was less painful than shaking his head.

“And are you willing to help me get rid of these . . . **Things**?”

Simon nodded too vehemently and a groan escaped him. The **Thing** swung around, the procession stopped and Simon’s heart raced. He put his hands up to his bruised throat as though trying to ease his neck. The **Thing** glared at Simon, then turned and continued its crab shuffle into the galleried landing.

“We need a plan of action,” said Sir Hereward, getting into campaign mode. “First we need to—”

Simon did not hear any of Sir Hereward’s plans. The **Thing**, tired of Simon lagging behind, was waiting for him. As Simon drew level, it grabbed hold of his torn robes, dragged him along the gallery and pushed him down the stairs. Simon half ran, half fell down to the entrance hall below, where a crowd of twenty-four **Things** waited for him.

Sir Hereward ventured cautiously down the stairs. From his vantage point, he saw Simon’s painful progress across the hall, pinched and punched as he was pushed and prodded toward the Palace doors. The ghost reached the foot of the stairs and, with some trepidation, he stepped into the crowd of **Things**. It was not a good experience. No ghost likes to be **Passed Through**, but to be **Passed Through** by something **Darke** is a truly awful experience. It had never happened to Sir Hereward before, but as he followed Simon across the hall, it happened to him at least ten times. Resolutely the ghost kept going. His job was to protect the Princess, and to do that he reckoned he needed to keep close to Simon. Sir Hereward knew that if anyone had the strength to get rid of the **Things**, to get the Palace back for the Princess, it would be a Living young man, not an ancient one-armed ghost. And besides, he didn’t like bullies. He’d had Simon Heap down as one, but now the boot was on the other foot. Or feet. If **Things** had feet.

Simon had reached the Palace doors. A thin film of Magykal purple flickered across them, to which every **Thing** gave a respectful distance.

“Open the doors,” instructed the **Thing**.

“Don’t you dare!” said Sir Hereward, who had suddenly grasped what was happening. “We don’t want *them* all over the Castle.”

Simon ignored Sir Hereward—he had enough to think about. He stared blankly at the **Thing** but his thoughts were racing. He now understood why he had been **Fetch**ed—it was to break a **Quarantine**. A truly **Darke** entity can never get through a **Quarantine**, which is a powerful form of **Anti-Darke**. It needed a human being with **Darke** knowledge—knowledge that the **Things** knew Simon had. It was well known that **Things** would seek humans out to do this for them, for no human can be completely **Darke**—all have some small remnant of good feeling left lurking somewhere. Even DomDaniel had had a tiny bit: the old necromancer had once taken in a stray cat and given it a saucer of milk—a **Thing** would have skinned and eaten it.

The crowd of **Things** was growing impatient. “*Open . . . open . . . open!*” They whispered in unison.

Simon decided that, whatever the consequences for himself, he would not open the doors. If someone—he was sure it was Marcia—had put a **Quarantine** on the Palace it was for a good reason, most probably to keep the **Darke Domaine** isolated to one place and to protect the Castle. He himself would have done the same, and reinforced it with a **Cordon** too. No doubt Marcia had done something even better—and he wasn’t about to mess it up.

“No,” Simon croaked. “I won’t. I won’t open the doors.”

“Well said!” harrumphed Sir Hereward.

“Open . . . the . . . doors,” repeated the **Thing** who had half strangled him.

“No,” said Simon.

“Then perhaps your *mother* will persuade you.” The **Thing** clasped its ragged, peeling hands together and, one by one, Simon heard its knuckles crack. He watched it push its way through the crowd of **Things** and, taking four other **Things** with it, lope off down the Long Walk in the direction of Sarah’s sitting room.

Surely, thought Simon, his mother wasn’t still in the Palace—was she?

Chapter 25

Simon and Sarah



Sarah Heap looked much smaller than Simon remembered. In fact, when the **Things** that had gone to fetch her came back into the entrance hall, Simon could see no sign of Sarah. For a brief moment of hope he thought his mother was not there after all. But as they drew near, Simon saw Sarah's faded yellow curls just visible inside the press of **Things** that surrounded her.

Murmuring in the excited way that **Things** have when they know something unpleasant is going to happen to someone, they pushed and poked the terrified Sarah Heap toward Simon. Sarah stared at Simon in horror, and on her face Simon read what he had been so afraid he would see—his mother thought that this was *his* doing.

"Mum, Mum, *please*, I didn't do this. *I didn't!*" said Simon, instantly back to being a little boy wrongly accused of something.

Sarah clearly did not believe him. "Oh, *Simon*," she sighed.

But the next few seconds made Sarah change her mind.

"You will open the door now," the strangler-**Thing** intoned.

"N-no," stuttered Simon.

"You *will*," the **Thing** informed him. It shoved a smaller **Thing** standing beside Sarah out of the way, then it raised its bony hands and placed them around Sarah's neck, which looked, Simon thought, so very thin and fragile.

"Simon," whispered Sarah. "What do they want?"

"They want to get out, Mum. But they can't. They want me to do it for

them.”

“Out into the Castle?” Sarah looked horrified. “All of them? Out there? With all those poor people?”

“Yes, Mum.”

Sarah looked outraged. “No son of mine will do *that*, Simon.”

“But Mum, if I don’t . . .”

“*Don’t!*” said Sarah fiercely. She closed her eyes.

The **Thing** tightened its fingers around Sarah’s neck. Sarah began to choke.

“No!” yelled Simon. He sprung forward to wrench the **Thing** from his mother but the four other **Things** pounced on him and held him fast. “Stop it, stop it, *please!*” Simon yelled.

“When you open the door, I shall stop,” replied the **Thing**, pressing into her throat with its thumbs.

Sarah’s hands clawed uselessly at the **Thing** and gasping sounds came from her throat as she struggled for air.

Simon was in despair. “No . . . please *stop.*”

The **Thing’s** blank eyes stared back at Simon. “Open . . . the . . . door,” it commanded.

Desperately Simon glanced around, looking for Sir Hereward for help. But the ghost had been pushed backwards by the throng of **Things** that had gathered for a better view, and all Simon could see was the tip of his sword waving uselessly in the air. He was on his own.

Sarah drew in a loud, rasping gasp and went limp.

Simon could stand it no more—*he was killing his own mother*. All he had to do was to open one stupid door and she would live. If he didn’t, she would die. That one certainty overwhelmed him. Nothing else mattered. Everything else was in the future, but his mother was dying *right now*, before his eyes. Simon made a decision: everyone would have to take their chance; at least they would have a chance—unlike Sarah, who had none unless he gave in. He stepped up to the Palace doors and placed his hands on the thin film of Magyk that covered the ancient wood. And then, hating every moment of what he was doing, Simon Heap spoke the **Reverse** for the **Quarantine**.

The **Thing** dropped Sarah like a hot potato—humans were not pleasant objects for **Things** to touch. “Open it,” it hissed at Simon.

Simon turned the huge brass door handle and pulled open the heavy double doors. The **Things** poured out of the Palace like a stream of dirty oil, but Simon paid them no attention—he was kneeling on the worn limestone flags, holding Sarah. She took in a long, wheezing breath, so long that Simon wondered if she would ever stop. Slowly the mottled blue of her face suffused with pink and Sarah’s eyes flickered open. She looked up at her oldest son in confusion.

“Simon?” she croaked in a painfully hoarse whisper. She looked at him as

if seeing him for the first time. “*Simon?*”

Gently Simon helped her sit up. A sudden gust of snow blew in through the open doors. Sarah was staring at him, remembering now. “Simon, you *haven’t?*” she whispered. Simon glanced up at Sir Hereward, not daring to reply.

The ghost looked down at Simon sadly. There was nothing to say. He would have done the same for his own mother, he thought.

“Simon,” said Sarah. “You *didn’t* let them out. Did you? Oh no . . .”

Sarah sank back to the floor and Simon gently let her go. He sat beside her, head in his hands. He’d done wrong. He knew he had. But he’d had a choice only between two wrongs. And what choice was that?

Chapter 26

Absences



Beetle,” said Marcia as they halted outside Larry’s Dead Languages and Beetle fumbled for his key. “What are your plans for tonight?”

Beetle thought glumly what his plans had been: Jenna’s fourteenth-birthday party at the Palace. He’d been looking forward to it for months. He knew that the cancellation of a party paled in significance against what had happened at the Palace that night, but if you’d asked Beetle which he regretted most right then, he would have admitted it was the party.

“None,” he replied.

“In the continued *absence* of my Apprentice”—there was an edge in Marcia’s voice—“I would greatly appreciate an assistant—a knowledgeable assistant. An assistant who does not run off and spend his valuable time with a *disreputable old Alchemist*.” Marcia almost spat the last few words. She recovered her poise and continued. “So, Beetle, what do you say to spending the night at the Wizard Tower and helping us with our preparations for the **Fumigation** tomorrow?”

Once again Beetle had the uncomfortable feeling of being second choice to an unavailable Septimus. But the offer was not one he wanted to refuse. The alternative was creeping up to his tiny room at the back of Larry’s Dead Languages while trying not to wake the irascible Larry—something he had not yet managed to do. Larry was a light sleeper and always woke with a string of Latin curses, which, with his recently acquired knowledge, Beetle

now understood perfectly.

And so he replied, “Yes, I’d like that very much.”

“Good.” Marcia looked pleased.

As Beetle and Marcia walked up Wizard Way, the **Safety Curtain** lighting up the night behind them, both were occupied with thoughts of who might be marooned in the Palace inside the **Darke Domaine**. Beetle’s thoughts led to his terrifying afternoon—and it was only then he remembered the book he had snatched from Merrin’s grasp.

He fished it out of his pocket and handed it to Marcia. “I forgot. Merrin had this. I snatched it just as he was doing the **BeGone**. I’m sure you’ve got a copy but I thought you’d be interested.”

Marcia stopped in her tracks, which happened to be under a torch post. She stared at the unprepossessing, sticky little book in her hands and let out a long, low whistle. Beetle was a little shocked—he didn’t know Marcia *whistled*.

“Beetle, I most certainly do not have a copy—there is only *one* of these,” said Marcia, turning over the dog-eared book in amazement. “I have wanted to get my hands on this for *years*. It is the index—the key to the secrets—of a very important book.” She looked at Beetle, her eyes shining with excitement. “Beetle, I cannot tell you what a relief this is. I have to confess that what I saw at the Palace tonight frightened me and frankly, I wasn’t at all sure we could get rid of it. I was afraid we might never be able to use the Palace again—that it would be **Quarantined** forever.” Marcia shook her head in dismay.

Quickly Marcia flicked through *The Darke Index*. “Amazing . . . just wonderful. This is the real thing. Beetle—you have saved the day!”

Beetle grinned. “Gosh,” he said. “I didn’t realize it was *that* important.”

Marcia turned to him. “It is *pivotal*. You see, now—for the first time for hundreds of years—we can use the **Paired Codes**. They are our protection against the **Darke** but we have been unable to read them ever since this disappeared along with *The Undoing of the Darkenese*. I found *that* moldering in the Marram Marshes, but it’s no good for the really important stuff without this.” She waved *The Darke Index* triumphantly. “Now we shall be able to get rid of that nasty little concoction of Merrin Meredith’s down at the Palace with *no trouble at all!*” Marcia looked at Beetle with a broad smile. “I do hope it will be all right if I borrow this tonight?”

Beetle was quite taken aback. “Oh . . . yes. Of course,” he said. “In fact, I’d like you to keep it. Something like that should only belong to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard.”

“Very true,” said Marcia approvingly. “But thank you all the same, Beetle.” She put *The Darke Index* into her most secure pocket. “So now,” she said, “we shall pay a visit to the Manuscriptorium. There is something there I need to collect.”

Bother, thought Beetle.

The door to the Manuscriptorium was locked but Marcia had a key. This was a source of great indignation to Jillie Djinn but there was nothing she could do about it. ExtraOrdinary Wizards always had a key to the Manuscriptorium for use in emergencies—which Marcia considered this to be. She turned the key in the unwilling lock and the door swung open without the usual *ping*. The counter was disconnected every evening before the scribes left the building.

Reluctantly Beetle followed Marcia into the scruffy front office. He had been there too many times that day for his liking.

“It’s not *my* favorite place, either,” Marcia said in a half whisper. “But I need to collect the Manuscriptorium half of the **Paired Code**. Of course we have the Wizard Tower half of the **Pair**, but unfortunately the Manuscriptorium half is somewhere here in a place known only to the Chief Hermetic Scribe.” Marcia sighed. “I just wish it wasn’t *this* Chief Hermetic Scribe, that’s all.” She looked at Beetle hopefully. “I don’t suppose you happen to know where it might be?” she asked.

Beetle shook his head. “I’ve no idea what a **Paired Code** even looks like,” he said.

“The Manuscriptorium one is a small silver disc with lines radiating out. I think there’s a hole in the middle where the ancient Hermetic Scribes used to put a thread and wear it around their neck. They used the **Paired Codes** a lot in those days,” Marcia said wistfully. “The Manuscriptorium half is much smaller than the Wizard Tower half, which we have up in the Pyramid Library. Neither of them look like much on their own, but when you put them together it’s quite something, apparently. As we will soon find out.” Marcia looked delighted. The thought of once more being able to perform such ancient **Magyk** thrilled her.

They went through to the Manuscriptorium, which was deserted. It was wreathed in shadows, illuminated only by the light that shone up from the basement where the Conservation, Preservation and Protection Scribe, Ephaniah Grebe, lived and worked. Of Jillie Djinn there was no sign.

“Miss Djinn will be in her rooms,” Beetle whispered to Marcia. “She never stays down here after the scribes have gone home. She goes upstairs and eats biscuits. And counts things.”

Beetle led Marcia through the lines of desks to the back of the Manuscriptorium to a short flight of worn stairs with a battered blue door at the top. Marcia *tippy-tapped* up the stairs and tugged irritably at the silver bellpull beside the door. The faraway tinkle of a bell rang forlornly somewhere at the top of the building. They waited for the sound of Jillie Djinn’s footsteps descending, but none came. Impatiently Marcia rang the bell

again. There was no response.

“It really is too bad,” muttered Marcia. “The Chief Hermetic Scribe should always be available in emergencies.” She stomped back down the steps. “We’ll just have to search this wretched place until we find her. She’s got to be here somewhere.”

Suddenly something caught Marcia’s attention. She pointed to the narrow stone arch at the side of the Manuscriptorium that led to the Hermetic Chamber. “I thought I saw someone go in. Out of the corner of my eye. But she must have seen us—what *is* she playing at?” Marcia hurried over, her python shoes tapping on the old oak floorboards.

Beetle hung back as Marcia stepped through the arch into the pitch-black passageway that led to the Chamber, but she beckoned him to come with her. He followed her in.

The Hermetic Chamber, the inner sanctum of the Manuscriptorium, was reached by a seven-cornered passage, which was specially designed to catch any stray **Magyk** that might try to escape from the Chamber or, indeed, enter and disturb the delicate balance within. It was also completely light tight and soundproof—and somewhat unnerving.

As Beetle followed the rustle of Marcia’s cloak brushing along the stone floor of the passageway, he had the uncomfortable feeling from the way she had slowed down that she was a little spooked. As he went deeper into the passage and lost any glimmer of light, Beetle began to feel pretty spooked himself, but as they turned the seventh and last corner, the light from the Hermetic Chamber flooded the final few feet of the passageway and Beetle relaxed. Half obscured by Marcia’s flowing cloak, he saw with some relief—for he’d had the distinct impression that Marcia had been expecting something altogether different—the Chief Hermetic Scribe, Jillie Djinn, sitting at the familiar round table.

The white walls of the Hermetic Chamber made it feel dazzling after the darkness of the passageway. Beetle glanced around—everything looked just as he remembered it. The ancient dark Glass was propped up against the roughly plastered walls, as was the old-fashioned abacus. The large, round table was in the middle and underneath it, Jillie Djinn’s tiny feet in their sensible—and sadly scuffed—black lace-ups were resting on the main Ice Tunnel hatch, which, Beetle noticed with relief, was closed and clearly had been for a long time, judging by the dust covering it.

Jillie Djinn seemed smaller than Beetle remembered. The harsh light in the Chamber showed up the shabbiness of her dark blue silk robes—a shabbiness that he had not seen before. Jillie Djinn had always been rather fond of new silk robes and was very particular about keeping them clean, but now they were creased and had what looked suspiciously like gravy stains down the front. Beetle was shocked. But what he found most concerning was that Jillie

Djinn was not actually doing anything. There were no books of calculating tables open in front of her, no fat ledgers filled with endless columns of her tiny figures, ready for an unfortunate scribe to transcribe in triplicate the next day. She sat hunched over the bare table, staring into space and hardly seemed to register the intrusion of her visitors. It was as if she wasn't there.

A flash of concern crossed Marcia's face but she got straight down to business. "Miss Djinn," she said briskly. "I have come to collect the Manuscriptorium half of the **Paired Code**."

Jillie Djinn sniffed and, to Beetle's shock, wiped her nose on her sleeve. But she did not reply.

"Miss Djinn," said Marcia, "this is a serious matter. You must make available to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard the Manuscriptorium half of the **Paired Code** upon request at any time of day or night. I realize this has not been requested for many hundreds of years, but I am requesting it *now*."

Jillie Djinn did not react. It was as if she did not understand a word that was said.

Marcia looked concerned. "Miss Djinn," she said quietly. "May I remind you that **Paired Code** Protocol forms part of the induction Oath of a Chief Hermetic Scribe."

Jillie Djinn shifted uncomfortably and sniffed again. She looked pathetic, thought Beetle. Once so upright and proper, she was now weighed down by her cares. He had never liked the Chief Hermetic Scribe, but now his dislike was mixed with sadness for her. And disquiet—something was very wrong. Beetle glanced at Marcia. She was regarding the Chief Hermetic Scribe with a new light in her eye—like a cat getting ready to pounce. And then, suddenly, she did. Marcia leaped forward and clapped both hands on Jillie Djinn's shoulders. "**Depart!**" she commanded. A flash of purple lit up the white chamber and Jillie Djinn gave a sharp scream. A loud hiss came from beneath Marcia's hands, and Beetle was aware of something small and dark—he couldn't see exactly what—leaping to the ground and scuttling out.

"A Maund," muttered Marcia. "Someone's put a *Maund* on her. Vicious beasts and so heavy. *What* is going on here?" She glanced around the Hermetic Chamber anxiously. So did Beetle. It appeared to be empty, but he was no longer so sure.

"Miss Djinn," said Marcia quickly. "This is of the utmost urgency. You must *immediately* give me the **Paired Code**."

Jillie Djinn, relieved of her burden, was no longer hunched. But she still looked haunted. She glanced around the chamber, then quickly ran her hand across the table in a zigzag movement. There was a quiet whirring noise and a tiny drawer opened in front of her. Looking about her uneasily, Jillie Djinn took out a small, polished silver box and placed it on the desk.

"Thank you, Miss Djinn," said Marcia. "I would like to check that the

Code is indeed in the box.”

Jillie Djinn was gazing out somewhere in the distance over Marcia’s shoulder. She nodded absently, then an expression of fright flashed across her features.

Marcia was busy opening the box. Inside she saw a small silver disc with a raised central boss, which was exactly like the textbook drawing that she was familiar with. Marcia put her spectacles on and took a closer look. A mass of fine lines radiated from the tiny hole at the center of the disc and scattered along these was an array of **Magykal** symbols, some of which she had not seen since her advanced codacology week in her final Apprentice year. Marcia was satisfied—it was indeed the Manuscriptorium half of the **Paired Code**.

There was sudden disturbance in the air. Marcia spun around. She lunged forward, and Beetle saw the little silver disc fly into the air and disappear—then something gave him a sharp punch in the stomach.

“*Oof!*” He doubled over, gasping for breath.

“Beetle, block the passageway!” Marcia shouted.

Still winded, Beetle threw himself in front of the entrance to the seven-cornered passage. Something bony with sharp elbows hurtled into him and Beetle staggered back. He braced himself, arms across both sides of the narrow passageway so that whatever it was could not pass. As an invisible hand gripped his arm and tried to wrench it away from the wall, Beetle felt something burning dig deep into his flesh.

“Aargh!” he gasped.

“Don’t move, Beetle,” said Marcia, advancing toward him. “Just . . . stay . . . there.”

Beetle’s arm felt as though the pointed end of a red-hot stick was being thrust into it, and the look on Marcia’s face as she came forward was terrifying. But he did not move. Marcia stopped a little way in front of him, her green eyes flashing furiously. She stretched out her arms and grasped something, as though she were picking up a two-handled pot.

“**Reveal!**” she said triumphantly. A cloud of purple filled the exit to the Hermetic Chamber and showed a dark shape within it. As the cloud cleared, the gangly form of Merrin Meredith was **Revealed**, both ears held firmly in Marcia’s iron grip.

Merrin swallowed hard and winced. The **Paired Code** had sharp edges.

“He’s *swallowed* it!” Marcia cried incredulously.

Chapter 27

Bott's Bridge



Rose was late. Things were somewhat chaotic at the Wizard Tower and she had had to fill in at the sick bay until the duty Wizard had eventually turned up from the **Call Out**. But now, excited by the prospect of being part of the amazing piece of **Magyk** that was the **Safety Curtain**, Rose raced down Wizard Way, trying not to be any later for Bertie Bott than she possibly could.

* * *

In front of the dazzling **Safety Curtain**, Bertie Bott stood resolutely guarding the fusion point, unaware that only a few feet behind him, on the other side of the shimmering purple wall, twenty-five **Things** were patrolling to and fro, silently looking for the join.

Bertie's stomach was grumbling. He was having cruel visions of supper: sausages and mashed potatoes dripping with gravy, treacle tart and custard and possibly even a small square of chocolate fudge, if he could manage it. Bertie sighed inwardly. He was sure he could. As Bertie wondered whether he would prefer peas or a double helping of mash with his sausages, his stomach emitted the loudest rumble yet. A mere arm's length behind him, the strangler **Thing** stopped and listened hard.

Bertie was getting extremely cold. Even his finest pre-loved, fur-lined cloak was not keeping out the chill of the Longest Night. Bertie took it off to shake the fur out and thicken it up for a while—a trick he knew from the

cloak business—but as he shook it, the edge of the cloak touched the **Safety Curtain**. Bertie never knew what hit him.

Lightning fast, the **Thing** punched a hole through the fusion point, grabbed Bertie’s cloak with one hand and pulled hard. Bertie toppled backwards into the **Safety Curtain**. In a moment the strangler **Thing** had its hands around Bertie’s throat and was pulling him in so that he lay across the **Safety Curtain** like a small, humpbacked bridge—later immortalized in Apprentice textbooks as Bott’s Bridge.

On either side of Bertie the **Magykal** purple light still shone like a luminous wall, but now there was a dark gap, like a broken tooth in a smile. As Bertie Bott lay face-up on the snow-dusted grass, a **Darke** tide of **Things** began to flow across him. (Many years later, when the **Safety Curtain** was **Raised** by one who wished he had not missed his only chance to see it done, this scene was the first to be replayed.)

Rose arrived at the two torches that flanked the Palace Gate. She stopped for a moment to catch her breath and then pushed open the gate, on which a large notice had been stuck that tersely read: PARTY CANCELLED. Gudrun the Great—the faded old ghost on guard at the Palace Gate—smiled at Rose, but Rose, almost blinded by the startling brilliance of the **Safety Curtain**, did not see her.

“Take care, Apprentice,” whispered Gudrun. “Take care.” But all Rose heard was the whispering of the wind blowing in off the river.

As Rose approached the **Safety Curtain** she began to feel uneasy. Rose was a sensitive Apprentice who was aware—some said far too aware—of the **Darke**. And Rose had a talent that she did not yet know she possessed but was soon to discover: she could **See Things**. Looking out for Bertie Bott, Rose walked slowly across the grass, heading to where she knew the join in the **Safety Curtain** was—directly in front of the Palace Gate. The twinge of anxiety that had been niggling at her grew greater. *Where was Bertie Bott?* She could not see him anywhere. It wasn’t as if he was hard to spot. There was plenty of Bertie to see. She wondered if, because she was late, he had already gone home for his supper, but Rose was sure that not even a ravenous Bertie Bott would dare desert such an important post.

Reluctant to get any closer, Rose slowed to a halt. She had the oddest sensation that the harder she looked for Bertie, the less she could see. She shivered and pulled her green Apprentice cloak around her, not to keep warm—she was still warm from her run—but to protect herself. Against what, she was not sure.

“Bertie?” she called in a half whisper. “*Bertie?*”

There was no reply.

Rose decided to use an old Wizard trick. She stood still and turned her head

slowly from side to side, letting her eyes “see what they will see.” And they did. Suddenly Rose saw the gap in the **Safety Curtain**, and pouring through the gap were **Things**. Monstrous, shadowy **Things** loping toward her like all her nightmares rolled into one.

Rose ran. She ran so fast that she was halfway up Wizard Way before the true meaning of what she had seen struck her. And then she kept on running, as fast as she could, back to the Wizard Tower to tell Marcia.

But Marcia was not there.

Marcia was still at the Manuscriptorium.

Chapter 28

Hermetically Sealed



*As Rose raced past the dark windows of the Manuscriptorium, Marcia was inside struggling to place a **Locking Band** around Merrin’s wrists.*

Merrin was fighting her all the way, and Marcia was shocked at how powerful he had become. She was using the strongest **Restrain** she could without putting him at risk, and still he was not totally subdued. Merrin’s dark eyes blazed with anger and his feet twitched as he tried to kick out. The gold on his Two-Faced Ring flashed as he pulled and twisted his wrists, stretching the **Locking Band** almost to the breaking point. After a torrent of verbal abuse, Marcia had also placed a **Silent** on Merrin but that did not stop his mouth moving. Marcia was—to her regret right then—a good lip-reader.

A loud knocking came suddenly on the outside door. Marcia looked annoyed. “Beetle, see who it is and tell them to go away.”

Beetle went into the front office. He opened the door to find Marcellus Pye on the other side. “Ah, Scribe Beetle.” Marcellus sounded relieved. “I am glad it is you.”

Beetle had long ago given up trying to explain to Marcellus Pye that he was no longer—and indeed never had been—a scribe at the Manuscriptorium.

“Excuse me, Mr. Pye,” he said closing the door, “we’re a bit busy at the moment.”

Marcellus stuck his foot in the door. “I have just been to the Palace for the party, only to find there is a **Safety Curtain** up.” He sounded worried. “My

Apprentice, Septimus Heap, was going there and I am concerned for his safety. I thought I'd call in on my way to the Wizard Tower. Is he here, by any chance?"

"No, he's not. I haven't seen him and no, before you ask, I *don't* know where he is." Beetle sounded annoyed. He was tired of everyone asking him about Septimus. "Excuse me, Mr. Pye, but do you mind leaving now? We have things to do. Would you move your foot *please*?"

But Marcellus did not move—his attention was suddenly taken by something down at the Palace end of Wizard Way. Beetle took the opportunity to close the door. He had to lean against it hard to shut it, and as he turned the key he saw that Marcellus was executing an odd kind of dance.

Beetle decided to ignore him.

Marcellus began banging on the door.

Marcia came into the front office, grasping Merrin by his **Locking Band**. Jillie Djinn trailed behind like a ghost. "Beetle, what's going on?" Marcia demanded.

"It's Marcellus," said Beetle. "He won't go. He's looking for Septimus."

A look of concern flashed across Marcia's face. "But I thought Septimus was with *him*."

"Apparently not," said Beetle, a trifle sulkily.

"What's that in the door?" asked Marcia. A long, thin piece of red leather was poking between the door and the doorjamb.

"Oh," said Beetle. "It's his shoe." He unlocked the door and it flew open to reveal Marcellus Pye, equally irritable, on the other side, nursing the squashed tip of his precious red shoe—a birthday present from Septimus a few years back.

"It's ruined," said Marcellus. "Look." He pointed to the torn ribbons that were tied just below his knee.

"You shouldn't wear such ridiculous shoes," snapped Marcia.

"Well, you'd know all about *that*, Marcia," Marcellus retorted.

While Marcia and Marcellus were bickering, something had caught Beetle's attention—the two torches burning on either side of the Palace Gate had just gone out. Beetle had a bad feeling—why had both torches gone out at the same time? He soon had his answer.

"No . . . no, it *can't* be!" he gasped.

"*What?*" asked Marcia, stopping midway through a shoe-based insult.

Beetle pointed down Wizard Way. Like water through a sluice gate, the thick fog of the **Darke Domaine** was pouring out through the Palace Gate and swirling into the lower reaches of Wizard Way. "The **Safety Curtain!** It's been breached!"

"*What?*"

Merrin smirked.

“Marcellus,” said Marcia. “Make yourself useful for once. Hold on to this . . . this *creature* for me. I must see what’s happening.” She handed Merrin over to Marcellus and hurried out into Wizard Way. She was just in time to see the first torch at the Palace end of the Way extinguished by what looked like a bank of black fog.

Marcia ran back into the front office, slammed the door and leaned against it. She looked as white as a sheet of best Manuscriptorium paper. “You’re right. It’s breached.” And then, to Beetle’s shock, Marcia swore.

Merrin broke through his **Silent** with a snigger.

Marcia glared at him. “You won’t be laughing soon, Merrin Meredith,” she snapped. “Not when we are getting that **Paired Code** out of you.”

Merrin went pale. He hadn’t thought about that.

“Get him out of here, Marcellus,” said Marcia. “Beetle, you take Miss Djinn. We must get back to the Wizard Tower *now*.”

Beetle was reluctant. “But we can’t abandon the Man-uscriptorium,” he said.

“The Manuscriptorium must take its chance.”

Beetle was horrified. “No. *No*. If the **Darke Domaine** gets in everything will be destroyed. All the arcane **Magyk** in the Hermetic Chamber *and* in the old Chamber of Alchemie . . . it will all be gone. Nothing will remain. *Nothing*.”

“Beetle, I’m sorry, there is nothing we can do.”

“Yes, there is,” Beetle retorted. “The Hermetic Chamber can be **Hermetically Sealed**. That’s why it’s built like it is. And the ExtraOrdinary Wizard can **Seal** it. That is true, isn’t it?”

Marcia answered with great reluctance. “Yes, it is true. But to **Seal** Miss Djinn in there would be nothing short of murder. She wouldn’t know what was happening to her. She’d have no chance.”

“But I might,” said Beetle quietly.

“*You?*”

“Yes. **Seal me** in the Hermetic Chamber. *I’d* guard it.”

Marcia was grave. “Beetle, there’s only enough air for about twenty-four hours—after that you’ll have to do a **Suspension**. You do know that not all those **Sealed** in the Chamber have survived, don’t you?”

“I’ll take a chance. Fifty-fifty isn’t bad.”

Marcia shook her head. So often Beetle knew far more than she expected. “Three lived, three died,” she muttered. “Not great odds.”

“Could be worse. Please, Marcia. I don’t want to lose the Manuscriptorium. I’d do anything to stop that. *Anything*.”

Marcia knew that Beetle was not going to change his mind. “Very well, Beetle. I’ll do as you ask. I’ll **Activate** the **Hermetic Seal**.”

Leaving Marcellus Pye with a firm grasp on Merrin and Jillie Djinn staring

into space, Marcia and Beetle made their way to the entrance of the seven-cornered passage. They stopped outside.

“You’ll find the secret siege drawer in the table by tapping the tiny black circle in the center seven times. The drawer contains emergency supplies and the **Suspension Charm** with instructions,” Marcia told him.

“I know,” said Beetle.

“You’re a brave young man, Beetle. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

Marcia wondered if she’d ever see Beetle again. “Right then. You’d better go in. As soon as you get into the Chamber, sit in the Chief Hermetic Scribe’s seat. It’s in the very center and you’ll be all right there. The **Sealing Magyk** will be very intense and that isn’t always pleasant.”

“Oh. Right.”

Marcia gave Beetle a strained smile. “I’ll count to twenty-one and then I’ll **Activate the Seal**. Understood?”

“Yep. I’ll count too. One . . . two . . .”

Beetle was gone. He ran through the narrow stone archway into the darkness of the seven-cornered passageway, and before he had finished counting to ten he was in the brightness of the circular Hermetic Chamber. Feeling as though he shouldn’t, Beetle sat down in the Chief Hermetic Scribe’s seat at the table and, still counting, he watched the archway that he had just run through. The next few seconds were the longest of his life.

The **Activating** of the **Seal** began. A hissing sound filled the Chamber, immediately followed by a rush of cold air as the **Seal** was driven along the seven-cornered passage. Beetle watched in awe as a shining wall of purple **Magyk** came around the last corner and stopped at the arch that led into the Chamber. The brilliant **Magykal** light pulsed over the archway and the circular white walls of the Hermetic Chamber intensified it, sending currents of **Magyk** swirling while Beetle sat in the calm at the very center of it, hardly daring to breathe. After a few minutes he could see that the purple light was beginning to fade, wisps of **Magyk** were drifting off. They hung in the air, and the bittersweet taste of **Magyk** caught in Beetle’s throat and made him cough.

As the last vestiges of **Magyk** disappeared, Beetle understood what it meant to be **Sealed** in the Chamber. Where the arch had been there was now solid wall, indistinguishable from any other part of the walls that surrounded him. He was entombed. Above his head rose the dome of white stone that formed the ceiling of the Hermetic Chamber and below his feet was the **Sealed** hatch to the Ice Tunnels.

Remembering what Marcia had told him, Beetle tapped the tiny black circle in the center of the table seven times. A small drawer below the table sprung open. He reached in for the **Suspension Charm**—and drew out a

handful of licorice bootlaces.

Chapter 29

Retreat



The Darke Fog was rolling on. It had reached the door to Larry's Dead Languages. It seeped in around the edges, finding out the cracks, pouring through the knotholes, needling through the woodworm burrows. It gathered around the piles of translated papers, swirled into the much-repaired vase and snuffed out the candles in the window display that had been lovingly created by Beetle. It rolled on through the shop, up into the gallery, along the landing and up the rickety winding stairs. In his little room deep in the back of his house, Larry awoke. He sat up in bed and pulled the bedclothes around his chin. He stared into the darkness, listening hard. Something was wrong. Larry swung his sticklike legs out of bed and, as his bare feet flinched at the cold touch of the floorboards, he saw black smoke pouring underneath the door. Aghast, he leaped up—*the house was on fire!*

The smoke advanced toward him; it began to curl around his frozen toes and slowly, as if in a dream, Larry sat down again. A great feeling of contentment overwhelmed him. He was back in his old school, getting the Latin prize for the seventh time, and he had just seen his father in the audience, in the front row, smiling at him. Smiling at *him*. Larry. Clever Larry . . .

As the **Darke Fog** layered around him, Larry sank back onto the bed. His breathing slowed and, like a tortoise in the depths of winter, he slipped into a dark and dreamless state somewhere between life and death.

Marcia ushered Jillie Djinn and Marcellus, who had custody of Merrin, out into Wizard Way. She quickly locked the Manuscriptorium door behind her. Marcia could hardly bear to think about what she had left behind, but what was facing her was even worse. Advancing up Wizard Way like a pulsating black toad was a **Darke** shifting blackness.

Marcia was horrified to see that the rolling **Fog** was accompanied by a line of **Things**—the outriders of the **Darke Domaine**. Like the sweep of a terrifying search party, they spread out across Wizard Way, with the **Fog** tumbling behind. She stared in shock, unable to tear herself away from the disaster unfolding before her.

Marcellus tried to draw Marcia away. “Marcia, you must get to the Wizard Tower at once,” he said.

Merrin’s eyes flashed angrily at Marcellus. With the **Darke Domaine** advancing ever nearer he felt he was growing stronger. The Two-Faced Ring was growing hot on his thumb and the vicious green faces were beginning to glow. The top face winked up at Merrin, and suddenly he knew he could beat Marcia. He could beat them all. *He* was in charge now. He was the *best*.

First Merrin broke the **Silent** with the worst insult in the Castle, then he broke the **Restrain**. With a violent twist, he tore himself from Marcellus’s grasp and delivered a vicious kick to the Alchemist’s shins. As Marcellus hopped up and down, gasping in pain, Merrin raised his arms in the air and, in a taunting gesture, he pulled his wrists apart, snapping the **Locking Band** as if it were no more than tissue paper. Relishing his moment of triumph, Merrin darted forward and waved his left thumb in Marcia’s face, laughing as she instinctively drew back. The ring’s evil-looking faces glowered at her, their jade complexions gleaming.

Marcia knew that there was only one possible reason for Merrin’s sudden surge of power—the oncoming **Darke Domaine** had indeed been **Engendered** by him. Up to that moment she had found it hard to believe that Merrin was capable of such a thing but now, as he pranced away, defiantly punching the air with his fist, with his Two-Faced Ring glittering, Marcia realized just how much control Merrin now had. It was a terrifying thought.

“You *idiot!*” she yelled at him. “You have no idea what you are messing with, do you?”

“Neither do you, Wizard-face.” Merrin laughed. “Run away to your twinkly little Tower and take old haddock-brain with you. I don’t need her anymore. See ya! Ha, ha, ha!” Merrin could hardly contain himself. He had never had such an attentive—such an astonished—audience. It was wonderful. It was what he had always wanted.

“*That’s* what I think of your stupid **Magyk!**” he yelled at Marcia, flicking his fingers at her. Gesticulating and laughing, Merrin danced backward, his pale face lit by the still-burning torches and the ghostly candle displays

shining onto the empty streets. “Come and get me if you dare!” he yelled.

Marcia did dare. It was undignified but she didn’t care. Inside Merrin’s nasty little stomach the precious half of the **Paired Codes** was churning, and she was not having her last chance to defeat him escape her. She tore down Wizard Way in pursuit. Merrin laughed and ran, his scribe’s cloak streaming behind him, his outstretched arms flapping like a demented bird flying toward his flock.

Marcellus raced after Marcia. It was a long time since he had run anywhere and his shoes were not ideal for the job—particularly after their encounter with the Manuscriptorium door. But Marcia’s pointy purple pythons were even less suited to running and he soon caught up with her.

“Marcia . . .” he puffed. “*Stop.*”

Marcia shook Marcellus’s hand off her arm. “Let *go*,” she hissed.

Marcellus stood firm. “No. Marcia, don’t you see? The closer you get to *that*”—he waved his free hand at the advancing **Darke Domaine** and its outriders—“the more power it gives him and the more it takes from you. Come away before something awful happens.”

“Something awful *has* happened,” snapped Marcia, setting off in pursuit once more.

Marcellus kept up with difficulty. “It could be worse . . . you still have the Wizard Tower . . . don’t risk it all on a nasty little scribe.”

Marcia stopped. “You don’t understand—he’s got the **Paired Code!**”

Marcellus looked shocked, but he quickly recovered himself. “You must leave the **Code** to its fate. You must go back to the Wizard Tower.” His voice shook with urgency. “*You must not lose that too.*”

“I shall lose neither.” Marcia flared angrily. “Just watch me.”

Marcellus and Marcia were now more than halfway down Wizard Way. Only a hundred yards or so in front of them, the wall of **Darke Fog** rolled slowly toward them. At the base of the **Fog** a line of **Things** stretched out, shifting and blending in with the **Darke**, loping slowly forward, pulling the **Darke Domaine** with them.

Merrin was heading erratically for the **Fog**. Spinning around to check that Marcia and Marcellus were still watching him, flashing rude signs, screaming obscenities, he drew ever closer to his **Darke Domaine**.

Marcia focused hard on Merrin, gauging the distance. Muttering the words for a **Fast Freeze**, she raised her arm and a streak of ice-blue light left her hand and arced into the air. It landed with a brilliant white flash in the middle of Merrin’s back. He staggered forward and gave a loud cry.

“Good shot,” muttered Marcellus.

Marcia grimaced. She had never before performed **Magyk** behind someone’s back. It was considered the lowest form of **Magyk**, but now was not the time for such refinements. She had held back from **Freezing** Merrin,

assuming she would get him to the Wizard Tower and deal with things there. **Freezing** someone was dangerous and not to be undertaken lightly. But now, with the lives of everyone in the Castle at stake, Merrin's safety was no longer a consideration.

Slowly Merrin turned around. Outlined in a blue-white crackle of the **Freeze** trying to take, he shivered and shook as though caught in an icy blast—but he did not **Freeze**. He stared at Marcia for some seconds, as though his brain had slowed and he was trying to work out what had happened. Marcia returned the stare, waiting impatiently for the **Magyk** to take effect. In the frost of the spell, Merrin shone out against the **Darke Fog**, but slowly he began to shine a little less. Horrified, Marcia saw the icy brilliance fade and Merrin shake himself, throwing off the **Freeze** like a dog throwing off water.

Marcia's **Magyk** had failed. It was then that she really understood what she was up against.

Marcellus stepped up beside her. "You *must* go now," he said quietly.

"Yes. I know," Marcia said, but she did not move.

Merrin was ecstatic—*he had defeated the ExtraOrdinary Wizard*. High on success, he turned to the line of **Things** and yelled, "Get her!"

Marcellus saw three **Things** step forward as one. He saw them take another step and that was all he waited to see. He grabbed Marcia's hand and ran, dragging her up Wizard Way, not daring to look behind. Breathless, they reached the Manuscriptorium, where Jillie Djinn was patiently, vacantly, waiting.

Marcia recovered her senses. She wheeled around to see how far away the **Things** were and saw to her great relief that they had barely moved. An encroaching **Darke Domaine** takes a lot of energy, and the **Things** were slow and ponderous. Knowing that it could do no more than cause a brief delay, Marcia threw an emergency **Barrier** across Wizard Way, then with the Chief Hermetic Scribe sleepwalking between them, she and Marcellus set off toward the Wizard Tower.

At the Great Arch an extremely anxious Hildegarde was hovering, waiting for Marcia's return.

"Madam Marcia! Oh, thank *goodness* you are here!"

Marcia wasted no time. "Is Septimus back?" she asked.

"No." Hildegarde sounded worried. "We thought he was with you."

"I feared as much." Marcia turned to Marcellus and laid her hand on his arm. "Marcellus. Please, will you find Septimus for me? And keep him safe?"

"Marcia, *that* is why I came to the Manuscriptorium. I *am* looking for him. I will not stop until I find him—I promise you."

Marcia gave Marcellus a strained smile. "Thank you. You know I trust you, don't you?"

"Well, I never thought I'd hear you say *that*," said Marcellus. "Things must

be bad.”

“They are,” said Marcia. “Marcellus, if . . . if anything happens, I give you guardianship of my Apprentice. Farewell.” With that she turned away abruptly and walked quickly into the dark blue shadows of the Great Arch, the *tippy-tappy* sound of her shoes echoing as she went.

Marcellus stood for a moment and watched something that he had only seen once before, in his first life as the Castle’s greatest Alchemist. He saw the Barricade—a thick slab of ancient pitted metal—silently slice down through the center of the Great Arch, closing the main entrance into the Wizard Tower courtyard. It was, Marcellus knew, the first of many shields that would be sliding into place, readying the Tower for its strongest and most ancient **Magyk** of defense.

Next came the beginnings of a four-sided **Living SafetyShield** (this was the strongest **SafetyShield** possible; it was known as **Living** because it required the energy of many living presences within it to keep it active. It could also, in extremis, act independently). Like the Barricade, a **Living SafetyShield** was extremely rare. Marcellus watched it rise slowly from the walls surrounding the Wizard Tower courtyard, a blue shimmering skin that cast its eerie light into Wizard Way.

Satisfied that the Tower would be protected—for a while, at least—Marcellus slipped away, leaving Wizard Way to its fate. With his cloak blending into the shadows, the old Alchemist disappeared into the very narrowest of gaps between two ancient houses. Marcellus walked quickly through what, in his Time, had been known as the Canyons—formed in the earliest days of the Castle when the houses that lay between Wizard Way and the Moat were built. To protect against the spread of fire, houses had been built in blocks of two or three, with a tiny gap left between the blocks—a gap so small that Bertie Bott would not have been able to squeeze in. But Marcellus Pye moved fast through the Canyons like a snake down a pipe, heading for what he guessed was his last chance to find Septimus before the **Darkeness** fell.

Chapter 30

In the Dragon House



*Jenna walked slowly back along the jetty to the overgrown path at the river's edge. She saw the purple glow of the **Safety Curtain** lighting up the sky and guessed it was some kind of **Magyk** isolating the Palace—and her mother inside it. She stuffed her hands deep into her pockets and the smooth brass of the key that Silas had given her met her hand. Jenna sighed. She did not want to spend the night alone in her old home. She wanted to be with Septimus, but if Septimus was not around, the next best thing was his dragon. She set off along the path beside the river, wading through the long, frosty grass until she reached a tall gate at the end. Nailed onto the gate was a rough, and somewhat charred, wooden sign. It read:*

DRAGON FIELD
ENTER ENTIRELY AT OWN RISK
POSITIVELY NO COMPENSATION PAYABLE
FOR ANY EVENTUALITY, FORSEEN OR OTHERWISE.
SINGED: BILLY POT (MR.)
DRAGON KEEPER BY APPOINTMENT

Jenna could not help but smile. The sign actually *was* singed, so Billy's spelling was unusually accurate. She opened the gate and stepped inside. On

the far side of the field she could see the long, low shape of the Dragon House silhouetted against the purple light. Carefully weaving her way around several suspiciously smelly heaps in the grass, she headed toward the Dragon House. Sometimes talking to a dragon was the only thing that made sense.

Now that Spit Fyre was no longer an unwelcome squatter in the Wizard Tower courtyard but master of his very own field, his Dragon House was left open all night. When Sarah Heap had queried this, Billy Pot had indignantly told her that, “Mr. Spit Fyre is a gentleman, Mistress Heap, and gentlemen are not locked up at night.” The more pressing reason, which Billy had omitted to mention, was that on his very first night in the Dragon House, Spit Fyre had eaten the doors.

And so, as Jenna carefully crossed the field, she saw the dark outline of Spit Fyre’s blunt snout resting on the edge of the ramp that led up to the shed. Jenna drew her witch’s cloak around her and pulled the hood down low on her face, enjoying the feeling it gave her of blending in with her surroundings. Silently she approached the Dragon House, planning to creep into the warm straw and curl up beside Spit Fyre’s comforting bulk.

The Dragon House was a dark and smelly place. It was also noisy. Dragons as a rule do not sleep quietly and Spit Fyre was no exception. He snuffled, he grunted, he snorted, he sniffed. His fire stomach rumbled and his ordinary stomach gurgled. Every now and then an enormous snore would shake the roof of the Dragon House and send Billy Pot’s rack of dragon-poo shovels rattling.

Deep inside the Dragon House, Septimus was leaning against the warmth of Spit Fyre’s fire stomach. He had made a decision—it was time to go back to the Wizard Tower. Time to face Marcia and explain why he had missed the most important **Magyk** in the Castle in many years. Slowly he got to his feet and—*what was that?* A rustle in the straw like a rat . . . but bigger than a rat . . . much bigger . . . moving stealthily . . . purposefully . . . with a subtle taint of **Darke** about it. *It was coming toward him.* Muscles tensed, Septimus did not move. Spit Fyre, he noticed, continued sleeping, which was odd. He peered into the dark, straining his eyes to see. *The rustling was getting nearer.*

There was a sudden stumble in the straw, but still Spit Fyre slept on. Why, thought Septimus, didn’t Spit Fyre wake up? The dragon was very touchy about who came into his house. He hated strangers—only a few months ago Spit Fyre had very nearly eaten a sightseer who had run in for a dare.

It was then that Septimus saw the intruder move out of the shadows and he realized why Spit Fyre did not wake up. It was a witch; she must have put some kind of sleep spell on him. It was a **Darke** witch too; the front-buttoned cloak with the embroidered symbols all over it was just like the ones worn by the Port Witch Coven. Septimus crouched down and watched the fumbling figure approaching, feeling its way along the spines. From his pocket he took

out his neat coil of **Darke** thread. He waited until the witch was so close that her next step would tread on him—then he pounced. He threw the thread, which had a surprising weight to it, around the witch’s ankles and pulled. She toppled onto him with a piercing scream.

“Arrrgh! Ouch ouch *ouch!*”

“*Jen?*” gasped Septimus.

“*Sep?* My ankles. Oh, Sep, there’s a *snake*. Get it off me—*getitoffme!* Oh, it hurts. *It’s burning me!*”

“Oh, Jen. I’m sorry, oh, I’m sorry! I’ll get it off you. Keep still. *Keep still!*”

Jenna stayed as still as she could bear and Septimus unwound the **Darke** thread as fast as he could. As soon as it was gone Jenna began rubbing her ankles furiously.

“Ouch ouch ouch . . . *aargh!*”

Septimus leaped to his feet. “Back in a mo, Jen. Don’t move.”

“Fat chance,” muttered Jenna. “I think my feet are going to fall off.”

Septimus squeezed past Spit Fyre’s leathery folded wings and disappeared behind the dragon’s spiny head. He emerged a few moments later and quickly made his way back to Jenna.

“Ouch ouch ouch . . .” Jenna was muttering fiercely to herself. “*Ouch.*” Bright red welts had sprung up wherever the **Darke** thread had touched her skin and she felt as though a red-hot wire were cutting into her.

Septimus kneeled down and rubbed a damp and somewhat sticky cloth carefully over the angry red lines. Immediately the vicious sting left them and Jenna gave a sigh of relief.

“Oh, Sep, that’s amazing. It’s stopped. Oh, it’s *stopped*. What is it?”

“It’s my handkerchief.”

“I know *that*, silly. But what’s the sticky stuff on it?”

Septimus avoided answering. “You need to leave it on for twenty-four hours. Okay?”

“Okay.” Jenna nodded and poked tentatively at her ankles; she now felt no more than a warm buzz along the fading red lines. “It’s brilliant stuff. What is it?”

“Well. Um . . .”

Jenna looked at Septimus suspiciously. “Sep, *tell* me. What is it?”

“Dragon dribble.”

“Oh, yuck!”

“It’s powerful stuff, Jen.”

“I’ve got to have dried dragon dribble on me for *twenty-four hours?*”

Septimus shrugged. “If you don’t want the **Darke** stuff back.”

“**Darke** stuff?” Jenna looked at Septimus. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Is that what it was? What are you doing messing with **Darke** stuff, Sep?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” said Septimus.

“Huh?”

“Jen, you might think that’s a nice fancy dress witch’s cloak, but it’s not. It’s the real thing.”

“I know,” said Jenna quietly.

“You *know*?”

Jenna nodded.

“But I thought that no one could wear a **Darke** witch’s cloak unless they’re . . .” Septimus looked at Jenna. She returned his gaze steadily. “Jen—you’re *not*?”

Jenna was defensive. “I’m only a novice,”

“*Only a novice*? Jen. I . . . I . . .” Septimus ran out of words.

“Sep, stuff’s happened.”

“*You’re telling me.*”

Jenna stifled a sob. “Oh, it’s been so horrible. It’s *Mum* . . .”

They sat in the straw at the back of the Dragon House and Jenna told Septimus about Merrin, about the **Darke Domaine** and about what had happened to Sarah. Now, at last, Septimus understood what had been going on since he had left Marcia that afternoon.

Jenna reached the end of her story and fell silent. Septimus said nothing; he felt as if his whole world was falling apart.

“It’s all so rubbish, Jen,” he muttered eventually.

“I *hate* birthdays,” said Jenna. “Stuff happens on birthdays. Everything you love gets messed up. It’s awful.”

They were silent for a while, then Septimus said, “Jen. I’m really, *really* sorry.”

Jenna looked at Septimus, his face lit by the soft yellow light shining up from his Dragon Ring. She didn’t think she’d ever seen him look so unhappy, not even when he was a small, frightened boy soldier. “It’s not *your* fault, Sep,” she said gently.

“Yes, it is. It wouldn’t have happened if I had helped you when you asked me—if I had listened properly to what you were saying. But I was so taken up with . . . with all my stuff. And now look at the mess we’re in.”

Jenna put her arm around Septimus’s shoulders. “It’s okay, Sep. There are so many *ifs*. *If* I had taken more care of the Palace. *If* I’d searched it ages ago when I first thought I saw Merrin. *If* Dad had done something when I’d asked him. *If* I’d gone to Marcia earlier instead of asking Beetle. *If* Marcia had explained things properly to Mum. *If* if if. You were just one of a long trail of them.”

“Thanks, Jen. I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me too,”

They sat quietly together, lulled by the regular breathing of the sleeping

Spit Fyre. They were beginning to drift off to sleep themselves when they heard something that made the hairs on the backs of their necks prickle. From outside the Dragon House came a scraping sound, as though someone was scratching fingernails on brick.

“What is it?” whispered Jenna.

Septimus felt Spit Fyre’s muscles suddenly tense—the dragon was awake. “I’ll go and see.”

“Not on your own, you won’t,” said Jenna.

The scraping was making its way toward the front of the Dragon House. Spit Fyre gave a warning snort. The scraping sound stopped for a moment and then continued. Septimus felt Jenna grab his arm. “Use this,” she mouthed, pointing to her witch’s cloak.

Septimus nodded—it seemed that a witch’s cloak had its uses after all. Hiding beneath the cloak to disguise their human presence, they crept forward, squeezing between Spit Fyre and the rough sides of the Dragon House. Suddenly Spit Fyre made an odd movement that almost flattened Jenna and Septimus against the wall. Keeping his head on the ground, the dragon raised himself on his rear haunches. His back spines stabbed at the rafters of the Dragon House, deepening the grooves they had already made. He snorted and his fire stomach gurgled.

Septimus glanced at Jenna; something was wrong. They inched around Spit Fyre’s wings and stopped dead—black against the purple glow of the **Safety Curtain** were the unmistakable shapes of three **Things**.

One of the **Things** had hold of Spit Fyre’s sensitive nose spine and was pushing the dragon’s head down into the straw. Spit Fyre snorted once more, trying to draw in enough air to make Fyre—but because the **Thing** was holding his head down, his fire stomach could not work. A dragon can only make Fyre with his lungs full and his head held high.

On either side of Spit Fyre’s head, the other two **Things** were closing in. A sudden glint of steel—purple in the glow of the Safety Curtain—flashed a warning. The **Things** had knives. Long, sharp, dragon-stabbing blades.

Jenna had seen the knives too. She made a sign that Septimus took to mean *you get one and I’ll get the other one*. It was only after Jenna took off like a rocket and launched herself and her cloak onto the nearest **Thing** that Septimus realized Jenna had no weapon—except surprise. But he thought no further. While Jenna landed on the **Thing**, knocked it to the ground and smothered it in the swathes of her cloak, Septimus leaped over Spit Fyre’s neck and hurled himself at the other **Thing**. The **Thing** knew nothing until it was felled by a burning hot wire around his neck and the rapid incantation of a **Freeze**.

Bemused, the third **Thing**—which still had hold of Spit Fyre’s nose spine—stopped and stared. It was the very last **Thing** to have been **Engendered** by

Merrin and was the runt of the litter, with few of the nastier **Thing** attributes. It survived by mimicking other **Things** and generally playing follow-the-leader, but it had a tendency to dither when left on its own—which is what it did now.

The next few seconds were a blur. Spit Fyre felt the **Thing's** grip loosen. With a fierce, fast movement he threw his head high. The nose spine **Thing** went flying. Like a ragged bundle of wash hurled by an angry washerwoman, it traveled into the air, crashed through the branches of an overhanging fir tree and disappeared over the high hedge that divided the Dragon Field from the Palace grounds. As it flew through the air it hit the purple force field of the **Safety Curtain**—which still worked fine everywhere but at the fusion point—bounced off and was sent on an opposite trajectory toward the river. Some seconds later a faint but extremely satisfying splash was heard as it hit the river.

Jenna and Septimus grinned at each other cautiously. Three down—but how many to go?

The **Thing** felled by Septimus lay inert in the straw with a long strand of **Darke Thread** almost lost in the scraggly folds of its neck. Jenna still had her cloak wrapped around the other **Thing's** head, but it wasn't something she wanted to do for long.

"Sep, I'm stuck," she whispered. "If I get up then this **Thing** will too."

"Just leave your cloak over it, Jen. It's a **Darke** cloak and you shouldn't be messing with it. Leave it there and it will carry on smothering the **Thing** all on its own."

Jenna was not impressed. "I'm not leaving my cloak. No way."

Septimus glanced around nervously, wondering if there were any more **Things**. He didn't want a discussion with Jenna right then, but some things just had to be said.

"Jen," he whispered urgently. "You don't seem to realize. Your cloak is a **Darke witch cloak**. It's not good. You shouldn't be playing around with it."

"I am *not* playing around with anything."

"You are. Leave the cloak."

"No."

"*Jen*," Septimus protested. "This is the cloak talking, not you. *Leave it.*"

Jenna fixed Septimus with her Princess look. "Listen, Sep, this is *me* talking—not some lump of wool, okay? This cloak is my responsibility. When I want to get rid of it I will do it properly so that no one else can get hold of it. But right now I want to keep it. You forget that you've got all this weird **Magyk** stuff to protect you. You know what to do against the **Darke**. I don't. This cloak is all I have. It was given to me and *I am not leaving it on this disgusting Thing.*"

Septimus knew when to give up. "Okay, Jen. You take your cloak. I'll

Freeze that one as well.”

Expertly Septimus muttered a quick **Freeze**. “You can get your cloak back now, Jen,” he said. “If you really want.”

“Yes, Sep. I *do* really want.” Jenna snatched her cloak off the **Thing** and to Septimus’s amazement she put it on.

Septimus decided to leave his **Darke** thread buried deep into the raggedy skin folds of the other **Thing**’s neck. There were some things he never wanted to do and diving into the folds of a **Thing**’s neck was one of them. Close up, **Things** have a foul, dead-rat kind of smell and there is something truly revolting about direct contact with them. When a human touches them, strips of slimy skin peel off and stick to flesh like glue.

Spit Fyre had watched with interest as his Pilot and Navigator so very effectively immobilized his attackers. There is a widespread theory that dragons do not feel gratitude, but this is not true—they just don’t show it in a way that people recognize. Spit Fyre lumbered obediently out of the Dragon House. He carefully avoided treading on any toes and refrained from snorting in Septimus’s face—this was dragon gratitude at its fullest.

Septimus stood close to the comforting bulk of Spit Fyre and scanned the eerily purple Dragon Field.

“Do you think there are more **Things**?” Jenna whispered, looking uneasily behind her.

“I dunno, Jen,” muttered Septimus. “They could be anywhere . . . everywhere. Who can tell?”

“Not *everywhere*, Sep. There’s one place they can’t go.” Jenna pointed skyward.

Septimus grinned. “Come on, Spit Fyre,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Chapter 31

Horse Stuff



The Gringe family was upstairs in the gatehouse. They had come home early from their traditional Longest Night wander down Wizard Way because Mrs. Gringe had felt ignored by Rupert—who had been talking to Nicko for much of the time—and had demanded to go home. Consequently they had missed the **Raising** of the **Safety Curtain**, although it would have meant little to them as the Gringes treated **Magyk** with great suspicion.

Mrs. Gringe was sitting in her chair, unraveling a knitted sock with quick, irritable movements, while Gringe was poking at the small log fire that they allowed themselves on the Longest Night. The chimney was cold and choked with soot, and the fire was refusing to draw and was filling the room with smoke.

Rupert Gringe, his filial duty of the Wizard Way promenade done for another year, stood hovering by the door, anxious to be away. He had a new girlfriend—the skipper of one of the Port barges—and he wanted to be there to meet her when the late-night barge arrived at the boatyard.

Beside Rupert stood Nicko Heap, equally anxious to be gone. Nicko had come along because Rupert had asked him. “There’s not so much shouting if someone else is there,” Rupert had said. But that was not the only reason Nicko had come. The truth was, he was feeling unsettled. Snorri and her mother had taken their boat, the *Alfrún*, on a trip to the Port and “only a little way out to sea, Nicko. We’ll be back in a few days,” Snorri had promised.

When he had asked her why, Snorri had been evasive. But Nicko knew why—they were testing the *Alfrún*'s seaworthiness. He knew that Snorri's mother wanted Snorri and the *Alfrún* to come home with her, and something told Nicko that Snorri wanted that too. And when Nicko thought about it—which he tried not to—he felt a sense of freedom at the thought of Snorri going away. But it was tinged with sadness, and after Lucy's excited talk of weddings, Nicko longed to get back to the boatyard. At least you knew where you were with boats, he thought.

Lucy smiled at her brother trying to edge out the door. She knew exactly how he felt. Tomorrow she would be away on the early morning Port barge and she couldn't wait.

"You definitely booked a horse space, Rupe?" she asked him, not for the first time.

Rupert looked exasperated. "Yes, Luce. I *told* you. The early morning barge has two horse berths and Thunder's got one. For sure. Maggie said."

"Maggie?" asked his mother, looking up from her sock unravelling, suddenly alert.

"The skipper, Mother," Rupert said quickly.

It was not lost on Mrs. Gringe that Rupert had gone bright pink, his face clashing with his spiky, carrot-colored hair. "Oh. She's a *skipper*, is she?" Mrs. Gringe tugged at a knot, determined to unpick it. "Funny job for a girl, that."

Rupert was old enough now not rise to the bait. He ignored his mother's comments and continued his conversation with Lucy. "Come down to the boatyard early tomorrow morning, Luce. About six. We'll—I mean *I'll* help you load him before the passengers arrive."

Lucy smiled at her brother. "Thanks, Rupe. Sorry. I'm just a bit edgy."

"Aren't we all," said Rupert. He hugged his sister and Lucy returned his hug. She didn't see much of Rupert and she missed him.

After Rupert had left, Lucy felt the eyes of both her parents on her. It was not a comfortable feeling. "I'll go and check on Thunder," she said. "I thought I heard him whinny just then."

"Don't be long," said her mother. "Supper's nearly done. Shame your brother couldn't wait for supper," she sniffed. "It's stew."

"Thought it might be," muttered Lucy.

"What?"

"Nothing, Ma. Back in a tick."

Lucy clattered down the wooden stairs and pushed open the battered old door that led onto the run up to the drawbridge. She took a few deep breaths of smoke-free, snowy air and walked briskly around to the old stable at the back of the gatehouse, where Thunder was residing. Lucy pushed open the

door and the horse, lit by the lamp that she had left in the tiny high window, looked at her, the whites of his eyes glistening. He pawed the straw, shook his head with its dark, heavy mane and gave a restless whinny.

Lucy was not a great horse person, and Thunder was bit of a mystery to her. She was fond of the horse because Simon loved him so much, but she was also wary. It was his hooves that worried her—they were big and heavy and she was never quite sure what Thunder was going to do with them. She knew that even Simon took care not to stand behind the horse in case he kicked.

Lucy approached Thunder cautiously and very gently patted the horse's nose. "Silly old horse coming all this way to see me. Simon must be so upset that you've gone. Won't he be pleased to see you? Silly old horse . . ."

Lucy suddenly had a vivid picture in her mind of riding Thunder off the Port barge and Simon's look of amazement when he saw what she could do. She knew it was possible; she had seen the daredevil boys who rode their horses off the barge instead of leading them. It couldn't be that difficult, she thought. It was only up the gangplank, which was not exactly far to ride a horse. Then Simon could take over and they could ride back together. It would be such fun . . .

Lost in her daydream, Lucy decided to see how easy it was to actually get up onto Thunder. Not at all, was the answer. Lucy regarded the horse, which stood so much taller than her—his back was as high as her head. How *did* people get onto horses? Ah, thought Lucy, saddles. They had saddles. With things for your feet. But Lucy did not have a saddle. Gringe had not found one cheap enough, and Thunder had had to make do with a thick horse blanket—which Lucy rather liked, as it was covered in stars. It was also, in the cold, much more useful to him.

Lucy was not deterred; she was determined to get up on Thunder. She fetched the set of wooden steps that reached to the hay manger and set them beside the horse. Then she climbed the steps, wobbled precariously at the top and clambered onto the horse's broad back. Thunder's only reaction was to shift his weight a little. He was a steady horse and it seemed to Lucy as though he hardly noticed her. She was right. Thunder had barely registered her presence; the horse had someone else on his mind—Simon.

"Drat!" An exclamation came from somewhere near the floor.

Lucy recognized the voice. "Stanley!" she said, looking down from her great height. "Where are you?"

"Here." The voice sounded rather aggrieved. "I think I've trodden in something." A rather portly brown rat was peering at his foot. "It's not very nice if you don't wear shoes," he complained.

Lucy felt excited—a reply from Simon, and so soon. But Stanley was fully occupied inspecting his foot with an expression of disgust. Lucy knew that the sooner he got the horse poo off his foot, the sooner she would hear Simon's

reply to her message.

“Here, have my hanky,” she said. A small, square of purple dotted with pink spots and edged in green lace floated down from Thunder. The rat caught the scrap of cloth, gave it a bemused look, and then scrubbed his foot with it.

“Thanks,” he said. With a surprisingly agile leap, Stanley hopped up the steps and jumped onto Thunder, landing just in front of Lucy. He presented her with the handkerchief.

“Mmm, thank you, Stanley,” said Lucy, taking it carefully between finger and thumb. “Now, please, *tell me the message.*”

With one hand holding on to Thunder’s coarse black mane for support, Stanley stood up and put on his official message delivering voice.

“No message received. Recipient marked as gone away.”

“Gone away? What do you mean, *gone away?*”

“Gone away. As in, not present to receive message.”

“Well, he was probably out doing something. Didn’t you wait? I paid extra for that, Stanley, you know I did.” Lucy sounded annoyed.

Stanley was peeved. “I waited as agreed,” he said. “And then, seeing as it was you, I went to the trouble of asking around, which was when I discovered that there was no point waiting any longer. I only just got the last barge home, *actually.*”

“What do you mean, no point waiting any longer?” asked Lucy.

“Simon Heap is not expected to return, so his domestics told me.”

“Domestics—*what domestics?* Simon doesn’t have any cleaners,” Lucy said snappily.

“Domestics as in the rats that live in his room.”

“Simon doesn’t have rats in his room,” said Lucy, slightly affronted.

Stanley chuckled. “Of *course* he has rats. Everyone has rats. He has—or had—six families under his floor. But not anymore. They left when something rather nasty turned up and took him away. It was sheer luck I bumped into them. They were looking for another place on the quayside but it’s not easy; very desirable properties there are already stuffed to the brim with rats, you wouldn’t believe how many—”

“Something nasty took him away?” Lucy was aghast. “Stanley, whatever do you mean?”

The rat shrugged. “I don’t know. Look, I must go home and see what my brood are doing. I’ve been out all day. Goodness knows what state the place will be in.” Stanley went to jump down but Lucy grabbed hold of his tail. Stanley looked shocked. “*Don’t* do that. It’s extremely bad manners.”

“I don’t care,” Lucy told him. “You’re not going until you’ve told me *exactly* what you heard about Simon.”

Stanley was saved from answering by a sudden gust of wind, which blew the stable door wide open.

Thunder raised his head and sniffed the air. He pawed the ground restlessly and Lucy began to feel slightly unsafe—there was something **Magykal** about Thunder and he was a little scary. Thunder had been Simon’s faithful horse through his master’s **Darkest** moments and there was an indissoluble connection between them. And now Thunder **Knew** his master was near. And where his master was, Thunder must be.

And so Thunder went. He threw his head back, whinnied and was out the stable door, his hooves slipping on the snowy cobbles as he cantered out into the night. Paying Lucy no more attention than if she had been a gnat on his back, the horse galloped off to the place where he **Knew** his master awaited him.

The clattering of Thunder’s hooves was the only sound to disturb the warren of deserted streets that led from the North Gate gatehouse to Wizard Way—apart from some extremely piercing screams.

“Stop! *Stop*, you stupid horse!”

Chapter 32

Day of Recognition



*A*fter Spit Fyre had taken off from the **Dragon Field**, Septimus had flown him away from the Palace and out above the river. They had wheeled to the right just before the jagged crag of Raven's rock and were now flying above the Moat. Septimus craned over Spit Fyre's wide, muscled neck and stared down at the Castle below on his right-hand side. He gasped. It looked as though someone had dropped a large pool of ink onto the Palace and Wizard Way. The dark irregular shape was, even as he watched, moving outward as yet more candles and torches were extinguished.

Jenna was sitting in her usual Navigator space, in the dip between the dragon's shoulders, just behind Septimus.

"It's so dark down there!" she shouted above the noise of Spit Fyre's wings.

Septimus searched for a sign of Marcia's **Safety Curtain**. He thought that maybe, just possibly, he could see a faint purple glimmer deep within the blackness, but he could not be sure. The only thing he could be sure of was that the **Safety Curtain** had failed.

At least, Septimus noted with relief, Marcia knew what was happening. The spreading blackness had halted at the wall surrounding the Wizard Tower courtyard and from its boundaries he saw the **Living SafeShield** begin to grow upward into the night sky, encasing the entire tower in a cone of brilliant indigo and purple lights, the colors of which showed, to Septimus's

knowledgeable eye, that Marcia was in residence. It was a magnificent sight and made him feel proud to be part of the Wizard Tower—although once again unhappy to be outside the **Magyk**.

They flew slowly along the Moat, keeping the Castle Walls on their right. The **Darke Domaine** was spreading fast and he knew that nowhere in the Castle would be safe for long. The one beacon of light—the Wizard Tower and his *home*—was now closed to him and to Jenna. They had a simple choice: leave the Castle and flee to safety or find somewhere within the Castle where they could hide out and keep the **Darke** at bay.

Jenna tapped him on the shoulder. “Sep, what are you *doing*? We have to get to the Palace. We have to get Mum out of there!”

They had now reached the other end of the Moat. The One Way Bridge was to their left and in front of them, on the other side of the river, lights ablaze, was the ramshackle shape of the Grateful Turbot Tavern. Septimus contemplated landing there—the lights looked so welcoming—but he needed time to think. He wheeled Spit Fyre around in a tight turn and began to retrace their path.

Septimus flew Spit Fyre slowly so that he could see how far—and how fast—the **Darke Domaine** was spreading. They flew over the drawbridge, which was raised as it always was at night. The **Darkeness** had not yet reached there, although the Gringes’ rather mean single candle in the upstairs window of the gatehouse did not make it easy to tell. But there were other signs that all was still well; Septimus could still see the thin covering of snow on the road reflecting the light from candles in houses set back from the gatehouse. He also saw, as he dipped down for a closer look, a rectangle of lamplight thrown onto the road from an open door at the back of the gatehouse.

Septimus took Spit Fyre down low along the Moat. He was relieved to see that candles were still burning in the windows of the houses that backed onto the Castle walls, as were the lamps in Jannit Maarten’s boatyard and on the newly arrived late-night Port barge, which was just docking. But farther down, the Manuscriptorium boathouse was **Darke**. Not merely unlit but so dark as to be almost invisible. If Septimus had not known it was there, he would have thought it was an empty space. And yet, strangely, the houses on either side of it were still lit.

What Septimus could not see was that the **Darke Domaine** had followed Merrin to the Manuscriptorium and had spread through the entire premises, which extended down to the Moat. Merrin intended to make the Manuscriptorium his temporary headquarters until he got into the Wizard Tower. But being in charge was not as much fun as he had expected now that Jillie Djinn was no longer there to intimidate. The empty old place felt rather creepy, especially with the **Seal** on the Hermetic Chamber glowing eerily through the **Darke**, behind which—unknown to Merrin—Beetle was

frantically searching for the **Suspension Charm**, which was now languishing in the garbage bin out in the yard along with the rest of the contents of the siege drawer.

With the **Paired Code** feeling like it was stuck in his throat, Merrin had gone upstairs to Jillie Djinn's rooms to wash it down with her stash of biscuits and plan his next move. His mouth full of stale biscuit, Merrin stared out of the window and caught a glimpse of Spit Fyre as he flew past. *What was he doing up there?* Merrin cursed. Stupid **Things**. They couldn't even do a simple job like getting rid of a pathetic dragon. Well, he'd show that dragon. He'd get it. Merrin smiled at his dark reflection in the grubby window. Oh, he'd get it all right—one way or another. It wouldn't stand a chance. Not against what he'd got planned. This was, Merrin told himself, going to be *fun*.

Spit Fyre flew slowly on, past tiny attic windows containing flickering candles until they came to Snake Slipway. Below them, to the left of the Slipway was Rupert Gringe's boathouse, still happily ablaze with a couple of buckets containing torches. The houses on either side of the slipway were also still untouched; many of them seemed to have caught Marcellus's habit of burning forests of candles, and the whole slipway shone brightly.

Septimus had made his decision—Alther must wait. He would use his **Darke Disguise** to rescue Sarah and then he would stay and fight the spreading **Darkeness**. But he could not risk Jenna's safety. He wheeled Spit Fyre out across the Moat and over the Forest borders in order to give the dragon space to turn for a good run into Snake Slipway, where he planned to land.

"What are you doing?" yelled Jenna.

"Landing!" yelled Septimus.

"Here?"

"Not here. Snake Slipway!"

Jenna leaned forward and yelled in Septimus's ear, "No, Sep! We have to get Mum!"

Septimus turned to face Jenna. "Not you, Jen. Too dangerous. I'll go!"

"No way! I'm coming too!" Jenna shouted above the *whooshing* of the air as the dragon's wings swept down.

Spit Fyre was lining up for the tricky sloop down into Snake Slipway, but Septimus could not concentrate with Jenna yelling in his ear. He wheeled the dragon around once more.

"No, Jen!" Septimus yelled as Spit Fyre flew back across the Moat toward the Forest again. "I'm taking you somewhere safe first. We don't know what's in the Palace now!"

"Mum's in there, you—you *total dumbbrain!*"

Septimus was shocked. Jenna never used language like that normally. He

blamed the witch's cloak. He turned Spit Fyre around and lined him up once more for landing on Snake Slipway.

Spit Fyre began his second attempt to land.

"Septimus Heap, you are *not* dumping me!" Jenna yelled.

"But Jen—"

"Spit Fyre!" yelled his Navigator. "Go up!"

Spit Fyre—who obeyed his Navigator's instructions in the absence of any from his Pilot—began to go up. But not for long.

"Down, Spit Fyre!" his Pilot countermanded. Spit Fyre went down. His Pilot was in charge.

"Up!" yelled Jenna.

Spit Fyre went up.

"Down!" Septimus yelled. His dragon obeyed. Septimus had one last go at persuading Jenna.

"Jen, please, listen to me! The Palace is *dangerous*! If something happens to you, that's it. No more Queens in the Castle. *Ever*. We can land here and I'll take you to Marcellus's house—he's got a **SafeChamber**—or we can even go to Aunt Zelda's. You choose. But you *have* to be safe!"

Jenna fumed. How many times had she been sidelined just because she had to be *safe*? She leaned forward—all the better to yell at Septimus and tell him she didn't care about being Queen, *so there*—and *The Queen Rules* dug into her. Angrily she pulled the book out of her pocket, intending to hurl it into the Moat below. But something stopped her. The little red book sat so naturally in her hand and felt so much a part of her that suddenly Jenna knew she could not throw it away—in fact, she could *never* throw it away. This fragile, worn, little red book contained her history. Whatever she thought of it, whether she liked it or not, this was who she was, who her family was, and she knew, as she looked down onto the **Darkening** Castle below, that this was where she belonged. Nothing she did would ever change that.

And so, sitting on a somewhat confused dragon, Jenna realized what the Day of Recognition actually meant. Somehow, without any official ceremony, procession or traditional hoo-ha, it had happened. She understood who she was and she accepted it. It was, she realized, recognition of something she had known for a while but had preferred not to notice. It was a bit late in the day, she thought, as she heard the chimes of the Drapers Yard Clock strike ten, but that was fine.

Septimus took Jenna's sudden silence to mean that she had stopped speaking to him in disgust.

"Landing!" he yelled.

"Okay!" Jenna shouted back.

Surprised, Septimus turned around. "Really?" he shouted.

Jenna smiled. "Yep! Really!"

Septimus gave Jenna a huge grin of relief—he hated arguing with her—and once more Spit Fyre began his approach to Snake Slipway. The slipway was hemmed in on both sides by houses, some leaning in toward each other and none wanting their windows smashed by a misplaced dragon’s tail. It was not an easy landing, even for a dragon used to the narrow confines of the Castle. With a loud snort of excitement—Spit Fyre liked a challenge—the dragon headed down.

It was a perfect landing. Spit Fyre settled lightly in the center of the slipway and folded his wings with an air of satisfaction and the creaking sound of old leather. His Pilot and Navigator slipped down from their places and stood on the sleet-shined slipway.

“Spit Fyre,” said his Pilot. “**Stay!**”

Spit Fyre regarded his Pilot quizzically. Why did his Pilot want him to **Stay** in this bad place? Had he done something wrong? His Navigator came to his rescue.

“You can’t tell Spit Fyre to **Stay**, Sep.”

“It’s only for a few minutes, Jen. Then I’m going to get Mum.”

But Spit Fyre’s Navigator dug her heels in. “No, Sep. Supposing those **Things** come back? You have to take the **Stay** off. It’s not fair.”

Septimus sighed. Jenna was right. “Okay. Spit Fyre, **Stay** replaced with **StaySafe**.” He patted the dragon’s nose. “Okay?”

Spit Fyre snorted. He thumped his tail and sent a plume of Moat water up into the air. The dragon watched his Pilot and Navigator walk to a doorway a few yards up on the left where the slipway leveled out. His Pilot placed a key in the lock and turned it, then they disappeared inside and the door closed behind them.

Spit Fyre watched the door, waiting for them to come out again. And while he watched he stretched out his wings so that he was ready to take off quickly—just in case. He didn’t like the slipway. It was narrow and full of hiding places on either side. Spit Fyre didn’t like what was happening to the Castle either; he could smell the **Darke**, he could feel it coming closer. And then, suddenly, he saw a movement in the shadows. His Pilot’s **StaySafe** kicked in and so, as a group of **Things** crept up on him in a pincer movement, knives at the ready, Spit Fyre raised his wings and, with one powerful downstroke, he was airborne. He looked down and saw the **Things** on the slipway staring up at him. A moment later there was a loud *splat*—a particularly large amount of dragon poop had scored a direct hit.

Jenna didn’t like Marcellus’s house very much. There was something about the smell of it that reminded her of a Time five hundred years ago.

“Do we *have* to come here?” she asked uneasily.

“Marcellus has a **SafeChamber**,” said Septimus. “Where you can be, um,

safe.” He glanced around. The narrow hallway and the flight of stairs leading up to the next floor were ablaze with candles, as they always were, but a stillness hung in the air, and he knew the house was deserted. Septimus felt at a loss. He realized he was also hoping for Marcellus’s company—and advice. “He’s not here,” he said flatly.

Jenna was puzzled. “He must be. All these candles are lit.”

“He always does that,” said Septimus. “I’ve told him that one day he’ll come back to find his house burned down but he doesn’t listen.”

“I don’t want to stay here on my own, I really don’t,” Jenna said anxiously. “It’s so creepy . . .”

“Let’s go,” said Septimus. “We’ll sit it out on Spit Fyre and wait for him to come back.”

“I’m not leaving the Castle,” said Jenna, a warning in her voice.

“Neither am I. We’ll just kind of hover. We’ll be safe on Spit Fyre.” Septimus opened the door and stepped outside. Jenna heard a sharp intake of breath.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Spit Fyre. He’s *gone*.”

Chapter 33

Thieves in the Night



*As Jenna and Septimus stood on the lonely slipway, the dark waters of the Moat to their right and the spreading **Darkenesse** of the Castle all around them, they heard an echoing, flip-flapping noise coming toward them.*

“Quick, Jen. Let’s get back inside.”

*Jenna nodded. The noise sounded horribly like an approaching **Thing**. Septimus was fumbling with the key when a voice called out, “Apprentice! Apprentice!”*

The flustered figure of Marcellus Pye, with one shoe looking like a dog had mangled it, appeared from a gap between two houses and hurried toward them. “Thank goodness you are here.” He bowed slightly to Jenna, as he always did, and then succeeded in annoying her—as he always did. “Princess. I did not recognize you at first. You do realize you are wearing the cloak of a true witch?”

“Yes. I do, thank you,” said Jenna. “And before you ask, the answer is no, I will not take it off.”

Marcellus surprised her. “I should hope not. It may prove useful. And you will not be the first Witch Princess in the Castle.”

*“Oh.” Jenna was not entirely pleased. She had rather assumed that she *was* the first Witch Princess.*

*“Marcellus,” said Septimus urgently. “Jenna needs to stay somewhere safe. I thought your **SafeChamber**—”*

Marcellus did not let Septimus finish. “It is not safe here, Apprentice. Miss Djinn knows I have a **SafeChamber**—all Chambers are declared to the Chief Hermetic Scribe—and I fear our Chief Hermetic Scribe has already given away our secrets.” Marcellus shook his head sadly. He hated to see what had happened to the Manuscriptorium. “There are **Things** abroad already,” he continued. “They will come here soon enough, and Princess Jenna will be trapped like a rat. We must go somewhere the **Darke Domaine** will have trouble finding.”

“But the **Darke Domaine** is spreading fast,” said Septimus. “It will soon be *everywhere*. Jenna should leave the Castle.”

“Sep, I’m actually still *here*,” said Jenna, annoyed. “And I am *not* leaving the Castle.”

“Quite right, Princess,” said Marcellus. “Now, I believe that the **Domaine** will have some trouble getting into the Ramblings, and even once it’s inside it will not find it easy to spread. So I suggest we head there and . . . what is that Young Army term, Apprentice?”

“Regroup?” Septimus offered.

“Ah, yes. Regroup. Ideally, what we need is an overlooked little fleapit down a dead end, with an outside window.”

Jenna knew exactly where to find one. She pulled out the key that Silas had given her not so very long ago.

“What’s that?” asked Septimus.

“It’s a key, Sep,” teased Jenna.

“I *know* it’s a key. But where to?”

Jenna grinned. “An overlooked little fleapit down a dead end, with an outside window,” she said.

Marcellus Pye closed the door of his house behind him with a sigh and looked up at his dark windows. Septimus had insisted he blow out all his candles and it had made him feel quite depressed.

“Come now, we must go,” said Marcellus.

“I’ll **Call** Spit Fyre,” said Septimus. “Something must have spooked him. He can’t have gone far.”

Marcellus looked doubtful. He’d got along just fine without dragon flight for more than five hundred years and he wasn’t in a hurry to change things. But Septimus was already letting out the ululating **Call**, which reverberated off the densely packed houses on Snake Slipway and made the Alchemist shiver. It was a primeval sound, Marcellus thought, one that went back way beyond Alchemie.

They waited nervously on the slipway, glancing at the shadows, imagining movements.

After a few minutes Marcellus whispered, “I do not believe your dragon is

coming, Septimus.”

“But he *has* to come when I **Call**,” said Septimus, worried.

“Maybe he can’t, Sep,” whispered Jenna.

“*Don’t*, Jen.”

“I didn’t meant that he was . . . well, I . . .” Jenna stopped. She could see she was only making things worse.

“Dragon or no dragon, we can wait no longer,” said Marcellus. “With care we can travel short distances through the **Darke Domaine**. My cloak has certain . . . abilities, shall we say, and you, Apprentice, have a small tinderbox that may prove useful.” Jenna shot Septimus a questioning look. “And you, Princess, will be protected well enough with your membership of . . .” Marcellus peered at the markings on her witch cloak. “My, you don’t do things by halves, do you? The Port Witch Coven! Now, we must go. We will travel by the Castle Canyons.”

“Castle Canyons?” asked Jenna, who liked to think she knew most things about the Castle. “*I’ve* never heard of them.”

“I suspect not many Princesses ever do. Although now you have other, er, allegiances, you might find that will change,” Marcellus said with a smile. “The Canyons are not, shall we say, salubrious places. Those using them generally have reasons to hide. However, I know them well and we can slip through the night unnoticed. I am much practiced at the art.”

That did not surprise Jenna. Marcellus threw his long black cape around himself with a dramatic swirl and, equally theatrically, Jenna followed suit with her witch’s cloak, pulling the hood over her head to cover her gold circlet. Compared with his companions, Septimus felt a little conspicuous in his Apprentice green. He followed in their footsteps, feeling like an apprentice thief shadowing his masters.

Almost immediately Marcellus dived into a tiny gap between the houses. An ancient sign half hidden behind some ivy announced its name: *SQUEEZE GUTS OPE*. With the rough bricks snagging at their cloaks, they threaded their way through the warren between the jumble of houses that were packed in behind Snake Slipway. Their footsteps made no noise as they trod on years of leaves, moss and the occasional soft mound of a small dead animal. Feeling like a small animal himself scuttling through its burrows, Septimus kept glancing up, hoping to see the sky. But the dark of the moon and the snow-laden clouds gave nothing away. Once or twice he thought he saw a star, only to be obscured by the black shape of a chimney or a twist of a roofline as he turned yet another corner. The only light came from the comforting glow of his Dragon Ring as he held his right hand out in front of him.

As they went deeper in, the Canyons narrowed, sometimes so much that they were forced to walk sideways, squeezing past towering walls that threatened to press them flat. Septimus had an image of them squashed

between the walls like the dried herbs Sarah Heap kept between the pages of her herb book. He longed to be able to stretch his arms out wide in all directions without his knuckles hitting brick, to be able to run freely in any direction he wanted to, not crawl like a crab between rocks. With every step he felt as though he were going deeper into a place from which he would never escape.

Septimus tried to take his mind off the encroaching walls by looking out for lighted candles in windows but there were hardly any windows to see. The sheer sides of stone rising up on either side blocked any view, and few people had put a window in a wall that looked out onto another wall no more than an arm's length away. But once or twice Septimus saw the telltale glow of a candle way up above them, shining onto the opposite wall, and his spirits raised a little.

At last they followed Marcellus into a wider gap and the Alchemist raised his hand in warning. They stopped. At the end of the gap was a bank of **Darke Fog**—they had reached the edge of the **Darke Domaine**.

Jenna and Septimus exchanged anxious glances.

“Apprentice,” said Marcellus, “it is time to open your tinderbox.”

Jenna watched with great interest as Septimus took a battered tinderbox from his pocket and pried off the lid. She saw him draw something from it, but what it was, she could not tell. He muttered some strange words that she could not catch and threw his hands upward. She got the impression that something floated down very slowly and settled onto him, but she couldn't be sure. He looked no different. In fact, it seemed more like a mime than anything else—the kind of thing they had had to do in drama classes in the Ramblings Little Theatre, which Jenna had always found rather embarrassing.

However, Marcellus and Septimus seemed satisfied, so Jenna guessed something must have happened. And then she did notice a change—the light from Septimus's Dragon Ring seemed more fleeting somehow, as if thin gauze was moving across it. And, when she looked at Septimus and tried to catch his eye, she realized that something about him eluded her. He was there, and yet he was not there. A little spooked, Jenna stepped back. Sometimes she felt Septimus was part of things that she would never fully understand.

Marcellus regarded his two charges closely. They were as prepared as they could ever be, he thought. Now they would have to put things to the test—it was time to step into the **Darke Domaine**. He beckoned them to the end of the passageway. They stopped where the **Fog** rolled in front of them, close enough to reach out and touch, and Marcellus said, “I will go first, then you two walk together. Keep a steady pace, breathe quietly. Keep your mind clear, for it will tempt you to stray from our path with beguiling thoughts of those you once loved. Do not react to anything and above all, *do not panic*. Panic draws **Darke** things to it like a magnet. Understood?”

Jenna and Septimus nodded. Neither could quite believe they were about to step into the shifting wall of **Darkeness** of their own free will. Both Septimus's **Darke Disguise** and Jenna's witch cloak protected them from the beguiling thoughts that drew people into the **Darke Domaine**. It was odd, thought Jenna, that her witch cloak allowed her to see the **Darke Domaine** for what it truly was: a terrifying blanket of evil.

Once again they exchanged glances, then together they followed Marcellus into the **Darke Fog**.

Septimus's **Darke Disguise** felt like a second skin. He moved easily through the thick **Darke Fog**, but both Marcellus and Jenna struggled. Jenna's witch's cloak gave her less protection—it did not totally enclose her in the way Septimus's **Darke Disguise** did and it was not nearly as powerful. Marcellus's cloak gave even less protection—he did not dabble with the **Darke** quite as much as he liked people to think he did. But any remnants of **Darke** offer protection in a **Darke Domaine** and Marcellus and Jenna managed to struggle along, even though they felt as though they were wading through glue and breathing through cotton wool. Waves of fatigue washed over them, but by force of will they managed to keep going.

After some minutes they came to a halt—they had reached Wizard Way. Marcellus peered cautiously out. He looked right and left and right again in exactly the way Jenna remembered Sarah doing when they used to cross the Way when she was little. Then Jenna had known what Sarah was looking out for, but now she had no idea what it was Marcellus was watching for—or how he could possibly see anything. Marcellus beckoned them forward and they stepped out into Wizard Way.

It was not a good place to be. The **Darke Domaine** felt heavier here and it moved around them like a living thing. Sometimes they felt something brush past them, and once a **Thing's** finger poked at Marcellus but he swept it off with a **Darke** curse and the **Thing** scuttled away. They walked steadily down the middle of the Way and concentrated on breathing slowly and calmly, in and out, in and out, as they measured their steps along the familiar—yet now so strange and frightening—Wizard Way.

As they walked on, Septimus began to get a strong sensation that there was something approaching behind them. It was a sense that he had learned to develop over his Apprentice years and he knew it was good. Remembering what Marcellus had said, he fought the urge to look back, but he could not rid himself of the feeling of a great creature bearing down on them fast. So fast that if they didn't jump out of the way right *now* . . . Septimus gave Marcellus and Jenna a hefty shove—not so easy in a **Darke Domaine**—and leaped to the side.

He was just in time. A huge black horse thundered past, his eyes wide and wild, mane streaming in the **Darke** and Lucy Gringe clinging on, screaming

silent, terrified screams.

Thunder's flight had the effect of clearing a temporary path through the **Darke**. Marcellus quickly recovered himself and steered Jenna and Septimus into the horse's wake, where they moved quickly along the horse-shaped tunnel that Thunder had created through the swirling blackness. For Marcellus and Jenna it was a relief to be out of the weight of the **Darke**, although they knew it would not last long—the space was already being invaded by a dull murkiness. At the end of the tunnel they could see that Thunder had halted, and the muffled sounds of shouting drifted toward them.

Jenna risked an excited whisper to Septimus. "Mum . . . I can hear *Mum*."

Septimus was not sure it was Sarah. It sounded more like Lucy Gringe to him, and there was a deeper voice there too.

Thunder's tunnel was slowly collapsing under encroaching wisps of **Darke Fog** moving into the space like smoke from a fire burning something foul. The sounds at the end of the tunnel faded into ghostly whispers, but in those faraway echoes, Jenna was absolutely convinced she could hear Sarah's voice. Suddenly, much to Marcellus's disapproval, she broke into a run. She could not bear the sound of her mother being obscured by the **Darke** once more. She *had* to get to her this time.

Jenna flew along the space, forcing Septimus and Marcellus to follow the departing witch's cloak, which spread out behind her like a huge black wing. They arrived at a scene of which Septimus, let alone Marcellus, could make no sense at all.

At first all Septimus could see was Thunder, stamping and tossing his head, rolling his eyes from side to side—a terrified horse longing to flee. A man had hold of his mane and was talking to him in a low voice without much effect, it seemed to Septimus. On the other side of the horse, mostly obscured by Thunder's bulky body and starry horse blanket, he saw the hem of Lucy Gringe's embroidered robes and chunky boots and then he saw Jenna's witch's cloak—with four feet coming from beneath it. And then, as Thunder did a sudden turn, he saw Jenna. She was wrapped in Sarah's arms and had enfolded her mother in her cloak as if to never let her go. Lucy was also hanging onto someone . . .

"Simon!" gasped Septimus. He turned to Marcellus. "My brother. It *had* to be. Of course it did. *He's* behind all this. So that's what his creepy letter was about: *Beware the Darke*. I get it now."

Simon heard every word. "No!" he protested. "No, it's not that. It is *not*. I ___"

"Shut up, you *toad*," snapped Septimus.

Marcellus did not know what was going on. But what he did know was that the middle of a **Darke Domaine** was not the place to have a family argument.

"Believe me, this is *nothing* to do with me," said Simon, half pleading, half

angry at being blamed yet again for something he had not done.

“Liar!” exploded Septimus. “How dare you come here and—”

“Be silent, Apprentice!” snapped Marcellus.

Shocked at being spoken to in that way, for Marcellus was always scrupulously polite, Septimus stopped in mid sentence.

Marcellus took advantage of the surprised silence. “If you value your lives, you will—all of you—do as I say,” he said with great command. “Immediately.”

The peril of their situation hit home. Everyone—even Simon—nodded.

“Very well,” said Marcellus. “Jenna, you know where to go so you will lead the way with the horse. It will help that you will both clear the air a little.” Simon went to protest but Marcellus stopped him. “If you wish to survive you will do as I say. Septimus, your mother is very weak; you will find your **Disguise** will stretch to two. It will shield her from the worst of it. I will follow with the young lady and with Simon Heap—for I presume you are he?” Simon nodded. “We shall move in this formation: one, two, three. It is the most efficient way to move through viscosity. We will go silently as one. There must be no dissent. *None whatsoever*. Is that understood?”

Everyone nodded.

And so like winter geese they set off in their V formation, Jenna with Thunder, Septimus and Sarah Heap sharing the **Darke Disguise**, followed by Marcellus, who had thrown his cloak around Simon on one side and Lucy on the other.

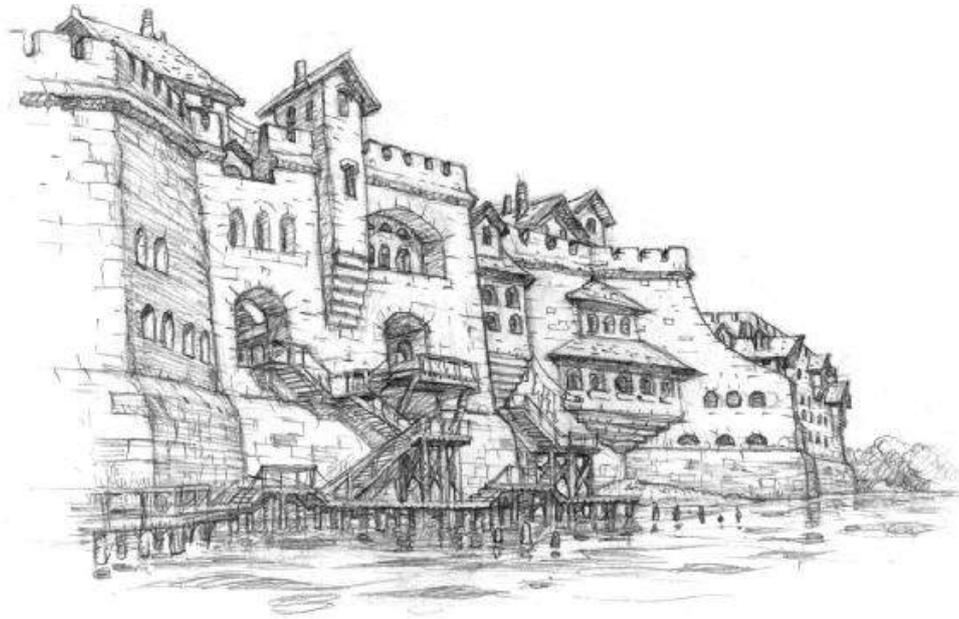
As they set off, Jenna muttered their destination under her breath. She didn’t know why she did, but as soon as she had, Jenna felt sure that she would find the way. She moved quickly out of Wizard Way and into the alleyways that would take her to the nearest entrance to the Ramblings. Deep in the **Darke Fog** Jenna found that the silence suited her. It allowed her to concentrate, and there was something about the witch’s cloak that gave her a feeling of safety within the danger that surrounded them. She moved easily through the **Darke**, and when she glanced around to check that everyone was still following her, she saw that, like Thunder, she was clearing a path for those behind. Not for the first time she wondered at her cloak’s powers.

There was no one in the Castle that terrible night who moved through the **Darke Fog** with anything approaching Jenna’s lightheartedness. Her happiness at finding Sarah safe overwhelmed everything. She hardly cared about the **Darke Domaine** or Simon’s sudden, suspicious appearance. She had her mum back and that was all that mattered.

And every route she had learned for her Extramural Ramblings Certificate all those years ago led to the very place she was now headed: The Big Red Door, There and Back Again Row.

Chapter 34

The Big Red Door



The Darke Domaine stopped at the Ramblings.

It had faded slowly. First they began to hear the sound of Thunder’s hooves, muffled and distant but growing louder every step. Hazy shadows began to form recognizable shapes—Lucy first heard, then saw Marcellus’s mangled shoe flapping on the paving stones—but they knew they had reached the boundary when they could at last make out the glimmer of a distant rushlight. As they stepped out of the **Darke Fog**, they found themselves in an alleyway not far from Ma Custard’s Cake Stop. Feeling as though a great weight had been lifted from their shoulders, everyone exchanged strained glances—although only Lucy and Sarah met Simon Heap’s eyes. No one spoke.

Free of the **Darke Fog**, Thunder snorted and pulled away from Jenna’s grasp. As he headed noisily back to his master’s side Jenna let go and, to her surprise, saw a rat clinging to Thunder’s mane.

“Stanley?” she said, but the rat did not respond. Its eyes were shut tight and it was muttering something that sounded like, “Stupid, stupid *stupid* rat.” It did not look happy, thought Jenna.

Marcellus looked about anxiously. The border of a **Darke Domaine** was not a place to relax—this was where outriders patrolled, extending its boundaries, pulling the **Domaine** ever outward. He placed a finger on his lips for silence and, reverting to what Septimus called old-speak—as he did when

a little tense—he whispered to Jenna, “Whither now, Princess?”

Jenna pointed at the lone rushlight, which illuminated the entrance to the Ramblings she had been heading for—a tumbledown archway covered in ivy and a purple flowering plant that grew out of untended walls in the Castle. The purple flowers were long gone in the dead of winter but the woody twigs of the plant hung down and brushed their heads as they stepped through the old stones into the hush of the Ramblings backwater.

Muttering, “*I knaht uoy, esaelp eriter,*” Septimus was busy returning his **Darke Disguise** to its tinderbox. It folded up as helpfully as his House Mouse and as thin as a piece of tissue paper. He pushed the lid on tight and placed the little box back in his deepest pocket, along with the precious key to Dungeon Number One.

“I’ll put a **SafeScreen** on the arch,” he said. “At least that will keep the Darkenese out for a little while longer.”

Marcellus disagreed. “No, Apprentice. We must leave no clue that we have come this way. We must leave it as we found it.”

Freed from the **Darke Domaine**, the party split into its natural alliances, which meant that Septimus and Simon got as far away from each other as possible. Marcellus and Septimus led the way. Simon—grabbed by Lucy on one side and Sarah on the other—stayed back, hiding his awkwardness at being near Jenna and Septimus by fussing with Thunder. Jenna hovered between the two groups like a magnet, attracted by the presence of her mother and repelled by the presence of Simon. Eventually, after two wrong turnings, Jenna joined Marcellus and Septimus and once again led the way.

The Ramblings was a strange place that night. Normally on the Longest Night it had a festive atmosphere. Doors would be flung open to reveal welcoming rooms with candles ablaze and tables piled high with delicacies from the Traders’ Market. People would sit chatting with friends while children, allowed to stay up late and run free, played in the corridors. It was always a noisy, riotous time, fueled by plates of sugared biscuits and bowls of sweets, which were traditionally left beside the numerous candles that roosted on any free perch in the passageways.

But as Jenna led the way through the empty corridors, the only sounds to be heard were low, worried conversations drifting through closed doors and the occasional wail of a disappointed child. It felt, she thought, as though everyone was waiting for the onslaught of a violent storm.

But despite the sense of trepidation pervading the place, the candles still shed their warm light on the newly swept passageways and the bowls of biscuits and sweets sat untouched in their niches, although not for long. Jenna, who had had nothing to eat since “Edifice” with Beetle, spied her favorite iced pink rabbit biscuits and grabbed a handful. Septimus was particularly

pleased to find a whole bowl of Banana Bears, and even Marcellus permitted himself a small toffee.

And so they walked on through the deserted corridors, Thunder's hooves *clip-clopping* as they went. The sound of the hooves brought one or two worried faces to the tiny, candlelit windows that looked out onto the passageways, and once or twice a door was held open an inch or two and frightened eyes gazed out. But the door was soon slammed and the candles quickly snuffed out—no one seemed reassured at the sight of the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice in the company of a witch, an ancient Alchemist, and that disgraced Heap boy—what was his name?

With Thunder in mind, Jenna led them up what was known as a trolleyway—a sloping passage with no steps. Trolleyways were longer, although not always wider, than the normal passageways, which often had very steep flights of steps. They were, naturally, designed for trolleys—an everyday feature of Ramblings life and an essential piece of equipment for people who lived on the top floors. “Trolley” was a term that covered a multitude of wheeled carts, the number of wheels varying between two and six. Those on the lower floors considered them to be the bane of Ramblings life, especially late at night when rowdy groups of teens would take them to the top of the steepest trolleyway and hurtle down through the various levels. Two-wheelers were the most popular for this sport, as they were easier to steer and had the advantage of being able to use the handles as brakes—if you leaned back at the right moment. But that night there was no danger of being run down by a trolley rider yelling, “*Way! Way!*” as a warning. All trolley riders were behind closed doors, fearful, bored and having to be nice to their visiting aunts—while the visiting aunts were deeply regretting their decision to come to the Castle for the Longest Night festivities.

With Thunder's hooves slipping on the worn surface of the bricks, the group trooped up the final and by far the steepest incline and stepped thankfully out into a wide passageway known locally as Big Bertha. Big Bertha wound through the top of the Ramblings like a lazy river and many tributary passageways branched off from it. This was one of the most difficult areas of the Ramblings to understand—some of the corridors were dead ends but did not appear to be, while others looked like dead ends but were not. Most twisted and turned in such a way as to disorientate even the most experienced traveler.

But Jenna had gotten top marks in her Ramblings Certificate and now it showed. Holding the key to the Big Red Door in her hand as if it were a compass, she led the way straight across Big Bertha into a corridor that appeared to be a dead end but was not. The wall at the end was a screen that had the entrances to two passageways hidden behind it. Jenna skirted the wall—which sported a line of multicolored pots, each containing a tall, thin

candle stuck into a mound of boiled sweets—and took the right-hand entrance. It was a tight corner and Thunder had some trouble getting around it. Jenna wondered if Thunder might be a little spooked by the narrow confines, but for a horse that once lived in an old Land Wurm’s Burrow, the Ramblings passageways were positively airy and spacious.

The passage led into a Well Hall—a circular space open to the sky. In the middle was the well, which was protected by a low wall and a wooden cover, on which stood three buckets of varying sizes. Above the well was a complicated pulley system that allowed heavy buckets to be easily drawn up from the huge fresh water cistern built into the foundations of the Ramblings. Rushlights cast a warm glow across the smooth, damp stones, which were warm enough to melt the occasional snowflake that drifted down. Set into the curved walls were some well-worn stone benches; pots with candles and wrapped sweets had been left on the benches and gave the Well Room a festive look. But even this popular meeting place was, like everywhere else, deserted.

Jenna waited by the well while everyone caught up. She caught Sarah’s eye and smiled, hoping that Sarah recognized the place where she used to draw water and spend many hours chatting to her neighbors. But to Jenna’s distress, Sarah just gazed blankly back.

“Nearly there,” said Jenna, trying to keep cheerful.

“Hey, Jens, remember when you dropped your bear down the well and I fished it out in a bucket?” said Simon.

Jenna ignored him. She didn’t think Simon had any right to use the old name he used to call her by before he kidnapped her and planned to kill her—no right at all. She spun on her heel and strode off into a narrow whitewashed corridor, which was lined with an array of multicolored candles. After a minute or so the party emerged once again into Big Bertha, having cut off a huge loop. They went around one more bend and then Jenna turned down a wide alleyway, which proclaimed itself *There and Back Again Row*. A few moments later she was standing outside the door to the room where she had lived for the first ten years of her life.

It looked different. No longer a scuffed and dismal black, the door was now painted bright, shiny red, just as it had been in what people still called *The Good Old Days*. In her hand Jenna held the precious key that she remembered Silas locking the door with every night, and which had hung on a high hook on the chimney the rest of the time. No one but Silas or Sarah had been allowed to touch the key because—as Silas had informed everyone one night when its hook had fallen out of the wall and Maxie had hidden the key under his blanket—it was a precious *Heap* heirloom. The *Big Red Door*, complete with lock and key (with *Benjamin Heap* inscribed on the bow) was the only thing that Silas’s father had left him.

Jenna knew exactly what to do with the key. She handed it to Sarah.

“You open it, Mum,” she said.

Sarah took the key and looked at it.

Jenna watched Sarah anxiously. She glanced up and saw that everyone else was watching too. Even Marcellus. It felt like an eternity while Sarah Heap stared at the big brass key lying on her palm. And then, very slowly, recognition dawned in Sarah’s eyes and the corners of her mouth flickered into the beginnings of a smile.

Hesitantly Sarah placed the key in the lock. The door recognized Sarah, and when she began, very weakly, to turn the key, the lock did the rest for her and the door swung open.

Chapter 35

The Longest Night



A large variety of animals had spent time—sometimes their whole lives—in the room behind the Big Red Door, but Thunder was the first horse. Sam had once brought a goat in but only for a few seconds. Sarah Heap did not, in those days, have things with hooves in her room. But this time Sarah had no problems with hooves. She was perfectly happy to have a huge black horse standing in the corner while her Simon fed him some withered apples that he had found in a bowl on the floor.

Sarah was amazed at the transformation of her old home. As she stood gazing about her, taking in all the changes that Silas had secretly made over the previous year, happy memories came flooding back and began to displace the heaviness and gloom that the **Darkenese** had left within her. *Now she understood why Silas was always disappearing.*

Neither Jenna nor Simon had been back to their old home since their hurried departure on Jenna's tenth birthday, and now they hardly recognized the place. Gone were the piles of books, clutter, bedding and general household "jumble-junk," as Silas had called it. Now there were rows of neat—albeit homemade—bookshelves carrying all the **Magyk** books that Silas had once saved by hiding them in the attic. The fireplace in the central chimney was swept and laid with large logs; the pots hanging on the chimney were clean and lined up in order of size; the worn wooden floor was covered with rugs (some of which Jenna recognized from the Palace) and scattered

with cushions, ready for the chairs that Silas was planning to make.

For Septimus it was a strange feeling to be in the very place where he had been born and yet had spent no more than the first few hours of his life. He stood awkwardly on the threshold. He saw Simon with his arm around Lucy pointing something out to her from the mullioned window that looked out over the river and Septimus realized why he felt so uncomfortable. Simon was at home; this was where he had belonged. It was he, Septimus, who was now the outsider.

Sarah Heap saw her youngest son at the doorway, looking as if he was waiting to be asked in. The sight of him cleared the very last remnants of the **Darkenesse** from her head. She walked over to Septimus, put her arm around his shoulders and said, “Welcome home, love.” Sarah drew him inside and closed the door.

A strange feeling welled up inside Septimus—he didn’t know whether he wanted to laugh or cry. But he did know that he felt like a weight he had been carrying on his shoulders without even realizing it had suddenly been lifted off. It was true—he was home.

The Longest Night drew on. Outside the Ramblings the **Darke Domaine** grew stronger as it spread through the Castle, drawing energy from all those trapped within it. The only spaces that remained clear were the Wizard Tower, protected by its dazzling **SafeShield**, the **Sealed** Hermetic Chamber, in which Beetle sat like a butterfly in a chrysalis, a tiny **SafeChamber** deep within Gothyk Grotto—and the Ramblings.

The Ramblings had been inhabited for a very long time. It went back to the days when many Castle inhabitants practiced a little amateur **Magyk** of their own, and so there were many remnants of **SafeScreens**, **PassageProtectors**, **Blessings**, **HappyHomes** and all kinds of spells for good things still hanging around the entrances. The **Magyk** was faint, but its cumulative effect over the years had soaked into the old stones and was enough to halt the **Darke Domaine** at every single archway, gate, door and window that led into the Ramblings. It was not, however, strong enough to hold out against the determined assault that now began.

At the ivy-covered archway near Ma Custard’s—and at each and every Ramblings entrance—the ragged shadow of a **Thing** walked out of the **Darke Domaine**. The **Thing** stepped through the archway, forcing its way through the ancient echoes of **Magyk**. With it came the first tendrils of **Darkenesse**, smothering the rushlight with a soft *hisssssss* as they went swirling into the corridor. The **Thing**—which happened to be the one that Spit Fyre had hurled into the river—dripped along the stone flags, sending the candles sputtering out and drawing the eddying blackness behind it. As it passed by the rooms and apartments, the **Darke Domaine** went creeping under the doors and

through the keyholes, and the fearful voices within were stilled. Sometimes there was a scream or a shout of joy as someone thought they were about to meet a long-lost love, but these were soon cut short and followed by silence.

On the top floor of the oldest part of the Ramblings, in the room behind the Big Red Door, Sarah Heap was getting ready for a siege. Against all protests she was about to go and fetch water from the Well Hall.

“I’ll come with you,” Septimus and Simon said at the same time—and then glared at each other.

Sarah regarded her oldest and youngest sons. “You can *both* come, but I’m not having you squabbling all the way to Well Hall and back,” she said sternly. “Understood?”

Septimus and Simon grunted assent and then frowned, annoyed at sounding so similar.

Flanked by her oldest and youngest sons, both now taller than she, Sarah set off for the once familiar trip to the well. As she walked between them, moving swiftly along the silent passageways, she could hardly believe what was happening. It was all her dreams come true. No matter that her sons refused to speak to each other, or that terrible things were happening in the Castle right then—and no doubt would soon reach them too. She had, for a few precious minutes, her boys back. Not all her boys, it was true, but she had the very two of whom so many times she had despaired of ever seeing again—and indeed had often believed dead.

Sarah’s moment of contentment did not last long. As they made their way back from the Well Hall, each carrying two heavy pails of water, they saw a telltale eddy of **Darkeness** appear around the far corner of Big Bertha. Quickly they hurried into There and Back Again Row and the Big Red Door threw itself open. They rushed in and the door immediately slammed itself shut. Sarah shoved the key in the lock and turned it.

“It needs an **Anti-Darke**,” Septimus said. “I’ll do one.”

Sarah didn’t like **Anti-Darkes**. She had grown up in a family that contained both witches and wizards and she was not happy hearing the word “**Darke**” spoken in her home, even when it was partnered by the word “Anti.” Sarah subscribed to the witch view on words—*a deed named was a deed claimed*. “No, thank you, love,” she said. “We’ll be safe without. The door has its own **Magyk**.”

Marcellus, who had been feeling rather useless since they had arrived in the room, was glad to weigh in with some advice. “We need all the protection we can get, Mistress Heap,” he said. “My Apprentice is right.”

Both Simon and Sarah shot Marcellus a questioning look. “Your Apprentice?” said Sarah.

Marcellus decided not to—as Septimus would have said—*go there*. “I

would go as far as to say that an **Anti-Darke** may be essential for our survival,” he said.

Simon could hold back no longer. “That is true,” he said. “What we need is a fluid **Anti-Darke** combined with a powerful **SafeScreen**. Once those are in place we must have an effective **Camouflage**—*that* is crucial.”

Septimus gave a snort of derision. Did Simon really expect him to take the advice of the very person who had caused this whole thing to happen?

Simon misunderstood the snort. He tried to explain. “Look, you can do the most powerful **Anti-Darke** in the world, but it’s no good if it’s visible. A **Darke Domaine** will just hammer away at it until it’s gone. And sooner or later it will be. Trust me, I know.”

“Trust *you*?” spluttered Septimus—worried by the fact that he had actually agreed with everything Simon had said. “You must be joking.”

The argument continued.

Sarah tried to ignore her sons. She wanted them to sort things out between them and she hoped that the knowledge that a **Darke Domaine** was coming their way would concentrate their minds. She busied herself checking all the preserved and dried food that Silas had piled up in the larder—and she told Septimus and Simon to *stop bickering*. She calmed Thunder by blowing on his nose and whispering to him—and she told Septimus and Simon that there was to be *no arguing about anything*. She began sweeping up some wood shavings that Silas had left behind—and she told Jenna to *keep out of other people’s quarrels*. She told Lucy to *let Jenna be*. And then, when a full-on fight, with Jenna and Septimus on one side and Simon and Lucy on the other, seemed inevitable, Sarah’s patience ran out.

“*Stop it, all of you!*” she yelled, banging the end of her broom on the floor. “*Stop it right now!*”

The melee by the door paused and they looked at Sarah, surprised.

“I will have *no* angry words in this room, do you understand?” Sarah told them. “I don’t care what any of you have done in the past, I don’t care how stupid or misguided or just plain bad you have been—and some of you have been all of those—because you are my children. *All* of you. And yes, Lucy, that includes you too now. Whatever any of you have done, however much you have hurt each other in the past, when you are in this room you will put that to one side. You will behave toward each other as brothers and sisters should. *Is that understood?*”

“Well said,” murmured Marcellus.

Jenna, Septimus, Simon and Lucy looked dumbfounded. They nodded sheepishly. Simon and Lucy went and sat by the fire, leaving Septimus to do the **Anti-Darke** his own way, which was also, Simon noticed, *his* way.

Jenna went over to the window. An unusually quiet rat was sitting on the windowsill, gazing out.

“Hello, Stanley,” she said.

“Hello, your Majesty,” Stanley replied with a heavy sigh.

Jenna followed his gaze to the river. Across the water the lights of the Grateful Turbot Tavern could just be seen flickering through the trees, and far below the indigo ribbon of the river flowed slowly past.

“It’s clear out there,” said Jenna. “Isn’t it lovely? No **Darke** stuff.”

“Only a matter of time,” Stanley replied gloomily.

The flap of a wounded shoe sounded behind them. Marcellus joined them at the window. “Not so,” he said. “A **Darke Domaine** is stopped by flowing water, especially by that which is influenced by the tides of the moon.”

“Really?” said Jenna. “So . . . outside here, outside this window, will stay safe?”

Marcellus peered down. It was a precipitous drop straight down to the water’s edge. “I believe so,” he said. “The river runs close here.”

Jenna knew all about that. She had watched the river from her own little window in her cupboard for as long as she could remember. “It comes right up to the walls,” she said. “There’s no bank at all, just some pontoons for boats to tie up to.”

“Then there is nowhere for the **Domaine** to go,” said Marcellus.

“In that case,” said Stanley, who had been listening with great interest, “I’ll be off.”

“You’re *going*?” asked Jenna.

“I must, your Majesty. I’ve got four ratlets out there all alone. Goodness knows what’s happening to them.”

“But how’re you going to get down?” Jenna looked out the window. It was a very long way down indeed.

“A rat has its ways, your Royal Personageness. Besides, I do believe I can see a drainpipe. If you’d be so kind as to open the window, I’ll be off.”

Jenna looked at Marcellus questioningly. “Is it safe to do that?” she asked.

“It is, Princess—for the moment at least. Of course, we do not know what will trickle down from the roof later. If the rat needs to go, it had better go now.”

Stanley looked relieved. “If you’ll do the honors, Sir, I’ll go right away,” he said.

Marcellus looked puzzled. “What honors?”

“He means open the window,” explained Jenna, who had spent enough time with Stanley to be able to translate.

Marcellus pulled the window ajar and a gust of cold fresh air blew into the room.

“What are you *doing*?” cried Sarah, aghast. “You’ll let it all in. Close the window now!”

Quickly the rat hopped onto the sill and peered down, trying to figure out

the best way down the sheer rock face of the Ramblings.

“Stanley, please, could you—” Jenna began as Sarah came hurtling across the room, still holding her broom.

“Could I *what?*” asked Stanley edgily, eyeing Sarah with the suspicion of a rat used to trouble with brooms.

“*Find Nicko*—Nicko Heap, at Jannit’s boatyard. Tell him what’s happening. Tell him where we are. Please?”

Sarah slammed the window shut.

On the other side of the glass, Jenna saw Stanley’s little rat mouth open wide in surprise as he tumbled away into the night.

“Mum!” yelled Jenna. “What are you doing? You’ve *killed* him.”

“Better a rat than all of *us*, Jenna,” said Sarah. “Anyway, he’ll be all right. Rats always land on their feet.”

“That’s *cats*, Mum, not rats. Oh, poor Stanley!” Jenna peered down but she could see no sign of him anywhere. She sighed. She didn’t understand her mother, she really didn’t. She would happily send a rat hurtling to its doom and yet risk her life for a duck.

“He’ll find something to catch hold of, Princess,” said Marcellus. “Don’t you worry.”

“I hope so,” said Jenna.

Stanley’s eviction upset everyone—including Sarah. She hadn’t meant for the rat to fall. In her panic to close the window, she hadn’t registered the fact that Stanley was on the *outside*. But Sarah was not going to admit to that. She needed to keep control of things, and if people thought she was tough enough to throw out a rat to its possible demise, then that was no bad thing.

Sarah set about organizing everyone, and soon there was a fire blazing and a fragrant stew bubbling in the pot hanging above it. A stew, Lucy noted, as far removed from her mother’s as to be worthy of a different name. At the thought of her mother, Lucy sighed. She hardly dared think what was happening to her parents just then—or to Rupert in the boatyard. In fact, it was all so frightening that Lucy hardly dared think at all. She sat close to Simon beside the fire and held him tight. At least Simon—bruised and battered though he was from the Fetch—was safe.

Simon drew Lucy close to him. “They’ll be okay, Lu,” he said. “Don’t you worry.”

But Lucy did worry. And so did everyone else behind the Big Red Door.

Chapter 36

Outside



Stanley fell farther than he had ever fallen before. A rat's life was precarious, particularly that of a Message Rat, and Stanley had fallen off things many times before—but never anything as high as the top floor of the Ramblings. And he had certainly never been pushed.

It was probably being pushed that saved him. It was such a surprise to suddenly find himself airborne that Stanley was quite relaxed as he was launched into space. And so when he landed in the middle of one of the many scraggly bushes growing out of the Ramblings walls, bounced off, tumbled ten feet farther and landed—just—in a larger cousin of the previous bush, Stanley's little rat bones did not snap into pieces as they might have done if his muscles had been tensely awaiting their doom. Dazed, Stanley lay, listening to the sound of its bare winter branches slowly cracking under his weight.

The final *craaaaaack* of the branch did, however, make the rat a little tense. It suddenly swung down like a broken bone itself and, just in time, Stanley performed a neat leap to a large stone that was jutting out of the wall. His long, delicate claws curled into the masonry and, very slowly, the rat began what he later described (many times) as his controlled descent.

The walls at this point of the Ramblings went straight down into the river but, luckily for Stanley, far away in the Port the tide was going out, and the river even as far up as the Castle was affected by the tides. At the bottom of his controlled descent Stanley clambered down the huge blocks of slimy green stone that formed the base of the Ramblings (and spent most of their time under water), slipped off and landed in the river mud with a faint *plop*.

The rat now began the long trek home. He skirted the Castle walls, hopping up onto the riverbank when he could, leaping over rocks, rotting hulks and mud flats when he couldn't. It was a dismal and occasionally frightening journey. Once Stanley thought he heard a distant roar come from deep within the Castle and the sound unsettled him, but it was not repeated and he began to think he had imagined it. As Stanley traveled onward he could not help but glance up at the Castle, searching for a lighted window to raise his spirits. But there were none. He had left the only one far behind him, and he began to wonder if even that was now **Darke**. The darkness frightened Stanley. He had never paid much attention to the Castle lights before; rats did not understand humans' love of light and flames. They preferred shadows where they could run unseen; light meant danger and usually someone wielding a broom—or worse. But that night Stanley began to appreciate the human love of light. As he hopped through yet another patch of sticky, fishy mud he realized that, in the past, when he had looked up and seen lights in windows, he had known that behind each flickering candle flame there was the person who had lit it—someone who was in the room, busy by the light of the candle. It meant, thought Stanley, *life*. But now, with every window dark, it felt as if the Castle was empty of all human life. And without humans, what is a rat to do?

And so it was a rat filled with foreboding that finally scaled the outside wall of the East Gate Lookout Tower—headquarters of the Message Rat Service and home to Stanley and his four teenage ratlets. Stanley peered in through the tiny, arrow-slit window and saw nothing. But he smelled something. His delicate rat nose smelled the **Darke**—a sour, stale smell with a touch of burned pumpkin about it—and he knew he was too late. The **Darke Domaine** had invaded his home and somewhere inside were the four founding ratlets whom Stanley loved more than anything else in the world.

Florence, Morris, Robert and Josephine—known to all but Stanley as Flo, Mo, Bo and Jo—appeared to any other rat to be four scrawny, awkward teen ratlets, but to Stanley they were perfection itself. They had been no more than a few days old when he had found them abandoned in a hole in the wall on the Outside Path. Stanley—who had never been remotely interested in babies—had scooped up the blind and hairless ratlets and taken them home to the East Gate Lookout Tower. He had loved them as his own; he had fed them, picked off their fleas, worried about them as they first went out scavenging alone, and recently he had begun to teach them the basic skills of a Message Rat. They were his whole life—they were the bright and starry future of the Message Rat Service. And now they were gone. Stanley dropped down from the window, utterly desolate.

“Ouch! Watch it, Dadso!” a young rat squeaked.

“Robert!” gasped Stanley. “Oh, thank goodness . . .” He felt quite overcome.

“You’re heavy, man. You’re squashing my tail,” said Bo gruffly.

“Sorry.” Stanley shifted his weight with a groan. He was getting too old to fall a hundred feet and not notice it.

“You all right, Da?” asked Flo.

“Where you been?” This from Jo.

“*Oh Da!* We thought it had got you.” A hug from Mo—always the emotional one—made Stanley’s world feel right once more.

The five rats sat in a despondent line on the Outside Path, which was no more than a narrow ledge below the East Gate Lookout Tower. Stanley recounted the events of the past few hours.

“It’s bad, Da, isn’t it?” Mo said after a while.

“Doesn’t look good,” said Stanley gloomily. “But, according to that Alchemist chappie, we’ll be all right here—we’re outside the walls. It’s all those poor rats trapped in the Castle I worry about.” He sighed. “And I’d only just got the Service fully staffed.”

“So where to now, Dadso?” asked Bo, kicking his feet impatiently on the stones.

“Nowhere, Robert, unless you want to swim the Moat. We’ll sit the night out here and see what the morning brings.”

“But it’s so *cold*, Da,” said Flo, looking mournfully at the tiny flakes of snow drifting down.

“Not half as cold as it is inside the Castle, Florence,” said Stanley severely. “There’s a stone missing from the wall a bit farther along. We can spend the night in there. It’s good training.”

“For *what?*” moaned Jo.

“For becoming a reliable and effective Message Rat, that’s for what, Josephine.”

This was met by a barrage of groans. However, the ratlets made no further protests. They were tired, scared and relieved to have Stanley back safe. Led by him they trooped along to the space in the wall and, reverting to babyhood, they fell into a rat pile—exactly as they had been when Stanley had found them—and resigned themselves to an uncomfortable night. When Stanley was sure they were settled he said, very reluctantly, “There’s something I have to do. I won’t be long. Stay there and *don’t move an inch.*”

“We won’t,” they chorused sleepily.

Stanley set off along the Outside Path toward Jannit Maarten’s boatyard, muttering grumpily to himself.

“You really should know better by now, Stanley. *Do not mess with Wizards. Or Princesses.* Not even just *one* Princess. One Princess is as bad as at least half a dozen Wizards. Every time you get involved with a Princess or a Wizard—especially the Heaps—you end up on some wild goose chase in the

middle of the night when you could be tucked up nice and warm in your bed. When will you ever learn?"

Stanley scurried along the Outside Path. Soon he was having second, third and fourth thoughts about the wisdom of his journey.

"What are you doing, you stupid rat? You don't have to go off and find yet another no-good Heap. You never actually *said* you would, did you? In fact, you didn't actually have a chance to *say* anything, did you, Stanley? And why was that? Because if you just cast your mind back, mouse-brain, that no-good Heap's own *mother* tried to kill you. Have you forgotten already? And in case you hadn't noticed, it's freezing cold, this path is a death trap, goodness knows what is going on in the Castle and you really shouldn't leave the ratlets outside on their own; aren't they just as important as a bunch of troublesome Wizards *ohmysaintedauntiedoriswhatisthat?*"

A roar—wild and rough-edged—broke through the silence. This time it was close. Too close. In fact, it sounded as though it was right above him. Stanley shrank back against the wall and looked up. There was nothing to see but the deep, dark night sky, scattered with a few clouded stars. The Castle Walls reared up high behind him and above them, Stanley knew, were the tall, thin houses that backed onto the Moat. But without even a glimmer of light the rat could see nothing.

As Stanley waited, wondering if it was safe to move, he realized that he could see something. On the still surface of the Moat, just around the next bend, a faint reflection of light caught his keen rat eye. It was, he figured, coming from the very place he was heading: Jannit Maarten's Boatyard. The glimmer of light raised Stanley's spirits considerably. He decided to carry on with his mission—even if it did involve a no-good Heap.

A few minutes later Stanley leaped lightly down from the Outside Path and ran across the boatyard, dodging between the tangle of boat clutter that inhabited Jannit's yard, heading for the wonderful sight of a lighted window. Granted it belonged to the Port barge and was, strictly speaking, a lighted porthole, but Stanley didn't care. Light was light, and where there was light there was life.

The hatch to the cabin-with-the-porthole was locked and barred but that did not deter a Message Rat. Stanley bounded onto the cabin roof, found the air vent—an open tube shaped like an umbrella handle—and dived in.

Nicko had never heard Jannit Maarten scream before. It was actually more of a loud squeak—short, sharp and very high-pitched. It didn't sound like it had come from Jannit at all.

"Rat, rat!" she yelled. She leaped to her feet, picked up a nearby wrench—there was always a wrench near Jannit—and smashed it down. Stanley's split-second reactions were severely tested. He leaped aside just in time and,

waving his arms in the air, he squeaked, “Message Rat!”

Wrench raised for another swipe, Jannit stared at the rat that had suddenly landed in the middle of the table, only just missing the lighted candle. Stanley watched the wrench with particular interest. Everyone else around the table watched Stanley.

Jannit Maarten—wiry, with a wind-browned face like a walnut and iron-gray hair in a sailor’s pigtail—was a woman who looked like she meant business. Very slowly she put the wrench down. Stanley, who had been holding his breath, exhaled with relief. He looked up at the expectant faces surrounding him and began to enjoy the moment. This was what Message Rattling was all about—the drama, the excitement, the attention, the *power*.

Stanley surveyed his audience with the commanding, confident eye of a rat that knows it will not, for the next few minutes at least, be swiped at with a wrench. He looked at the recipient of his message, Nicko Heap, just to check it was really him. It was. He’d recognize Nicko’s tiny sailor’s plaits woven into his straw-colored hair anywhere. And those Heap bright green eyes too. Next to him was Rupert Gringe, his short hair shining carrot in the candlelight, and for once he was not scowling. In fact, Rupert actually had a smile on his face while he looked at the slightly plump young woman sitting close beside him. Stanley knew *her*, all right. She was the skipper of the Port barge. She had red hair too, a good deal more of it than Rupert Gringe. And she too had a smile, and in the candlelight she even looked quite friendly, although Stanley was not convinced. The last time he’d seen her she’s hurled a rotten tomato at him. Better than a wrench, though . . .

Nicko cut through the rat’s musings. “Who’s it for then?” he said.

“What?”

“The *message*. Who is it for?”

“Ahem.” Stanley cleared his throat and stood up on his back legs. “Please note that due to the current, er . . . situation . . . and circumstances pertaining thereto, this is not delivered in Standard Message Form. Therefore no responsibility can be accepted for the accuracy or otherwise of this message. A fee is not payable but a box for contributions toward the new drains at the East Gate Lookout Tower may be found at the Message Rat Office door. Please note that no money is kept in the box overnight.”

“Is that it?” asked Nicko. “You came to tell us about the *drains*?”

“What drains?” said Stanley, whose mouth so often ran ahead of his thoughts. And then, when his thoughts caught up, he said rather snappily, “No, of course I didn’t.”

“I know which rat you are,” said Nicko suddenly. “You’re Stanley, aren’t you?”

“Why do you say that?” asked Stanley suspiciously.

Nicko just grinned. “Thought so. So, Stanley, who is the message for?”

“Nicko Heap,” Stanley replied, feeling slightly offended, although he was not sure why.

“Me?” Nicko seemed surprised.

“If that is you, yes.”

“Of *course* it’s me. What’s the message?”

Stanley took a deep breath. “*Find Nicko*—Nicko Heap, at Jannit’s boatyard. Tell him what’s happening. Tell him where we are. *Please.*”

Nicko went pale. “Who sent it?”

Stanley sat down on a pile of papers. “Well, I wouldn’t go running messages like this for just *anyone*, you know—especially given the present, er . . . situation. However, I do consider that I am, to some extent at least, not a mere messenger but operating in the capacity of a personal representative of—*oof!*”

Nicko’s finger jabbed the rat’s ample stomach. “Ouch! That hurt,” protested Stanley. “There is no need for violence, you know. I only came here out of the goodness of my heart.”

Nicko leaned across the table and stared eyeball to eyeball with the rat. “Stanley,” he said, “if you don’t tell me who sent the message *right now* I shall personally throttle you. Got that?”

“Yep. Okey dokey. Got that.”

“So who sent it?”

“The Princess.”

“*Jenna.*”

“Yes. *Princess Jenna.*”

Nicko looked at his companions, the light from the single candle in the center of the table throwing glancing shadows across their worried faces. For a few minutes Stanley’s antics had distracted them from what was happening outside—but no longer. Now all their worries for their families and friends in the Castle came flooding back.

“Okay,” said Nicko slowly. “So . . . tell me. Where is Jenna? Who is ‘we’? Are they safe? When did she send the message? How did you—”

It was Stanley’s turn to interrupt. “Look,” he said wearily. “It’s been a long day. I’ve seen some nasty stuff. I’ll tell you about it, but a cup of tea and biscuit first would work wonders.”

Maggie went to get up but Rupert stopped her. “You’ve had a long day too,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

Silence fell, broken only by the gentle hiss of the little stove—and the sudden, terrifying roar of something outside, deep in the **Darknesse**.

Chapter 37

Brothers



The night wore on in the room behind the Big Red Door, its occupants sleeping fitfully on the odd assortment of cushions and rugs. They were rudely awoken twice by Thunder—who was not named just for the stormy color of his coat—but after protests and much fanning of the air, everyone managed finally to drift off once again.

Jenna had appropriated her old box bed in the cupboard, which still had the rough, threadbare blankets of her childhood. They were very different from the heirlooms of fine linen and soft furs that covered her four-poster bed in the Palace, but Jenna loved her old blankets and box bed as much as she ever did. She knelt on the bed and peered out the tiny window for some minutes, looking up at the stars and down at the river far below, just as she had always done before she went to sleep. But the combination of the Dark of the Moon—which she sleepily remembered Aunt Zelda explaining to her one night on the Marram Marshes—with the thick, snowy clouds that covered most of the stars meant she could not see much at all. Her cupboard was colder than she remembered but before long Jenna too was asleep, curled up on the bed (which she had to be, because the bed was too short for her now), covered in the rough blankets, her fine fur-lined Princess cloak and her newly acquired Witch cloak. It was an odd combination but it kept her warm.

Septimus and Marcellus took turns through the night watching the door—two hours watching, two hours sleeping. When at about four in the morning

the **Darke Fog** rolled down There and Back Again Row and pushed against the Big Red Door, Septimus was on watch. He woke Marcellus and together, on tenderhooks, they watched the door. The door tightened its hinges and long minutes passed, but the **Darke Domaine** did not get in.

The reason for this was not only Septimus's **Magyk**; it was also the Big Red Door itself. Benjamin Heap had suffused the Big Red Door with **Magykal SafeScreens** of his own before he gave it to his son, Silas. It was his way of ensuring that his son and grandchildren would be protected after he had gone. Benjamin's **SafeScreens** could not stop anything or anyone who had been invited in (like the midwife who had stolen Septimus) but they were pretty good at stopping anything that the Heaps had not invited over the threshold. Benjamin had never told Silas this, for he did not want his son to think that he doubted his **Magykal** powers—even though he did. But Sarah Heap had guessed long ago.

And so the **Darke Domaine** began its unrelenting onslaught—just as it was doing in the three other places in the Castle that had protected themselves: the Wizard Tower, the Hermetic Chamber—and Igor's own secret **SafeChamber** in Gothyk Grotto, which, in addition to Igor, contained Marissa, Matt and Marcus. But those behind the Big Red Door were safe for the moment. And when the light of the rising sun began to shine through the dusty mullioned window, Septimus and Marcellus relaxed their guard and fell asleep beside the glowing embers of the fire.

Sarah Heap woke with the sun as she always did. She stirred awkwardly, her neck stiff from the night spent on a threadbare rug with only a rocklike cushion for a pillow. She got up and walked stiffly over to the fire, stepping over Marcellus, and gently placing a pillow beneath Septimus's head. Then she added some logs to the embers and stood, arms wrapped around herself, watching the flames begin to wake. Silently she thanked Silas for all the stores he had laid in: logs neatly stacked under Jenna's bed, blankets, rugs and cushions, two cupboards full of jars of preserved fruit and vegetables, a whole box of dried **WizStix**, which would become strips of tasty dried fish or meat when reconstituted with the correct **Spell** (the tiny, sticklike **Charm** for which Silas had thoughtfully left tucked beside them). Plus, Silas *had mended the loo*. This had been the bane of Sarah's life when the Heap family had lived there. Plumbing was not one of the Ramblings' strong points and the lavatories—little more than huts perched precariously on the outside walls—were always messing up. But now, at long last, Silas had fixed it. All this, along with a late-night discovery of a **WaterGnome** hidden in the back of the cupboard, made Sarah think of Silas with wistful affection. She longed to thank him and apologize for all the times she had complained about him disappearing without saying where he was going. But most of all, she wished Silas knew that she was safe.

Sarah got out the **WaterGnome** and stood it on top of the cupboard where she had found it. She smiled; she could see why Silas had hidden it—it was one of the rude ones. But none the worse for that, Sarah thought, as the **Gnome** provided a stream of water for the kettle. Water was the thing she had been most worried about—hence the risky trip to the Well Hall. But now, thanks to Silas, they had a reliable supply.

Sarah hung the kettle over the fire and sat to watch it boil, remembering how she used to do this every morning. She had loved those rare moments to herself when all was quiet and peaceful. Of course when the children were very little she often had one or two of them sitting sleepily at her feet, but they were always quiet—and once they were older none of them ever woke up until she banged on the breakfast porridge pan. Sarah remembered how she would take the kettle off the fire just before it began to whistle, brew herself a cup of herb tea and sit quietly watching the sleeping forms strewn around the floor—just as she was doing now. Except, she thought wryly, as Thunder made his presence known in his own special way, she wouldn't have been staring at a fresh pile of horse poop.

Sarah got the shovel, opened the window and launched the steaming pile into the air. She leaned out and breathed in the sharp, fresh morning air, which was dusted with a scent of snow and river mud. Happy memories of MidWinter Feast days with Silas and the children came flooding back—along with a memory of one much less happy day fourteen years ago. She turned and looked at the sleeping form of her youngest son and thought that, whatever happened, he had now at last spent a night in the room he should have grown up in.

Sarah watched the pale, wintry sun edging up above the distant hills, shining weakly through the bare branches of the trees on the opposite side of the river. She sighed. It was good to see daylight once more—but who knew what the day would bring?

It brought another fight between Septimus and Simon.

Septimus and Marcellus had retreated to a quiet corner by Silas's bookshelves and were looking through his old **Magyk** books, searching for anything written about **Darke Domaines**. They found nothing of use. Most of Silas's books were common textbooks or cheap versions of more arcane books with pages missing—always the pages that promised something interesting.

Septimus, however, had just found a small pamphlet hidden inside an ink-spattered copy of *Year III Magyk: Advanced Bothers* when Simon wandered across to see if any of his old favorites were still on the shelves. He glanced down and saw the title of the pamphlet: *The **Darke** Power of the Two-Faced Ring*.

A dangerous and deeply flawed device, historically used by Darke Wizards and their acolytes, Septimus read. Traditionally worn on the left thumb. Once put on, the ring will travel in only one way and so cannot be removed except over the base of the thumb. The faces are thought to represent those of the two Wizards who created it. Each Wizard desired to possess the Ring and they fought to the death over it. (See this author's pamphlet on the formation of the Bottomless Whirlpool. Only six groats from Wywald's Witchery). After this the Ring passed from Wizard to Wizard, wreaking havoc. It is thought to have been instrumental in the Slime Plague at the Port, the horrific Night River Serpent attacks at the Ramblings and very possibly the Darke Pit over which the Municipal rubbish dump was eventually built. The Two-Faced Ring possesses Incremental Power—each wearer attains the Darke power of all the previous wearers. This power reaches its full potential only after it has been worn for thirteen lunar months. Although many say that the Two-Faced Ring is still in existence, the author does not believe this to be the case. It has not been heard of for many hundreds of years now, and the likelihood is that it has been irretrievably lost.

“Interesting,” said Simon, reading over Septimus’s shoulder. “But not entirely accurate.”

Septimus’s reply was short and to the point. “Go away,” he said.

“Ahem.” Marcellus coughed ineffectively.

“I am only trying to help,” said Simon. “We all want to find a way to get rid of this **Darke Domaine**.”

“We do,” said Septimus, looking pointedly at Marcellus. “I’m not so sure about you.”

Simon sighed, which annoyed Septimus. “Look, I don’t do that stuff anymore. I really and truly *don’t*.”

“Ha!” said Septimus scornfully.

“Now, now, Apprentice. Remember what you promised your mother.”

Septimus ignored Marcellus.

“You just don’t get it, do you?” Simon sounded exasperated. “I made a mistake. Okay, it was a really bad mistake, but I am doing my best to put things right. I don’t know what more I can do. And right now I could be really useful. I know more about this . . . *stuff* than both of you put together.”

“I’ll bet you do,” snapped Septimus.

“Apprentice, I do think you should calm down and—”

Simon exploded. “You think just because you’re Marcia’s precious little Apprentice you know it all but you *don’t*.”

“Don’t patronize me,” said Septimus.

“Boys!” Suddenly Sarah was there. “Boys, *what* did I tell you?”

Septimus and Simon glared at each other. “Sorry, Mum,” they both muttered between clenched teeth.

It was Marcellus who was the go-between. To a seething Septimus he said, “Apprentice, these are desperate times. And desperate times call for desperate measures. We need all the help we can get. And Simon has a great advantage; he knows the **Darke** and—”

“Too right,” Septimus muttered under his breath.

Marcellus ignored the interruption. “And I do believe that he has changed. If anyone knows a way to defeat this **Darke Domaine**, it will be him *and there is no need to make that kind of face, Septimus.*”

“Huh.”

“We must do all that we can. Who knows how long we can keep the **Darke Domaine** out of the room? Who knows how long the poor people in the Castle can survive inside the **Domaine**? And indeed, who knows how long the Wizard Tower can hold out?”

“The Wizard Tower can hold out forever,” said Septimus.

“Frankly, I doubt it. And what would be the point if it did? Soon it will be nothing more than an island marooned in a Castle of death.”

“No!”

“Mark my words, Apprentice, the longer the **Darke Domaine** is in place, the more likely this is to be the case. Most people will survive for a few days. Others, perhaps those less lucky, will survive for longer but be driven mad by their experiences. We have a duty to do our utmost to prevent this. Do you not agree?”

Septimus nodded. “Yes,” he said heavily.

Marcellus arrived where Septimus knew he’d been heading. “To this purpose I believe we should enlist the help of your brother.”

Septimus could not bear the thought. “But we can’t trust him,” he protested.

“Apprentice, I truly believe we can trust him.”

“No, we can’t. He *knowingly* messes with the **Darke**. What kind of person does *that*?”

“People like us?” Marcellus said with a smile.

“That’s different.”

“And I believe your brother is different too.”

“*Too right.*”

“Apprentice, do not deliberately misunderstand me,” Marcellus said sternly. “Your brother has made mistakes. He has paid—and indeed still is paying—a high price for them.”

“And so he should.”

“You are being a little vindictive, Apprentice. It is not an attractive quality in one with so much **Magykal** ability as you. You should be more

magnanimous in your victory.”

“My *victory*?”

“Ask yourself who anyone would rather be—Septimus Heap, ExtraOrdinary Apprentice, loved and respected by all in the Castle, with a brilliant future ahead of him, or Simon Heap, disgraced, exiled and living a hand-to-mouth existence in the Port with little to hope for?”

Septimus hadn’t thought of it like that. He glanced over to Simon, who was alone, staring fixedly out the window. It was true; he wouldn’t swap places with Simon for anything.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah. Okay.”

And so it was that, much to Sarah Heap’s surprise and joy, her youngest and eldest sons spent the next few hours sitting together at the foot of Silas Heap’s bookshelves, in deep discussion with Marcellus Pye—about whom Sarah had had a complete reversal of opinion. Occasionally one would take down a book from the shelves, but for the most part they sat quietly and apparently companionably together.

By the nightfall both Septimus and Marcellus Pye had learned a lot from Simon: How Simon had last seen the Two-Faced Ring on the slimy bones of his old Master, DomDaniel, as they were about to strangle him. How he had trapped the bones into a sack and thrown them into the Endless Cupboard in the Observatory. How Merrin must have somehow retrieved the ring from the slimy thumb bone of DomDaniel—the thought of which made them all shudder.

Septimus thought that if they got hold of Merrin and took the ring off him the **Darke Domaine** would disappear, but Simon had explained that once the **Darke Domaine** was in place it would take more than that to get rid of it—it would take the most powerful **Magyk** possible. When he mentioned the **Paired Codes**, Marcellus reluctantly recounted what had happened and a gloom fell.

“There is another way,” said Simon after a while. “Apprentices to the same ExtraOrdinary Wizard share a **Magykal** link. Alther and Merrin were both Apprenticed to DomDaniel. And Alther is the most senior. There is a slim chance that he could **UnDo** the **Darke Domaine**, as it is the work of a more junior Apprentice. But . . .”

Septimus was listening with interest. “But what?” he asked. It was the first question he had asked Simon that was not an accusation too.

“But I am not sure if it works for ghosts,” said Simon.

“It might though?”

“It might. It might not.”

Septimus made up his mind. He would go to the **Darke Halls** and find Alther. It didn’t matter whether Alther had the power Simon thought he had or not. Alther would know what to do, he was sure of that. He was their only

hope.

“Marcellus,” Septimus said. “You know how you said there were other **Portals** into the **Darke Halls**?”

“Yeess?” Marcellus knew what was coming.

“I want to find the most effective one. I shall go and bring Alther back.”

Simon was horrified. “You can’t go to the **Darke Halls**!”

“Yes, I can. I was going there anyway before all this happened.”

Simon looked very concerned. “Septimus, be careful. That’s why I wrote to you—apart from saying sorry for, um . . . trying to kill you. Which I am. I *really* am. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, I think I do,” said Septimus. “Thanks.”

“Well, the last thing I want is for my little brother to get enmeshed with the **Darke**. It pulls you in. It changes you. It’s a terrible thing. And the **Darke Halls** are the **Darkest** place of all.”

“Simon, I don’t *want* to go, but that’s where Alther is,” said Septimus. “And if there’s a chance he can help then I want to take it. Anyway, I promised Alice I’d bring him back. And a promise is a promise.”

Simon threw in his last card. “But what would Mum say?”

“Say about what?” Sarah—who had ears like a bat when it came to her children discussing her—called out from the other side of the room.

“Nothing, Mum,” Simon and Septimus chorused in reply.

In the shadows of the bookshelves, Marcellus produced his pocket version of the almanac section of his book, *I, Marcellus*, and turned to the chapter headed **Portal Calculations: Coordinates and Compass Points**.

Night fell. Septimus **Called** yet again for Spit Fyre, although he now no longer expected his dragon to answer. The empty silence that followed his **Call** upset Septimus, but he tried not to let it show.

Sarah cooked up another stew, helped by Lucy, who wanted to know how to make a stew that was actually edible. After dinner Septimus, Simon and Marcellus returned to the bookshelves and, fortified by Sarah’s stew, finished the first set of calculations, which showed where the **Portal** to the **Darke Halls** was—give or take half a mile. No one was very surprised at the result.

The evening drew on and a northeast wind began to blow up. It shook the windowpane and sent icy drafts into the room. The occupants wrapped themselves in blankets and settled down for the night. Soon the room behind the Big Red Door fell quiet.

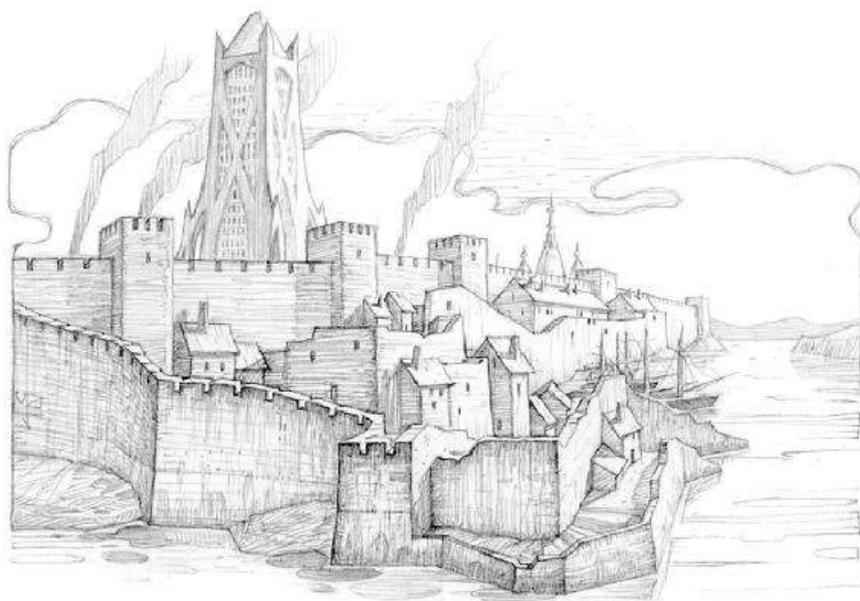
Shortly after midnight, on the other side of the Big Red Door, a **Thing** arrived. It regarded the door with interest. It placed its ragged hands on the shiny red wood and winced as they touched the **Camouflaged Magyk** that covered the surface. Unnoticed by Marcellus—who was meant to be keeping watch but had actually dozed off—the door shuddered slightly and tightened

its hinges.

The **Thing** sloped off down the corridor, muttering **Darkely** to itself.

Chapter 38

The Pig Tub



Nicko had set off to rescue Jenna and her companions from the Ramblings as soon as Stanley had left. He had not wanted to take the Port barge but he'd been outnumbered—even Jannit had agreed with Rupert and Maggie. She had told him that the Heaps were not the only ones to need rescuing; there would be others, surely, and they must take the biggest boat they could. Besides, what else did they have that was suitable? It was the depths of winter. Most of their boats were out of the water and sitting on props in the boatyard. Nicko had agreed reluctantly but before long he was regretting his decision. The Port barge—or the Pig Tub, as he soon began to refer to it—was nothing but trouble.

Right from the beginning progress had not been easy. They had to go the long way around because, for the Port barge, the Moat was not navigable past the boatyard. Added to that, the wind was against them and the long, unwieldy boat, which could not easily sail in the narrow confines of the Moat, needed to be poled along by Rupert and Nicko. This involved them standing on either side of the barge, pushing long barge-poles through the water. Progress was made a little easier by the falling tide, which was flowing their way, but it was still painfully slow and gave them plenty of time to stare at the **Darkened** Castle.

“It’s like everyone has . . . gone,” Maggie whispered to Rupert, not liking to say “died,” which was what she meant. She didn’t see how anyone trapped

in the Castle could survive and thought that the sooner she and Rupert got away to the Port, the better.

Nicko had pushed the oar through the water with all his might, propelling the barge inch by frustrating inch toward Raven's Rock, longing for the moment when they were out in the wide river with the wind in their sails. And then, just before the Moat joined the river, they ran aground on the Mump—the notorious mudbank at the entrance to the Moat. Nicko couldn't believe it.

Despite desperate efforts with the grounding poles, made specially to push a barge off a mudbank, nothing they could do would shift the “stupid Pig Tub idiot boat,” as Nicko put it. She was stuck fast.

Maggie was horribly embarrassed. A skipper going aground was hard to live down. At least she did not have a boat full of passengers and livestock with whom she would be marooned for six interminable hours, enduring their complaints, moans, barks and brays with no means of escape. With any luck, no one would get to hear of this. And Port barges were made to sit on mud, so there was no harm done.

But for Nicko and Rupert, there *was* harm done. They stared disconsolately over the side at the thick, muddy water, knowing that every minute marooned on the mudbank meant another minute of danger for Jenna, Sarah, Septimus and Lucy (they had forgotten about Marcellus, and neither of them cared if Simon was in danger). Although neither said it, Nicko and Rupert had no idea if they were even still alive. All they had was hope, which faded as the tide fell.

And then they had nothing to do but sit and stare at the Castle—and try not to think about what creature could be making the spine-chilling roar that echoed across the Walls every now and then and made the hairs on the backs of their necks stand on end. The only consolation was that, from where they were stranded, they could now see the indigo and purple glow of what Nicko told Rupert must be the Wizard Tower **SafeShield**.

At midnight, down in the Port, the tide turned. Salt water began to creep into the empty gullies in the sand and it began to rise once more in the sleeping harbors and push its way back up the river. At about three in the morning the Port barge shifted. To the accompaniment of another spine-chilling roar from inside the Castle, Nicko and Rupert got out the grounding poles and pushed with all their strength, knowing that this time they would get free. Ten minutes later they were sailing—slowly—toward the river. According to Jannit they were a little too close to Raven's Rock; Maggie pushed the huge tiller across to the right, but the boat seemed sluggish—and as they sailed beneath Raven's Rock they hit something.

Jannit knew at once that they'd hit one of the Beaks—a line of small rocks that came out from Raven's Rock and were not visible after midtide. Maggie was distraught. It didn't help that Jannit had said she'd *told* her they were

going too close and that Maggie had snapped she *knew that, thank you, Jannit.*

Rupert and Nicko took a spare sail and rushed below. Water was pouring into the cargo hold; Rupert was horrified, but Nicko knew that water coming in often looked worse than it really was. He and Rupert rammed a heavy canvas sail into the gash in the hull and found to their relief that the hole was barely bigger than Rupert's fist. The gush stopped and the red sail darkened as it grew wet. The water still came in but slowly now, dripping from the canvas at a speed that allowed Nicko and Rupert to bail it out with a bucket.

A holed boat must be got to shore as soon as possible. They decided to take the Port barge to the nearest landing stage on the Castle side—no one wanted to risk tying up on the Forest side at night. While Rupert and Nicko poured buckets of river water over the side, Maggie and Jannit, both pulling hard on the unusually stiff tiller, took the barge across to the Palace Landing Stage. As they got closer they saw that the normally brightly lit Palace—a landmark for returning mariners—was utterly dark.

"It's as if it isn't there anymore," whispered Jannit, staring across to where she knew the Palace should be and seeing nothing but blackness.

By the time they drew near to the Palace Landing Stage—which, unlike anything behind it, was still visible—everyone was having second thoughts about the wisdom of getting any closer. Nicko shone one of the powerful boat lanterns across to the bank but he could see nothing. The light petered out just behind the landing stage on what looked like a fog bank, but different. Fog had a brightness to it and bounced light back. This **Fog** drew in the light and killed it, thought Nicko with a shiver.

"I don't think we should get any closer," he said. "It's not safe."

But Maggie, worried about her boat sinking, didn't think the river was exactly safe either. She pushed the tiller hard to the right—the barge was being particularly contrary—and headed for the landing stage.

Suddenly a ghostly voice drifted across the water.

"Beware, beware. Come no closer. Flee . . . flee this place. This terrible place of doooooooooom."

White-faced in the light of the lantern, they looked at each other.

"I *told* you," said Nicko. "I told you it wasn't safe. We have to go somewhere else."

"All right, all right," snapped Maggie, who no longer had any confidence in her own decisions. "But where? It's got to be close. Supposing everywhere is like this—what do we do then?"

Nicko had been thinking. He knew from Stanley that this was a **Darke Domaine**. Nicko hadn't taken much notice of his **Magyk** classes at school—in fact, as soon as he was old (and brave) enough he had cut them to go to the boatyard—but he did still remember a few **Magykal** rhymes. The ones he

thought of were:

*A Darke Domaine
Must remain
Within the bounds of water.*

and:

*The Castle Walls are tall and stout,
They are built to keep the Darkenese out.
But if the Darkenese grows within,
The Castle Walls will keep it in.*

“Everywhere *won’t* be like this,” said Nicko in answer to Maggie’s question. “This **Darke** stuff is stopped either by the water or by the Castle Walls. That’s why we were all right in the boatyard, because we’re outside the walls. So I think if we go up to Sally Mullin’s place we’ll be okay; she’s outside the Castle Walls. We can tie up at the New Quay just below Sally’s pontoon and we’ll be safe. Then Rupert and I can find another boat. Okay?”

Maggie nodded. It was as okay as anything was likely to be right then—which was not, in her opinion, saying a lot. But she and Jannit set the sails and turned the Port barge out into the river.

It was then that they discovered that the rudder was jammed. The barge had not escaped unscathed from being grounded; it now insisted on turning steadily right, which was probably why she had hit the Beaks, Maggie realized. The barge now refused to turn left up to the New Quay. To everyone’s dismay, it drifted inexorably into the Raven’s Rock Run until it was taken by the reverse current and pulled through the deep, choppy waters at the base of the rock so that it was now heading rapidly away from the Castle. Desperately they tried to steer out of the Run using the barge oars as rudders, to no avail. The Pig Tub made a beeline for the Forest and as they neared the overhanging banks tangled with trees, they began to hear the frightening grunts and screeches of the Forest night creatures. But at least, Nicko pointed out, they could hear something *normal*. It was better than the awful silence of the Castle punctuated by that weird roar.

They were lucky. Once more they ran aground, this time on a shingle bar some yards out from the bank, which left a comfortable stretch of water between the barge and the Forest. Maggie, at her insistence, kept watch. “I’m skipper,” she said firmly when Rupert objected. “Besides, you three will be busy working on the rudder tomorrow. You need to sleep.”

Nicko, Rupert and Jannit spent most of the following day fixing the rudder. It would have been a quick and easy job in the boatyard, but without the right tools it took much longer. It was also much wetter and colder than it would have been in the boatyard, and even Maggie’s steady supply of hot chocolate

did not stop tempers fraying by the afternoon.

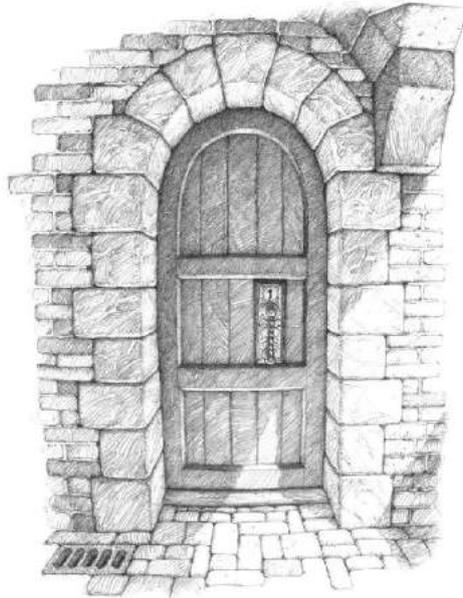
The winter sun was low in the sky when the repaired Port barge finally floated off the shingle bank and headed upriver toward the New Quay. As the barge rounded Raven's Rock they saw the **Darkened** Castle in daylight for the first time. It was a shock. At night the only visible sign of the **Darke Domaine** was the absence of the normal nighttime lights, but the daylight showed the full scale of the disaster that had overwhelmed the Castle. A great black dome of cloud squatted within the Castle Walls, obscuring the usual cheerful sight of the higgledy-piggledy rooftops and chimneys and the occasional turret or tower that would greet any boat as it rounded the bend at Raven's Rock. It was, thought Nicko, like a dark pillow pushed onto the face of an innocent sleeper. But still, shining above the **Fog**—just—like a brilliant beacon of hope, was the Wizard Tower. Wreathed in its shimmering **Magykal** haze, it sent out a defiant blaze of indigo and purple. Nicko and Rupert exchanged strained smiles—all was not yet lost.

As they drew near to the New Quay they saw the welcoming lights of Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House glowing in the gathering twilight and Nicko knew that he was right about the **Darke Domaine**. Sally Mullin's was safe. As they got closer, they saw through the steamed-up windows of the long, low wooden building that the place was packed with those lucky enough to have escaped and their spirits lifted—they were no longer the only ones.

But as the Port barge drew alongside the New Quay, a fearsome roar from the Castle—louder than they had ever heard before—sent the hairs on the backs of their necks prickling. Once more Rupert and Nicko exchanged glances, but this time without a trace of a smile. There was no need for words; they both knew what the other was thinking—how could anyone survive inside *that*?

Chapter 39

Descent



Night drew on in the room behind the Big Red Door. The red glow from the embers in the fire threw a warm light over the sleeping figures swathed in blankets. Outside a northeast wind began to blow and rattle the windowpane. One of Sarah's dreams began to turn into a nightmare.

"Ethel!" she gasped, sitting bolt upright.

"Ah! You all right, Mum?" asked Simon, who was taking his turn on watch and had been drifting into a doze.

Sarah wasn't sure. "I dreamed . . . I dreamed I was being suffocated. And then poor little Ethel . . . oh, *Ethel*."

Simon was suddenly on his feet. A tiny tendril of smoky **Darkeness** was curling in under Benjamin Heap's door.

"Wake up! Everyone *wake up!*" he yelled.

Thunder whinnied loudly and snorted. Instantly everyone was awake.

Septimus made for the door, intending to put some kind of **Emergency Stop** on it. But Marcellus grabbed him.

"Do not touch it, Apprentice! It is too dangerous—and too late."

Septimus stopped. Another wisp of **Darkeness** puffed in around one of the hinges—it was indeed too late.

Jenna appeared at her cupboard door, hair awry, witch's cloak up to her chin against the cold. "What is it?" she asked sleepily, half knowing already what the answer was.

“It’s coming in,” said Septimus. As if on cue, a spurt of **Darkenesse** puffed through the keyhole with such force that it looked as though it had been blown in with a pair of bellows.

“We must leave at once,” said Marcellus. “Sarah, is everything ready?”

“Yes,” said Sarah sadly.

As part of the previous day’s preparations, a huge coil of rope lay on the floor below the window. One end of the rope was tied around the central mullion of the window; it then snaked back across the room, looped around the base of the huge stone chimney that went up through the middle of the room, where it was secured with an impressive knot. Sarah pulled open the window and a freezing blast of air blew in, taking her breath away. It was not a night to be out, let alone a night to be climbing nearly a hundred feet down an exposed north wall, but they had no choice. With Jenna’s help Sarah picked up the coil of rope and together they heaved it out the window into the night. They jumped back and watched the loop around the mullion tighten as the rope hurtled down to the river far below.

Simon went over to Thunder. “Good-bye, boy,” he whispered. “I’m sorry . . . so sorry.” He put his hand in his pocket and felt for his last peppermints. Thunder nuzzled at his hand and then rubbed his nose against Simon’s shoulder. Breaking his promise to Lucy not to do any more **Darke** stuff, Simon did a **Sleep Spell** laced with just enough **Darke** to give Thunder a chance of surviving. As the horse settled down onto Sarah’s best rug and his eyes closed, Simon gently placed a blanket over him.

The previous day, when they were making plans to escape, they had decided to leave in order of their importance to the safety of the Castle. That had made Simon third to last—Sarah had been next and then Lucy had been last, but Simon had insisted on going last. There was no way he was going to leave Lucy and his mother alone to face the **Darke**. As Septimus and Marcellus stood at the window, Simon sat beside Thunder and wondered if they would be spending their time together in the **Darke Domaine**.

Another smoky tendril came slithering under the door.

“Time to go, Apprentice,” said Marcellus.

Septimus steeled himself. He took a deep breath and looked down. He saw the rope snaking down the rough stones of the Ramblings wall and disappearing into the night. The previous afternoon he had **Transformed** it from three rugs, two blankets and a pile of old towels. He had never **Transformed** anything into something so *continuous* before and, as he peered out the window and tried—unsuccessfully—to see the ground, he hoped he’d done it right.

Sarah was fussing, anxiously checking the knots. She was confident that even if the mullion did not hold their weight, the chimney would—but she was not so sure about the knots. She just hoped she’d got them right. If only

Nicko was here, she thought, he'd know how to do them. A pang of concern shot through her at the thought of Nicko, but she pushed it away. Time enough to worry about Nicko when they'd all got out safely, she told herself.

"I'll just **Call** for Spit Fyre one more time," said Septimus, putting off the terrifying moment of climbing out.

Marcellus glanced anxiously back at the door. A long stream of **Darke Fog** was curling beneath it and creeping across the floor toward the fireplace.

"No time now," said Marcellus. "Do that when we've got down there."

Shakily Septimus took hold of the rope. His hands were clammy but he had made the rope rough and thick for a good grip. He climbed up onto the windowsill and as he swung his legs over the side, Septimus felt a shiver of vertigo run through him—there was nothing between his feet and the river far below.

"Be careful, love," said Sarah, raising her voice against a sudden gust of wind. "Don't go too fast—far better you get down safely. When you've got to the bottom, give the rope three tugs, then Jenna will go."

With his arm around his **Sleeping** horse, Simon watched his youngest brother inch out into the night until all he could see were Septimus's hands gripping the rope and his curls blowing wildly in the wind.

Septimus began his descent. He knew that to give everyone a chance of getting out he had to put his fear of heights to one side and concentrate on getting quickly down the rope. It was not easy. The wind kept pushing him against the wall, banging him against the protruding stones, taking his breath away and disorientating him. It was only when—terrifyingly—his grip slipped and he found himself almost at right angles to the wall that Septimus discovered that if he deliberately leaned out from the rope, the wind buffeted him less and he could almost walk down the rough stones, many of which stuck quite a long way out and gave good footholds.

Septimus's descent continued until he stepped on the bush that had saved Stanley. The sudden change of foothold panicked him and he very nearly let go of the rope. But as he steadied himself and got his breath back he realized he could smell the river and hear the lapping of water. He speeded up and soon, like Stanley before him, he had landed on the mud. He gave three quick tugs of the rope and leaned against the Ramblings wall, shaking. *He had done it.* He felt the rope move in his hands and knew that Jenna was on her way down.

It was not long before Jenna landed beside him, breathless and exhilarated. Unlike Septimus, she had loved the excitement of the descent. They stood, looking up to the only lighted window in the entire Ramblings wall and saw another figure climb out. The figure moved quickly down, and Septimus was surprised at how agile Marcellus was—but a scream when the figure met the spiky bush growing from the wall told them it was Lucy, not Marcellus as

they had all agreed earlier.

“He made me go first,” said Lucy breathlessly, as she tugged the rope. “He said he’d lived long enough already. And he said Simon must come next.”

“*Simon!*” spluttered Septimus. “But we need *Marcellus.*”

Lucy said nothing. She looked up and did not take her eyes off Simon as he descended the rope, fast and easily. Soon he was beside them. Quickly he gave the rope three tugs and looked up anxiously at the window.

“The door’s not going to hold much longer,” he said. “They’re going to have to get a move on.”

It was too much for Jenna. She had waited once for her mother outside a room filling with **Darkeness** and once was enough. She couldn’t stand the thought of doing it again.

“Mum!” she called up. “Mum! Hurry up! Please, *hurry!*”

But no one came.

Up in the room behind the Big Red Door, two people who should have known better were arguing about who was leaving next. Sarah looked around the room she loved—that she now knew Silas loved too—and she dithered. No matter that Benjamin Heap’s door was changing as she looked at it, the red paint blackening as though a fire was raging on the other side. No matter that wisps of **Darke Fog** hung in the room like storm clouds heralding the arrival of a hurricane—Sarah would not budge. She was determined to be the last to leave.

“Marcellus. You must go first.”

“I will not leave you here alone, Sarah. Please, go.”

“No. *You* go, Marcellus.”

“No. *You.*”

It was Benjamin Heap’s door that settled it. There was a sudden *craaaaack*. A panel split and a long stream of **Darkeness** poured in. In a moment the fire in the hearth was out.

“Oh, that poor horse,” said Sarah, still dithering.

“Sarah, *get out,*” said Marcellus. He grabbed her hand and pulled her to the window. “We *both* go,” he said.

Sarah gave in. Surprisingly agile, she clambered out of the window and swung herself onto the rope—she had not lived in Galen’s tree house for nothing. Marcellus followed. He slammed the window shut, jamming it on the rope. Then he, too, easily began the descent, which was nothing compared to the tall chimney in the Old Way that he had regularly climbed in his old age. Far below Septimus, Jenna, Simon and Lucy looked at each other in relief.

Sarah and Marcellus made good progress, slowed only by Stanley’s bush, which Sarah irritably kicked at. It was the last straw for the bush, and it went tumbling in a shower of stones, which scattered the watchers below. When

they looked back up, the light in the small mullioned window had gone out. The great rock face wall of the Ramblings was now completely in **Darkeness**.

At last Sarah stepped unsteadily onto the ground. Jenna flung her arms around her.

“Oh, *Mum*.”

Marcellus pushed away from the wall and jumped athletically—he hoped—away from the knot of people gathered around Sarah. He landed with a *splat*. “Eurgh,” he muttered. “Wretched horse.”

“You only *just* made it,” Septimus told him disapprovingly. He thought Marcellus should have stuck to the agreed order of leaving.

“Indeed,” said Marcellus, inspecting his ruined shoe.

Marcellus’s casualness annoyed Septimus. “But we decided the order we would leave for a reason. It was important—for the whole Castle,” he persisted.

Marcellus sighed. “But things that are right in the cold light of reason may feel very wrong when faced with reality. Is that not so, Simon?”

“Yes,” said Simon, remembering the **Thing** strangling Sarah. “Yes, it is.”

“It’s my fault,” said Sarah. “I wanted to be last—like a captain leaving her ship. Anyway, it doesn’t matter; we’re all safe now.”

“It doesn’t *feel* very safe,” said Lucy, saying what most of them were thinking. She looked at Jenna accusingly. “You said there were always boats here. But I can’t see any.”

Jenna looked along the strip of mud that ran between the edge of the river and the sheer walls of the Ramblings. She didn’t understand it. There were always little boats tied up on the numerous outhauls—lengths of rope that snaked out from rings in the walls to weights sunk onto the riverbed. But now there were none.

Lucy was getting agitated. “What are we going to *do*? The water’s coming up and *I can’t swim*.”

“It’s okay, Lucy,” said Septimus, sounding more confident than he felt. “I’ll **Call** for Spit Fyre now. He’ll probably come now that we’re away from the **Darke**.”

Septimus took a long, deep breath and gave the loudest dragon **Call** he had ever made. The piercing, ululating sound bounced off the Ramblings walls and echoed across the river, and as the last faint whispers died away, his **Call** was answered—not by the hoped for sound of dragon wings beating the air, but by the answering cry of a monster within the Castle.

“Sep . . . what have you **Called**?” whispered Jenna.

“I don’t know,” whispered Septimus in reply.

Spit Fyre did not come, and Septimus dared not **Call** again.

The thin strip of mud between the sheer walls of the Ramblings and the

broad band of the deep, cold river was a temporary refuge only. They knew that as the tide came in it would slowly disappear. They gazed longingly over to the safety of the opposite bank. Far away to the right, flickering through the bare branches of the winter trees, were the distant lights of a farmhouse. Upstream to the left was glow of firelight in the downstairs window of the Grateful Turbot Tavern. Both were unreachable.

“We’ll have to walk down to Old Dock,” said Septimus. “See if we can find a boat there.”

“One that isn’t half sunk already,” said Jenna.

“Do you have any better ideas?” demanded Septimus.

“Stop it, you two,” said Sarah. “I don’t think anyone *does* have any better ideas—do we?”

There was silence.

“Old Dock it is,” said Sarah. “Follow me.”

Sarah led the cold, tired group along the mud. But whereas Stanley, with the lightness of a rat, had scampered over the top of the mud, it was not so simple for humans. Their feet sank deep into the goop and they stubbed their toes on hidden rocks and tripped over the empty outhauls. As they struggled on through the freezing mud, they saw countless open windows from which abandoned knotted sheets and makeshift ropes dangled—and they now understood why all the boats had gone. Even the floating pontoons had been unhitched and pressed into service; there was nothing left afloat on their side of the river.

Finally they arrived at the Underflow, an underground stream that ran from below the Castle. Sarah, not realizing where she was, took a step forward into the dark and fell into deep, fast-flowing water.

“Agh!” Sarah gasped with shock as she was swept out into the river.

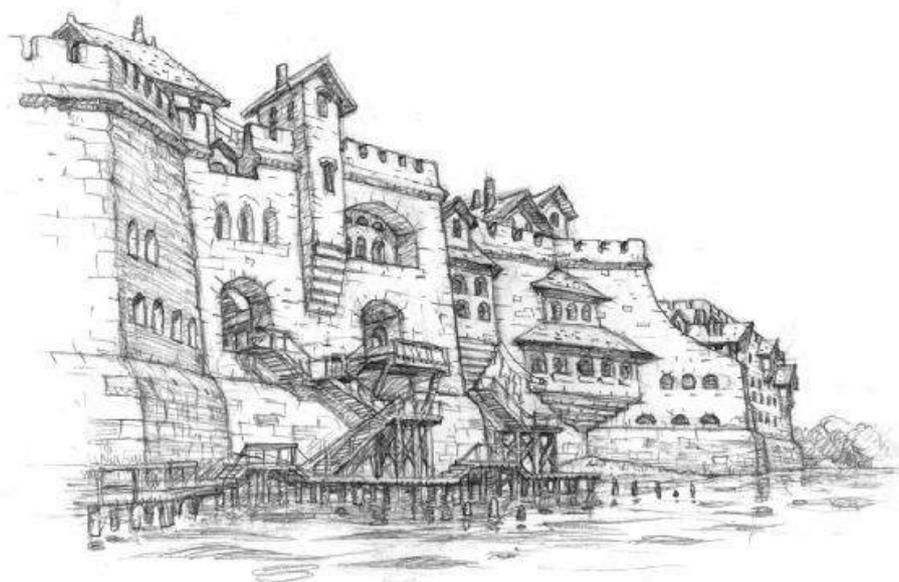
There was a loud splash and a scream from Lucy. Simon surfaced in the river, spluttering—then he turned and swam into the darkness after Sarah.

“Simon!” yelled Lucy. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh! *Simon!*”

Jenna, Septimus, and Marcellus stood, shocked, on the muddy bank of the Underflow. They stared into the night but could see nothing. Lucy stopped screaming, and the sounds of Simon swimming receded. Chilled by the freezing wind, they listened in silence to a few faint splashes coming from somewhere in the middle of the river.

Chapter 40

Annie



Sally Mullin had insisted that Nicko take her new boat, Annie.

“I hope she gives you as much luck as my *Muriel* did,” she had said. “Just don’t turn her into canoes this time.”

Nicko had promised. *Annie*—a wide, generous boat with a cozy cabin—was far too good to turn into anything else.

After helping Jannit and Maggie to safely dock the Pig Tub, Nicko and Rupert had not set off until way past midnight. They sailed up the river, heading toward the Ramblings on the north side of the Castle. It was slow progress at first because the blustery northeast wind was against them, but they followed the river around as it hugged the Castle walls, and slowly *Annie*’s position to the wind altered and she picked up speed.

It was a miserable journey. The eerie sight of the desolate, **Darkened** Castle made both Rupert and Nicko doubt that they would find anyone safe in the Heaps’ room at the top of the Ramblings. And when, once again, the terrifying roar echoed across the river, they began to dread what they would find.

“What *is* it?” Rupert whispered.

Nicko shook his head. Right then he didn’t want to know.

As they sailed toward Old Dock, a knot began to tighten in Nicko’s stomach. This was the place where it was first possible to see the Heaps’ tiny, arched mullion window at the very top of the Ramblings. Nicko always

looked up when he passed—and felt a small tug of nostalgia for times gone by—but now he did not dare. He kept his eyes fixed on the dark water of the river because every moment he did not look was another moment of hope. A quick flurry of tiny snowflakes blew into his eyes and Nicko rubbed them away, glancing up as he did so. *There was no light.* The sheer wall of the Ramblings reared up like a cliff face and, just like a cliff face, it was totally dark. A wave of desolation swept over Nicko; he slumped down and stared at the tiller. It was then that he heard a splash.

“Just a duck,” said Rupert in response to Nicko’s questioning glance.

“Big duck,” said Nicko. He stared toward the Ramblings side where the splash had come from, for some reason his hopes beginning to rise. Then came another splash and a scream cut through the air.

“Lucy!” Rupert gasped. “That’s *Lucy.*” No one screamed like his sister.

Nicko had already turned *Annie* toward the splashing. Rupert took the boat lamp out from under its cover and played its light across the water, searching.

“I can see her!” he shouted. “She’s in the water. Lucy! Lucy! We’re coming!” He threw the ladder over the side.

Beside the Underflow the stranded group heard shouts from the river and saw a light suddenly appear from the darkness. In the wildly swaying beam of light they saw Sarah being pulled from the water and then Simon’s head bobbing at the foot of the ladder. A curse traveled across the water, followed by a voice saying, “It’s your dingbat brother.”

“Which one?” came the reply that they all recognized as belonging to Nicko.

“What does he mean, *which one?*” muttered Septimus.

It took a few trips in *Annie*’s coracle to pick up Jenna, Septimus, Lucy and Marcellus. But eventually everyone was on board, a little wetter than they would have liked, but not—as Jenna pointed out—as wet as they would have been if Nicko hadn’t shown up.

Nicko could not stop grinning as he hugged his brother—*not* the dingbat one—and his sister.

“Did Stanley tell you where we were?” asked Jenna, gratefully wrapping herself in one of the many blankets that Sally Mullin had provided.

“Eventually,” said Nicko. “That rat does go on. Anyway, we decided we’d sail around and wait below. I figured sooner or later you’d look out and see us, Jen.” He smiled. “Seem to remember you were always gazing out of the window when you were little.”

“Good old Stanley,” said Jenna. “I do hope his ratlets are okay.”

“His what?”

Jenna’s answer was cut short by another bleak roar echoing across the water.

“His—oh Nicko, Sep, oh—look at *that* . . . what is it?”

Illuminated by the glow from the Wizard Tower **SafeShield**, a monstrous shape could be seen inside the **Darke Fog**.

“It’s *massive* . . .” Jenna breathed.

The creature opened its great mouth and sent another bellow across the river.

“It’s . . . a *dragon*,” gasped Nicko.

“About ten times bigger than Spit Fyre,” said Septimus, who was feeling extremely worried about his dragon.

“It would eat Spit Fyre for breakfast,” said Nicko.

“Nicko, *don’t!*” protested Jenna.

But Nicko had voiced the very thing that was worrying Septimus.

They stared across the water, watching the monster. It appeared to be trying out its wings—of which it had six. It rose a little into the air and then fell back with what sounded like a roar of frustration.

“Six wings. A **Darke** dragon,” muttered Septimus.

“That’s not good,” said Nicko, shaking his head.

Marcellus joined them. “Things are worse than we feared. No one is safe in the Castle with that thing on the loose. How fast can this boat go, Nicko?”

Nicko shrugged. “Depends on the wind. But it’s blowing up a bit. We can get to the Port not long after dawn if we’re lucky.”

“The *Port*?” asked Marcellus, puzzled. He glanced at Septimus. “You have not told him, Apprentice?”

“Told him what?” asked Nicko suspiciously.

“That we’re going to Bleak Creek,” said Septimus.

“*Bleak Creek*?”

“Yes. Sorry, Nik. We have to get there. Fast.”

“Jeez, Sep. Isn’t it bad enough for you here? You want *more Darke* stuff?”

Septimus shook his head. “We have to go. It’s the only hope we have to stop what’s happening here.”

“Well, you’re not taking Mum,” said Nicko.

Sarah’s bat ears were working well. Her head appeared in the lighted hatch. “Not taking Mum where?”

“Bleak Creek,” said Nicko.

“If that’s where Septimus needs to go, then that’s where I’ll go too,” Sarah said. “I don’t want you wasting any time on me, Nicko. Just do what Septimus asks you—and Marcellus too.”

Nicko looked surprised. “Okay, Mum. Whatever you say.”

They sailed past the reassuringly normal lights of the Grateful Turbot Tavern and then *Annie*’s mast scraped under the One Way Bridge, setting Nicko’s teeth on edge. As they began to round the first bend, everyone gathered on

deck to catch a last glimpse of the Castle. The only sound was the creaking of *Annie's* ropes and the swash of the water as she sailed briskly along. Her passengers were grimly silent. They looked back at the dark shape of the Castle that had been their home and thought about all the people left behind. Lucy wondered if her mother and father were still alive—How long could you survive in a **Darke** trance? Simon had told her he'd once been in a trance for forty days and had been okay at the end of it. But Lucy knew Simon was different. She knew he'd practiced all kinds of **Darke** things, even though he didn't like to talk about it. But her parents didn't have a clue about stuff like that. Lucy imagined them collapsed outside the gatehouse, snow covering them as they slowly froze. She stifled a sob and rushed below. Simon went after her.

As they drew farther away, the Wizard Tower became visible—but only just. The **Darke Domaine** was rising higher and only the top two floors of Marcia's rooms and the Golden Pyramid were now clear of the **Fog**. The indigo and purple **SafeShield** still shone brightly, but every now and then there was a new color visible—a faint flash of orange.

Sarah and Jenna took comfort from the lights. They thought of Silas somewhere in the Tower, adding his—admittedly small and somewhat unreliable—share of **Magyk** to the Wizard Tower's defenses. Septimus and Marcellus, however, took no comfort at all.

Marcellus drew Septimus away from the others. "I assume you know what that orange flash means, Apprentice?" he asked.

"The **SafeShield** is in distress," Septimus said. He shook his head in disbelief. "That's not good."

"No, it's not," said Marcellus.

"How long do you think we've got until it . . . fails?" asked Septimus.

Marcellus shook his head. "I don't know. All we can do is make haste to Bleak Creek. I suggest you get some rest."

"No. I'll stay up. We still have to figure out *exactly* where in Bleak Creek the **Portal** is," said Septimus.

"Apprentice, you must sleep. You have a task ahead of you for which you will need all your powers. Simon and I will do the final calculations—*no protests, please*. He is proving a most able mathematician."

Septimus hated the thought of sleeping while Simon took his place at Marcellus's side. "But—"

"Septimus, this is for the good of the Castle, for the survival of the Wizard Tower. We must all do what we can—and what you can do now is *sleep*. Come away from the Tower, it does no good." Marcellus put his arm around Septimus's shoulders and tried to steer him toward the cabin.

Septimus resisted. "In a minute. I'll come in a minute."

"Very well, Apprentice. Do not be long." Marcellus left Septimus alone and

went below.

Septimus longed for a glimpse of Marcia. He wanted to see her face at the window, to know that she was all right. “Nicko, do you have a telescope?” he asked.

Nicko did have a telescope. “Tower looks good, doesn’t it?” he said, handing it to him. “I like the orange.”

Septimus made no reply. He focused the telescope on the Wizard Tower and silently added his own **Magnification**. The top of the Tower that was peeping up over the **Fog** sprung into sharp focus. Septimus gasped. It seemed so close that he felt he could reach out and touch it. Eagerly he searched out Marcia’s study window, which he thought should just be visible. It was. And not only was the study window visible but so was the unmistakable shape of Marcia’s head and shoulders, silhouetted against the lighted window. It looked as though she was staring out the window straight at him. Feeling a little silly Septimus waved, but almost immediately Marcia turned away, and Septimus knew that she had not seen him at all. Feeling suddenly lonely, Septimus longed to talk to Marcia. He longed to tell her that there was still hope, to say “hold on as long as you can. Don’t give up. Please don’t give up.”

Jenna’s voice broke into his thoughts. “Let me have a look, Sep. Please. I want to see . . . well, I want to see if I can spot Dad anywhere.”

Reluctant to let go of what felt like a link to the Wizard Tower, Septimus swung the telescope upward for a quick last glance at the Golden Pyramid. He gasped in surprise. Sitting on the flattened square at the very top of the pyramid was the unmistakable shape of Spit Fyre.

“What is it, Sep?” asked Jenna, worried.

Septimus handed her the telescope with a broad smile. “Spit Fyre. So that’s why he never came. Somehow he’s got inside the **SafeShield**. He’s sitting on top of the Golden Pyramid.”

“Wow. So he is,” said Jenna. “Clever dragon. No one can get him there.”

“For now,” said Septimus. He went over to the hatch. “I’m going to get some sleep, Jen.”

Jenna sat on the cabin roof, playing the telescope over the few visible windows in the Wizard Tower until *Annie* eventually rounded the bend and the Castle disappeared from sight. But she saw no sign of Silas.

The next morning the wintry sun rose to reveal an unfamiliar landscape. On either side of the river were empty fields dusted with frost and dotted with sparse trees stretched out to a range of blue hills on the horizon. The land seemed deserted, with not a farmhouse in sight.

The inside of *Annie*’s cabin was warm but cramped. Nicko, Jenna, Rupert and Lucy were up on deck, leaving Sarah some space in the tiny galley to

prepare a huge plate of scrambled eggs for breakfast. Marcellus and Simon were at the chart table with their set squares and protractors, making their final drawings from the almanac's coded coordinates of the **Portal** to the **Darke Halls**. Septimus was still asleep, tucked into a quarter berth, with only his tangled curls visible above his cloak and one of Sally's blankets. No one was in a hurry to wake him.

Eventually the mouthwatering smell of the eggs drifted into his dreams and Septimus opened his eyes blearily.

Simon looked up, his eyes red-rimmed with fatigue. "We've figured out where the **Portal** is," he said.

Septimus sat up, remembering with a sinking feeling what he was going to have to do that day. "Where?" he asked.

"Have some breakfast first, Apprentice," said Marcellus. "We'll discuss it afterward."

Septimus knew it was bad news. "No. Tell me now. I need to know. I need to . . . to get ready."

"Septimus, I'm so sorry," said Marcellus. "It's in the Bottomless Whirlpool."

Chapter 41

Bleak Creek



Bleak Creek was a dank and dismal place. Haunted by the ghost of the *Vengeance*, a **Darke** ship once berthed there, its waters lay deep and still, trapped between two rocky hillsides. A few stunted trees halfheartedly clung to the gaunt slopes but most had stopped bothering and had fallen into the water, where they lay rotting, providing a perfect breeding ground for the infamous Bleak Creek water snake—a nasty black squidge of venomous slime—and its equally lovely parasite, the Long White Leech. In the summer swarms of biting gnats patrolled the banks of the creek, but in the winter they were gone, thankfully. Their absence was more than compensated for by the tiny Jumping Log Beetles, which ventured onto the land once the water grew cold. Log Beetles could jump as high as six feet and would fasten their pincers into any flesh they could find and begin to chew. The only way to remove them was to snap their heads off and wait for the pincers to die. Some heads could keep chewing for days until they fell off.

Dotted among the sharp rocks that littered the hillsides were a few stone hovels built by ancient hermits, misfits and the odd person who had wanted a house by the water but had clearly suffered from a total lack of common sense. These piles of stones were deserted now, although Septimus knew that at least one was **Possessed**.

Not surprisingly Bleak Creek did not receive many visitors, although this was not necessarily due to its ghostly ship or even to the hostile wildlife and

the pungent smell of decay that hung in the air. It was because its entrance was guarded by the notorious Bottomless Whirlpool.

Every Castle child knew the story of the Bottomless Whirlpool. How it was created during a great battle between two Wizards in ancient times; how it was said that each Wizard had stirred up the waters into a frenzy in an effort to drown the other; that they had circled one another, faster and faster, until they had both been sucked into the depths and were never seen again. Everyone knew that the whirlpool went down into the very center of the earth, and some believed that it went right out to the other side.

There were occasional day trips from the Castle to see the Bottomless Whirlpool. These were often a thirteenth-birthday present. After sailing into Bleak Creek to try and spot the *Vengeance*, the boats—full of new teens screaming with excitement—would circle the whirlpool. However, these trips were run by experienced skippers who knew the safe distance from the whirlpool and who could tell the early warning signs that a boat was being dragged toward it. It was only the biggest, heaviest ships—as the *Vengeance* had once been—that could pass close by.

Nicko knew for sure that *Annie* was not one of these. He also knew that he was not one of those skippers who understood the safe distance from the whirlpool, although he hoped that he could tell the signs that they were being dragged too close. And so, as the forbidding rocky outcrops that heralded the entrance to Bleak Creek came into view, Nicko began to feel nervous—but not as nervous as Septimus.

Septimus was sitting alone in the prow of the boat, just behind the bowsprit and its large red sail that billowed in the wintry wind. He had never—not even on the Do-or-Die Night Exercises in the Forest—felt so scared. He glanced down at a small sheet of paper covered with Marcellus’s neat handwriting that set out some bullet-pointed questions and answers, which he was trying to fix in his head. They were not unlike the Young Army Pre-Exercise Pointers (or PEPs) that the boys had had to memorize and then chant before each expedition. This sense of déjà vu added to Septimus’s feeling of doom, but it also meant that he fell back into his old Young Army ways of focusing on survival—and nothing else. And so, as he sat behind the bowsprit, Septimus gazed out at the iron-gray water and chanted under his breath, learning the responses he must use when challenged by anything **Darke**.

“*Who be you?* Sum.”

“*How be you?* **Darke**.”

“*What be you?* The Apprentice of the Apprentice of the Apprentice of DomDaniel.”

“*Why come you here?* I seek the Apprentice of DomDaniel.”

Septimus was so absorbed that he did not notice Jenna and Nicko slipping

into the spaces on either side of him. They waited patiently until he had stopped muttering and then Jenna spoke.

“We are coming with you,” she said.

Septimus looked shocked. “*What?*”

“Nik and I . . . we have decided to come with you. We don’t want you to go alone,” said Jenna.

This had the opposite effect from what Jenna had intended—Septimus suddenly felt totally alone. He realized that they had no idea about the utter impossibility of their request. He shook his head.

“Jen, you can’t. It’s not possible. Believe me.”

Jenna saw the look in Septimus’s eyes. “Okay . . . I believe you. But if we can’t come with you, then I at least want to know where you are going. Marcellus knows, even *Simon* knows, so I think Nik and I deserve to know too.”

Septimus did not reply. He stared out at the water and wished that Jenna and Nik would leave him alone. He needed to disconnect.

But Jenna would not let him. She reached beneath her witch’s cloak, took out *The Queen Rules* and opened it to a page she knew well. She thrust it under Septimus’s nose.

“*Look,*” she said, stabbing her finger at a grubby, well-worn paragraph.

Reluctantly Septimus squinted at the tiny type. Then he gave in. He got out his birthday present from Marcia and moved the Enlarging Glass across the page. He read:

“The P-I-W has a Right To Know all facts pertaining to the security and wellbeing of the Castle and the Palace. The ExtraOrdinary Wizard (or, in absentia, the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice) is required to answer all the P-I-W’s questions truthfully, fully and without delay.”

With his head full of what he had to do, Septimus didn’t immediately recognize what he was looking at—and then it came back to him. He remembered the morning of his birthday, which seemed so far away now. He smiled as he recalled Marcia’s comment about “the wretched red book with its tiddly-squiddly type, the bane of every ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s life.” So *this* was what she had meant. And in remembering the Wizard Tower and the Castle as it had been, and with Marcia’s beautiful birthday gift in his hand, Septimus somehow felt less alone. He felt part of everything once more and he also, he realized, felt relieved. He *wanted* to tell Jenna where he was going, he wanted her to be part of what he was doing. Even though she couldn’t come with him, she could be thinking of him while he was there, wishing him safely through the **Darke Halls** to the other side. Septimus wasn’t sure that he should be telling Nicko too, but he no longer cared about *should* or *shouldn’t*.

And so, as they drew near to Bleak Creek and they saw the telltale chop of the water that heralded the Bottomless Whirlpool, Septimus told Jenna and

Nicko how he was going to find Alther and bring him back to the Castle through Dungeon Number One. He told them not to worry because he had the **Darke Disguise**. And even though he didn't believe it, he told them that he would be fine and he would see them soon. When he had finished talking, Nicko and Jenna were silent. Jenna wiped her eyes with her sleeve and Nicko coughed.

"We'll be there waiting, Sep," said Jenna.

"Outside Dungeon Number One," said Nicko.

"No. You can't do that."

Jenna put on her best Princess voice. "Nicko and I *will* be waiting for you at the entrance to Dungeon Number One. *No, don't say anything, Sep*. We can get through the **Darke** with my witch's cloak. You are not in this alone. Got that?"

Septimus nodded. He did not trust himself to speak.

A shout from Rupert broke the moment. "Nik—she's beginning to go!"

Nicko leaped up. He could feel the pull of the current beneath them and the flapping of *Annie's* sails told him that the boat's prow was being pulled into the wind and she was losing way—they were heading toward the wisp of spray that marked the Bottomless Whirlpool. Nicko raced back to the stern. He grabbed the tiller from Rupert—who was not a natural sailor—and yelled, "Oars! Everyone, get the oars!"

Annie's four long oars were snatched off the roof. Standing along the sides of the boat, Sarah, Simon, Lucy and Rupert dug them into the water. Frighteningly slowly, the boat's progress toward the Bottomless Whirlpool halted.

Septimus got to his feet. "I have to go, Jen," he said. "I'm putting everyone at risk."

"Oh. Oh, *Sep*."

Septimus hugged Jenna and quickly stepped back. "That witch's cloak is really . . . *zingy*. It buzzes when I touch it."

Jenna was determined to be positive. "Good. That means it's full of, er, witch stuff. It will get me and Nik through the Castle."

"Right." Septimus forced a smile. "I'll see you there, then."

"At the door to Dungeon Number One. We'll wait for you. We'll be there, I promise."

"Yeah. Okay. I'll go and find Marcellus now."

"Yep. See you, *Sep*."

Septimus nodded and picked his way back along the deck, past Simon and Lucy, who were sitting like gloomy seagulls on the cabin roof.

"Good luck, *Sep*," said Lucy.

"Thanks."

Simon held out a small, black metallic **Charm**. "Take it, Septimus. It will

guide you through.”

Septimus shook his head. Right then it was hard to turn down any offer of help, even from Simon. But he was determined. “No thanks. I don’t take **SafeCharms** from anyone.”

“Then take some advice—always take the left.”

Septimus reached the cockpit of the boat, where Marcellus had just emerged from the cabin.

“It is time, Apprentice,” Marcellus said, with an anxious glance at Sarah. He had just had a fraught conversation with her, trying to impress upon her how she must let Septimus go without upsetting him. He wasn’t sure that Sarah was going to manage it.

But Sarah did—just. She enveloped her youngest son in a desperate hug. “Oh, Septimus! Be careful.”

“I will, Mum,” said Septimus. “I’ll see you soon. Okay?”

“Okay, sweetheart.” With that Sarah rushed down into the cabin.

Nicko and Rupert hauled the little coracle down from the mast and dropped it over the side, hanging on to its rope. The flimsy round boat made of willow and skin bobbed lightly on the water like a leaf. Aware that everyone—except Sarah—was watching him, Septimus gave a tight smile and climbed down the ladder into the coracle. Nicko handed him the single paddle. “Okay?” he said hoarsely.

Septimus nodded.

With every instinct telling him that he was *killing his little brother*, Nicko threw the rope into the coracle and set it free. At first it drifted aimlessly, bobbing merrily as if out for a summer’s day paddle on a gentle lake. And then it began to turn, slowly at first, as though it had caught a gentle breeze. Moving steadily toward the wisp of steam at the center of the whirlpool, the coracle began to pick up speed and, like a fairground ride from which there is no return, to spin ever faster as it was drawn inexorably toward the edge of the vortex.

And then it reached the point of no return. With a suddenness that drew a gasp of dismay from everyone on *Annie*, it was whirled into the slipstream of the vortex. Spinning like a top as it raced around in ever decreasing circles, Septimus’s green cloak was the pivot around which his tiny black craft spun. There was a final acceleration as it tipped into the center of the whirlpool and was gone.

The creek was still. *Annie* was silent. No one could believe what they had just done.

Chapter 42

The Darke Halls



S*eptimus* timed his **Darke Disguise** perfectly. As the coracle tipped into the center of the whirlpool he muttered “ehtolc Sum” and felt the coldness of the **Darke** veil spread over him like a second skin. After that things were not quite so perfect.

Septimus was sucked into the roar of the whirlpool, whirled around like a piece of flotsam and pulled into its maw. Down, down, down he fell, whirling so fast that all his thoughts spun into a tiny dark place in the middle of his mind and he knew nothing except the roaring of water and the relentless pull of the vast emptiness below.

At that point, without a **Darke Disguise** Septimus would, like most of the whirlpool’s previous victims, have drowned. He would have taken one last breath, filled his lungs with water and been pulled through a hole in the riverbed into a great underwater cave that was hollowed out in the bedrock like the inside of a hundred-foot-long egg. Here, for a few weeks, he would have circled until, one by one, his bones dropped and mingled with the pile of clean, white, delicate sticks scattered on the smooth cave floor—all that remained of those who had traveled the Bottomless Whirlpool over the many centuries that had elapsed since the Great Fight of the **Darke** Wizards.

The **Darke Disguise** did not spare Septimus the hole in the riverbed—through which he was sucked like a noodle into a greedy mouth—or the swash of the cave below. But it protected him like a glove and gave him the

Darke Art of Suspension Underwater—something that Simon had spent many uncomfortable months with his head in a bucket learning to perfect. As Septimus swirled slowly around the underwater cave his thoughts unwound; he opened his eyes and realized that he was still alive.

The **Darke** Art of Suspension Underwater imparted an oddly distancing effect. The reason for this was to allay panic and so to conserve oxygen, although Septimus—indeed, most practitioners of the Art—did not realize this. It also allowed the eyes to see perfectly through the normal watery blurriness and this made moving underwater feel closer to flying than swimming. And so, as Septimus swam along with the circular currents of the egg-shaped cave, he found to his surprise that he was actually enjoying the sensation of being underwater. His Dragon Ring glowed brightly, turning the water around him a beautiful milky green and, when he drifted near the walls of the cave, the light made the crystals in the rock glitter as he passed.

But the **Darke** Art of Suspension Underwater does not last forever. After some long, hazy minutes, Septimus began to feel breathless and twitchy. Pushing aside the early signs of panic, he swam upward toward what he hoped was the surface and some air to breathe, only to hit his head with a painful *crack* on the roof of the cave. The panic welled up. There was no surface—*there was no air*.

Septimus sank a little and, holding his Dragon Ring out in front of him, he swam fast, looking upward, hoping to see some kind of space where he could draw a breath. Just one deep, beautiful breath of air was all he needed . . . *just one*. He was so busy looking up that he almost did not notice a flight of steps cut into the rock in front of him. It was only when the light from his Dragon Ring showed a strip of lapis lazuli set into the edge of a step, and above it another, and then another, that he realized he had found his way out. Eagerly his hands followed the steps up to an underwater gap in the rocky roof, through which they disappeared. Desperate now to take a breath, Septimus pulled himself up through the rock and emerged gasping into the freezing air of the **Darke Halls**.

The cold shocked him. His teeth chattering, water cascading off him, Septimus got shakily to his feet. In his preparation for his **Darke Week**, he had read ancient descriptions of what many now thought was no more than a mythical place beneath the earth, but he knew now they were true. All described what he was experiencing: a musty smell of earth and the stifling feeling of being pressed down by the surrounding rock and, accompanying everything, an eerie wail that seemed to drill into his bones. They had also described an overwhelming fear, but Septimus, insulated by the **Darke Disguise** covering him from head to toe, felt no fear—just elation at being alive and able to breathe once more.

Septimus drew in a few more luxurious deep breaths and took stock.

Behind him was the egg-shaped hole in the ground through which he had just emerged; the faint light from his Dragon Ring caught the glint of gold from the lapis lazuli strip on the top step. In front of him was the unknown: a deep, thick darkness. Septimus had no landmarks, nothing to navigate by, just the sensation of a colossal empty space. All he had to go on was Simon's advice. And so he took it. He turned left and began to walk.

As he got into his stride, Septimus's mind began to emerge from the state of panic into which it had descended during his last few seconds under water and he began to think clearly once more. According to Marcellus, all he had to do was walk through the **Darke Halls** until he reached the lower entrance to the antechamber to Dungeon Number One. It was there, Marcellus had said, that he was most likely to find Alther. *He has not long been **Banished, Apprentice.** He is unlikely to have yet roamed far.* Marcellus had even described the entrance to him—in such detail that Septimus suspected that the Alchemist had actually seen it for himself. A portico, he had called it: a square-cut doorway flanked on either side by ancient lapis pillars. Marcellus had calculated it to be about a seven-mile walk, which was the distance as the crow flies from the Bottomless Whirlpool to the Castle.

Septimus set a brisk pace. Seven miles at that speed should take him about two hours, he calculated. It was a monotonous journey. He saw very little except the pressed earth floor beneath his feet, and when he held his Dragon Ring out in front of him he saw nothing but the circle of light. It was a little disorientating, but he walked with a feeling of excitement—*Alther was near.* Soon he would see him and say, “Oh *there* you are, Alther,” as though he'd bumped into the ghost while strolling down Wizard Way. He tried to imagine what Alther would say and how pleased the ghost would be to see him. To prepare for that moment, Septimus went over in his mind the **Banish Reverse** that Marcia had taught him. It was complicated and, like the **Banish** itself, it must last for precisely one minute and be completed without hesitation, repetition or deviation.

Septimus walked on, his boots thudding dully against the earthen floor. He had the sensation of moving through a massive space, but not an empty one. All around him was a dismal wailing as if the wind was crying out in despair and loss. As he pushed through the dank, earthy atmosphere, small gusts of air brushed past him, some warm, some cold and some with a feeling of intense evil that took his breath away and reminded him that he was in a dangerous place.

After some time—surely much longer than an hour and a half—Septimus began to suspect that the **Darke Halls** were a whole lot bigger than he or Marcellus had thought. One of the ancient writers had called them “The Infinite Palaces of Wailing.” Septimus had noted the Wailing but had paid little attention to the Infinite Palaces bit. But the cavern he had been walking

through was surely as big as a dozen Castle Palaces—and it showed no sign of ending. The enormity of his task suddenly hit him. There were no maps to the **Darke Halls**; everything they knew was based on legends or on the writings of a handful of Wizards who had ventured there and returned to tell the tale. Most of these had drifted quickly into madness—not the most reliable of sources, thought Septimus, as his weary feet plowed onward.

And so it was with huge relief that Septimus at last saw a landmark appearing out of the gloom—a great square-cut gap in the rock, flanked on either side by two lapis lazuli pillars. It was exactly as Marcellus had described the entrance to Dungeon Number One. With his spirits soaring Septimus hurried toward it. Now all he had to do was to walk through and find Alther on the other side.

As he got closer to the portico Septimus noticed something white at its foot, and as he drew nearer still, he saw what it was. Bones. Clean and completely white—except for a thin brass ring with a red stone on the left little finger—the skeleton was sitting propped against the wall, the skull tipped at a jaunty angle toward the pillars as if pointing the way through.

Feeling it was wrong to pass casually by, Septimus stopped beside the bones. They had belonged to someone small, probably no taller than he had been a year ago. They looked fragile, sad and lonely, and Septimus felt a wave of sympathy for them. Whoever they had been had somehow survived the Bottomless Whirlpool only to find a haunted, freezing desert awaited them.

A sudden wail of wind blew through the portico and chilled him, even through the **Darke Disguise**. A bout of shivering overtook Septimus and he decided it was time to go through to the antechamber to Dungeon Number One; time to find Alther and do what he had come to do. He nodded respectfully to the bones and stepped through the portico.

The antechamber to Dungeon Number One was not what Septimus had expected—it seemed much the same as the empty space he had been walking through before. And there was no sign of Alther—there was, in fact, no sign of any ghosts at all. According to the texts, the antechamber was the most haunted place on earth, mostly by the ghosts of those thrown into the dungeon over the centuries. One of the great fears that Dungeon Number One held was the knowledge that those who died there were never seen as ghosts. All fell victim to the thrall of the **Darke Halls** and spent their entire ghosthood below the ground, with no possibility of ever seeing the people or places they had once loved ever again. Many quite reasonably preferred to stay with the company of other ghosts rather than roam the “Infinite Palaces of Wailing.”

The antechamber to Dungeon Number One was described as a circular walled chamber lined with black bricks, the same as those used to build the little round brick pot that marked the top entrance to the dungeon. And if

those descriptions were right—and Septimus believed they were—then he was most definitely not in the antechamber to Dungeon Number One.

Septimus felt near to despair. If he was not in the antechamber, where was he? Unbidden the answer came to him—he was lost. Totally and utterly lost. Far more lost than he had been during the night he had spent in the Forest with Nicko a few years back. To stop himself sliding into panic Septimus thought about what Nicko would say right then. Nicko would say that they must keep going. Nicko would say that sooner or later they would come to Dungeon Number One, that it was only a matter of time. And so, taking an imaginary Nicko with him, Septimus set off once more into the **Darke**.

Almost immediately he was rewarded with the sight of three plain, square entrances set into the smooth rock wall. Septimus stopped and considered what to do. He remembered Simon's advice and Marcellus's words came back to him: *Apprentice, I truly believe we can trust him.*

Septimus stepped through the left-hand entrance.

Another empty space full of wailing and fear met him. Imagining Nicko by his side, Septimus walked quickly on and before long he came to two more porticos standing side by side. Once again he took the left one. It led him into a long, winding passageway down which a foul wind funneled. It screamed at him, buffeting him and at times throwing him against the walls, but Septimus pushed on, and at last he stepped out of the passageway and into yet another empty cavernous space where, once again, he turned left.

Another tedious hour of walking followed. By now Septimus was footsore and weary, and the **Darke Disguise** felt as though it was wearing thin. The chill of the air was striking deep into him, and he could not stop shivering. The wailing was at times so loud that he felt he was losing touch not just with his own thoughts but with who he was—with *himself*. A deep, dark fear began to seep into him, a fear that even the imaginary Nicko could not keep out. But Septimus struggled on. It was either that, he told himself, or sit down and become another pile of bones.

Eventually he was rewarded by the sight of a distant portico. As he drew nearer his spirits rose cautiously. Surely *this* was the entrance to the antechamber—it fitted the description exactly. He picked up speed, but as he came closer he saw something that sent him very nearly over the edge of despair. He saw a small skeleton propped up against the side of the lapis pillar.

Septimus stopped dead. He felt sick. What were the chances of two skeletons sitting beside two identical porticos? He walked slowly forward until he was standing in front of the skeleton. It was small, delicate, and its skull nodded jauntily at the pillar. Septimus forced himself to look at its left hand. On the little finger was a cheap brass ring with a red stone.

Septimus sank to the ground—he had come full circle. He leaned back

against the cold lapis and stared into the darkness in despair. Simon had deceived him. Marcellus was a fool. He would never find Dungeon Number One. He would never find Alther. He would be here forever, and one day some unfortunate traveler would find *two* sets of bones propped up beside the arch. Now he understood why the skeleton was there. Whoever it had once been had also gone around in circles—how many times? Septimus looked up and found that he was eye to eye with the skull. Its teeth seemed to smile at him conspiratorially, the empty eye sockets to wink, but after the vast desert of empty spaces the bones felt like company.

“I’m sorry you didn’t make it,” he said to the bones.

“No one makes it on their own,” came a whispering reply.

Septimus thought he was hearing his own thoughts. It was not a good sign. But even so, just to hear the sound of a human voice, he said, “Who’s there?”

He thought he heard a faint reply that blended into the wail of the wind. “Me.”

“Me,” Septimus muttered to himself. “I *am* hearing myself.”

“No. You hear *me*,” said the whisper.

Septimus looked at the skull beside him, which returned his gaze mockingly. “Is it *you*?”

“It *was* me,” came the reply. “Now it is not. Now it is bones. *This* is me.”

And then something made Septimus smile for the first time since he had left *Annie*. A small figure began to materialize—the ghost of a girl aged no more than ten, he guessed. She looked like a miniature version of Jannit Maarten. She had the same wiriness about her and wore a child’s version of Jannit’s work clothes—a rough sailor’s smock, cutoff trousers and her hair in a small, tight plait down her back. Septimus was almost as pleased to see her as he would have been to see Alther.

“Now you see me?” she asked, her head tilted to one side in an echo of her skull.

“Yes, I see you.”

“Now I see you. But I could not before you spoke. You look . . . funny.” The ghost extended what Septimus could see had once been a very grubby hand. “You must get up,” she told him. “If you do not get up now, you will never get up. Like me. Come.”

Wearily Septimus got to his feet.

The ghost looked up at him, excited. “You are my first Living. I watch from the shore. I saw those wicked people cast you adrift. I saw you go in,” she chattered with the pent-up energy of a Living girl herself. “I followed.” She saw Septimus’s questioning glance. “Yes, through the whirlpool. It is Where I Have Trod Before.”

Septimus felt he had to clear the name of all those on board *Annie*. “They did not cast me adrift. I came here on purpose, because I have to find a ghost.

His name is Alther Mella. He wears ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes with a bloodstain over his heart. He is tall with white hair tied back in a ponytail. Do you know him?"

"No, I *don't*." The little girl sounded indignant. "The ghosts here are bad. Why would I want to know any of them? I only came back to this horrible place so that I can save you. Come on, I'll show you how to get out."

It took all Septimus's willpower to refuse her offer. "No, thank you," he said regretfully.

"But that's not *fair*. I have come here to *save* you!" The ghost stamped her foot.

"Yes, I *know*," said Septimus, a trifle irritably. He had prepared for many things in the **Darke Halls** but dealing with a little girl in a bad temper was not one of them. "Look, if you really want to save me then show me the way to Dungeon Number One. You do know the way?"

"Of course I do!" the ghost said.

"So please . . . will you show me?"

"No. Why should I? It's a horrid place. I don't like it."

Septimus knew she had him in her power. He took a deep breath and counted to ten. He could not afford to say something wrong. He had to find a way to persuade her to show him the way to Dungeon Number One.

Suddenly the ghost reached out and he felt the cool waft of her touch across his Dragon Ring. "This is pretty. I have a ring." She waggled her little finger with its cheap brass ring. "But it is not as pretty as this one."

Septimus was not sure whether he should agree with her or not, so he said nothing.

The ghost looked up at him earnestly. "Your pretty dragon. You wear it on your *right* hand."

"Yes, I do."

"On your *right* hand," she repeated.

"Yes. I *know*." Septimus was exasperated. He had had enough chit-chat about rings.

And then, to Septimus's dismay, she said, "You are a silly boy. You want to stay here, but I don't. I am going now. Good-bye."

And she was gone.

Septimus was alone once more. The little skull looked up at him and grinned.

Chapter 43

Dungeon Number One



Septimus sat next to the pile of bones feeling bad. Really bad. Really, *really* bad. He thought of Beetle, **Sealed** into the Hermetic Chamber, and himself marooned in the **Darke Halls** and he knew that there was no hope left for either of them.

He stretched out his hands and looked at his Dragon Ring, the only thing he had left for company. He saw the warm yellow glow and the green emerald eye and he thought it was true; it *was* a pretty ring. And suddenly something clicked—he understood the little ghost’s chattering about the ring. He wore his Dragon Ring on his right hand—he knew he did. He could even *feel* it on his right hand, on the index finger, where it always was. And yet, when he looked at his hands, the ring appeared to be on his *left* index finger. Septimus stared at his hands, uncomprehending. And then he understood. *That was it.* The ghost been giving him a clue—in the **Darke Halls** everything was **Reversed**, so when he had thought he was taking the left turning, he had in fact been taking the right. So maybe Simon had not deceived him after all. Maybe . . .

Septimus leaped to his feet and, with renewed hope, he set off once more. He took the apparent right-hand entrance of the first three and found himself in yet another great **Hall**. He speeded up, almost running in his wish to discover if this really was the secret to finding his way to Dungeon Number One. After choosing an apparent right-hand passageway leading from a small

archway that very soon divided into two flights of steps—of which he took the right-hand flight—he pushed open a heavy door and found himself in a huge cavern that was actually *lit*. Great torches flared from niches carved into the smooth rock walls, illuminating the soaring heights of the **Hall**, casting long shadows across the smooth rock floor. Septimus felt like yelling with joy. He was getting somewhere now, he *knew* he was.

As he jogged along he began to encounter **Things**, Magogs, Wizards, Witches and all manner of misshapen creatures—and he was glad to see every single one. Each and every one passed him by and paid him no attention. His **Darke Disguise** still did what it was meant to do—it presented Septimus as something **Darke**, something that was one of them.

Septimus reckoned he must now be walking beneath the Castle. He began to pass by archways protected by metal grills, which he suspected led into secret entrances somewhere in the Castle—entrances that even Marcia did not know about. There was a buzz of excitement in the air, which Septimus guessed was to do with the **Darke** events far above in the Castle itself. He passed by two Wizards who had left the Wizard Tower in disgrace a few years ago and heard one say excitedly, “Our time has come.”

And then, at last, he saw ahead of him a portico. Gold streaks in the lapis lazuli of its pillars glistened in the light of the torches and Septimus knew that this was the one that would take him into the antechamber to Dungeon Number One. Some minutes later, feeling so excited that he could hardly breathe, Septimus reached the portico.

As he went to step through, Tertius Fume—self-appointed busybody who terrified many of the ghosts—accosted him with a touch so cold that it felt burning hot. Septimus stopped, his heart beating fast. This put the **Darke Disguise** to its greatest test so far. Surely Tertius Fume would recognize him?

It appeared the ghost did not. He glared at Septimus with his piercing, goatlike eyes and demanded, “*Who be you?*”

Septimus was ready. “Sum.”

“*How be you?*”

“**Darke.**”

“*What be you?*”

“The Apprentice of the Apprentice of the Apprentice of DomDaniel.”

Tertius Fume looked surprised. He stopped his questioning and tried to figure out who exactly Septimus was. Septimus took advantage of the ghost’s confusion and stepped through the entrance. He was probably the first person to feel utter delight at finding himself in the large, round chamber lined with black bricks, stuffed full of depressed ghosts. Now all he had to do was to find one ghost in particular.

Septimus scanned the room and his heart leaped. There was Alther, sitting motionless on a stone bench set into the wall, his eyes closed.

Tertius Fume had given up trying to figure out who Septimus was—there were too many possibilities. The ghost followed him into the antechamber.

“*Why come you here?*” he demanded.

Septimus ignored Tertius Fume and began to make his way over to Alther. Tertius Fume followed like a storm cloud as Septimus dodged from side to side to avoid **Passing Through** the throng of ghosts. Eventually, with a feeling of elation, Septimus reached Alther’s side. He had imagined this moment many times as he had traveled through the **Darke Halls**. He had longed to see Alther’s expression as the ghost looked up and **Saw** through his **Darke Disguise** to the person he really was. But to his disappointment, nothing happened—Alther did not react. He seemed oblivious to his surroundings. His eyes remained closed and he sat still as a statue. Septimus knew that Alther had gone somewhere deep within himself.

Mindful of Marcellus’s instructions to speak only the set responses in the presence of the **Darke**—and with Tertius Fume hovering at his shoulder, he was certainly in *that*—Septimus stood wondering how to reach Alther. Tertius Fume solved his problem.

“*Why come you here?*” he demanded once again.

Loudly, hoping that Alther would recognize his voice, Septimus said, “I seek the Apprentice of DomDaniel.”

The moment that Alther recognized him was one of the best moments in Septimus’s life. Alther’s eyes opened slowly and Septimus saw recognition dawn. But Alther did not move an inch. His glance flicked sideways, took in Tertius Fume, and closed again. Septimus was elated. Alther understood. Alther was with him once again.

Tertius Fume did not notice Alther’s awakening, as he was too busy scrutinizing the newcomer. There was, he was sure, something odd about Sum—but what it was, he could not tell. The ghost gave Septimus a goaty gloat of a smile and replied, “Then, Sum, you are in the wrong place. The Apprentice of DomDaniel is doing well—surprisingly well, I hear—above.”

Septimus bowed and smiled in reply.

Tertius Fume mockingly returned the bow and drifted away.

Septimus sat down beside Alther. He knew Tertius Fume was suspicious and he had to work fast. He got straight to the point. “Marcia has given me the **Revoke** for the **Banish**. I have come to deliver it.” He glanced at the ghost. To any onlooker, Alther looked the same. He was sitting stone still with his eyes closed. But Septimus could tell that the ghost was poised like a cat waiting to pounce. He was ready to *go*.

Septimus took a deep breath and in a low monotone, he began the **Revoke**. He longed to rush through the words and get it over with before Tertius Fume noticed what was happening, but he knew he could not. The **Revoke** must mirror the original form of the **Banish**. It must last, to the microsecond, the

same amount of time. It must begin at the end of the **Banish** and end at the beginning.

Five and a half seconds before the end of the **Revoke**, Tertius Fume finally put two and two together. From a shortlist of seven, he had worked out who Septimus was. He was across the antechamber in a flash, **Passing Through** any ghost that got in his way. If it hadn't been for a particularly grumpy ghost—an unlucky bricklayer who had fallen into Dungeon Number One while repairing the wall—Tertius Fume would have been at Septimus's side in time to disrupt the **Revoke**. But thanks to the bricklayer, he arrived at the very moment the last words—"Overstrand Marcia I"—were being spoken.

Like a coiled spring, Alther leaped to his feet. In a most unghostly fashion, he grabbed Septimus by the hand and headed for the **Darke** vortex that spun in the very center of the antechamber. Tertius Fume raced after them but he was too late. Septimus and Alther were sucked into the vortex, but the still-Banished Tertius Fume was thrown clear and sent spinning across the antechamber like any new ghost hurled from Dungeon Number One.

Septimus and Alther were free. Together they crashed up through the layers of bones and despair, burst out through the sludge and slime, and hurtled into the chimney of Dungeon Number One. Septimus was propeled upward with the force. High above him he saw the iron rungs of the ladder that he must reach. Up, up he went, but just as he was within an arm's length of the lowest rung he felt his momentum fade and Septimus knew that he would not reach it. Soon he would drop back into the mire at the bottom of the dungeon—the mire from which few escaped. Dismayed, Alther saw gravity begin to take its hold on Septimus.

"**Flyte**, Septimus! Think **Flyte!**" the ghost urged, hovering beside Septimus. "Think it, be it, do it. **Flyte!**"

And so, remembering a time on the edge of an icy cliff beside an abyss, Septimus thought of his ancient **Flyte Charm**—now languishing in the bottom of a pot in the Manuscriptorium Vaults—and he felt gravity loose its hold and allow the momentum to continue. The next moment his hand had clutched the icy iron rung at the foot of the ladder and Septimus knew he was safe.

Alther kept pace with Septimus as he climbed the rungs. Far below the howl of the vortex grew ever fainter as he struggled upward and now, at last, he could see the thick iron door at the top, streaked with rust. On the very top rung Septimus halted and, clinging on with one hand, he fumbled in his buttoned pocket for the precious key. It took him many long, tired minutes to undo the buttons, but finally he took out the key, looped its cord around his wrist for safety, pushed it into the lock and turned it.

The door swung open and the **Darke Fog** tumbled in fast, taking Septimus

by surprise and knocking him backward. He would have fallen had not two pairs of strong arms grabbed him and dragged him out of the door like a sack of potatoes.

“*Sep!* You’re safe! And Uncle Alther! Oh, *you’re both safe!*” Jenna’s voice was distant in the **Darke Fog** but there was no mistaking the laughter and relief in it.

Septimus sat propped up against the little brick cone of the top of Dungeon Number One, too tired to do anything but smile. Jenna and Nicko, both swathed in the voluminous witch’s cloak, regarded him with answering smiles. There was nothing anyone needed to say—they were all together again.

But Alther had something to say. “Hmm,” he murmured. “You’ve let the old place get into a bit of a state while I was away.”

Chapter 44

The Wizard Tower



The sick bay Apprentice knocked timidly on the large purple door that guarded Marcia's rooms. The door was on high alert. It did not recognize Rose so it stayed firmly closed and it was Marcia herself who let Rose in. Rose felt quite overwhelmed to be standing in the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's rooms and for a moment forgot what she was meant to say.

"Yes?" asked Marcia anxiously.

"Um . . . excuse me, Madam Overstrand, the duty Wizard says that there is nothing more we can do. She respectfully asks to return the patient at your earliest convenience."

Marcia sighed. She could do without this. "Thank you, Rose. Would you be so kind as to tell the duty Wizard that I shall collect her at the end of my rounds?"

Some minutes later Marcia emerged from her rooms and set off down the stairs, which were now on permanent energy-saving Snail mode. Determined now to keep the Wizards' spirits up, Marcia breezed through the Wizard Tower like wildfire. To keep the **Living SafeShield** going in the face of the continuing onslaught of the **Darke**, she needed every Wizard to concentrate on their **Magyk**. The frequent flashes of orange light that came through the windows were a constant reminder that the **Magykal** energy was draining away. Marcia wasn't sure if the Tower could hold out much longer, and she was afraid that many Wizards felt the same. But she had to make them believe

it was possible.

As she went around spreading encouragement, Marcia felt the air begin to buzz with **Magyk** once more. It was exhilarating, like walking through the aftermath of a storm, with the air fresh and tingling and dusted with faint sparkles of light rain drifting in the breeze. Gone was the gossip, the bickering, and the petty rivalries that always bubbled below the surface of the Wizard Tower—now everyone was working together.

Marcia moved quickly through the Tower. Most Wizards and Apprentices chose to be in a public part of the Tower; few wanted to be alone at such a time. They were scattered about, each focussing on their **Magyk** in ways that were best for them. Many paced the Great Hall, murmuring quietly, so that a purposeful hum rose up through the Tower. Others sat by a window and stared intently at the indigo and purple lights of the **SafeShield**, trying not to wince when a flicker of orange disrupted them.

Having made a point of being seen by as many Wizards as possible, Marcia took the stairs to the sick bay. First she slipped into the **DisEnchanting Chamber** to see Syrah Syara. Marcia stood for a moment saying a silent good-bye—just in case. She knew that Syrah, still deep in **DisEnchantment**, would not survive for long if the **Darke Domaine** entered the Tower.

Marcia emerged shakily to find Jillie Djinn waiting for her at the duty Wizard's desk like a parcel in lost property.

"The duty Wizard sends her apologies but she has just been called to an emergency," said Rose. She fished out a large ledger from underneath the desk. "Um, Madam Overstrand, would you mind signing for the return of the Chief Hermetic Scribe, please?"

Marcia signed somewhat unenthusiastically for Jillie Djinn.

"Miss Djinn is ready to go now," Rose said.

"Thank you, Rose. I'll take her upstairs."

Stopping on every floor and encouraging Wizards as she went, Marcia made her way slowly back up to the top of the Wizard Tower with Jillie Djinn following her like a little dog.

Once the big purple door had closed behind her, Marcia's upbeat manner evaporated. She sat Jillie Djinn on the sofa and then slumped down onto Septimus's stool beside the fire. She took down a small silver box from the chimneypiece and opened it. Inside lay the Wizard Tower half of the **Paired Code**—a thick, shiny silver disc with a circular indentation in the center. The disc was covered with closely packed numbers and symbols; each one was joined to a finely etched line that radiated from the center.

Marcia stared at it for some minutes, thinking what might have been if only she had the Manuscriptorium half of the **Code**. The silver disc taunted her. *Where is my other half?* it seemed to say. Marcia fought down a desire to

Transport out of the Wizard Tower and hunt down Merrin Meredith—how she longed to get her hands on him. But Marcia knew that any **Magyk** that breached the **SafeShield** would let the **Darke** come streaming in—and it would be the end of the Wizard Tower. She was a prisoner of her own defenses.

Angrily Marcia looked up and glared at Jillie Djinn—the Chief Hermetic Scribe was, in her opinion, guilty of gross neglect. If she had not nurtured that snake Merrin Meredith in the Manuscriptorium, none of this would have happened. Marcia shut the silver box shut with a crisp *snap*. Jim Knee jumped. With a loud *snurrrrrf* the jinnee turned and made himself comfortable on the grubby shoulder of Jillie Djinn. The Chief Hermetic Scribe did not react. She sat staring into space, white faced, vacant. A sudden flash of orange lit up jinnee and Djinn, making them look eerily like wax dummies.

At the sight of them a great wave of despair overwhelmed Marcia—not since the night Alther and Queen Cerys were shot had she felt so alone. She wondered where Septimus was now and imagined him lying in a **Darke** trance in an empty alleyway somewhere, freezing in the snow. Marcia blamed herself. It was *her* intransigence that had driven Septimus to Marcellus that afternoon, just as it was *her* stupid mistake that had **Banished** Alther. And now she was going to be the ExtraOrdinary Wizard who lost the Wizard Tower to the **Darke**. It would be *her* name reviled in the future, known only as the last ExtraOrdinary Wizard who had squandered all the precious history and knowledge that was gathered in this beautiful, **Magykal** space. Marcia Overstrand, seven hundred and seventy-sixth ExtraOrdinary Wizard—the one who threw it all away. Marcia let out a sound somewhere between a groan and a sob.

At the top of the Wizard Tower was a large and very ancient Dragon Window that led into Marcia's sitting room. Outside the window was a wide ledge made for the perching of dragons, which was also useful for the perching of ghosts who were unused to exercise. Feeling thankful that as an Apprentice he had once—*very* briefly—climbed out onto the ledge for a dare, Alther hovered there while he recovered enough strength to **DisCompose** himself and go through the window. He peered through the glass but could make out very little. The room was dim, lit only by firelight. There was, he thought, a figure sitting by the fire with her head in her hands, but it was hard to tell.

Some minutes later Alther had regained enough strength to **DisCompose**. He took the ghostly equivalent of a deep breath and walked through the Dragon Window.

Marcia looked up. Her glistening green eyes widened and her mouth fell open. She did not move.

“Marcia . . .” said Alther very gently.

Marcia leaped to her feet and squealed—there was no other word for it. “Alther! *AltherAltherAlther!* It’s you. Tell me, *it is you?*” She raced across the room and, forgetting that he was a ghost, she hurled herself at him, **Passed Through** and cannoned into the Dragon Window.

Alther reeled with the shock of being **Passed Through** and fell back beside Marcia.

“Oh, Alther!” she gasped. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to do that. But . . . oh, I can’t believe you’re here. Oh, you don’t know how *pleased* I am to see you.”

Alther smiled. “I think I do. Probably as pleased as I am to see you.”

Up in the Pyramid Library a windswept Marcia closed the tiny window that led out onto the Pyramid steps. She looked amazed. “I saw his tail! What, for goodness’ sake, is he doing up there?”

“Keeping safe, I suppose. He must have found the expansion point where the **SafeShields** meet and slipped in,” said Alther. “I am guessing that *is* where they meet?”

Marcia nodded. “I’ve not had much luck with sticking things together recently,” she sighed.

“No defense is ever impregnable, Marcia. You seem to have done a pretty good job to me. Besides, a dragon may slip in and out of a **SafeShield** in a way that a Wizard cannot.” He paused. “I am sorry I cannot be more help, Marcia. Septimus thought I could **UnDo** the **Darke Domaine** because unfortunately, Merrin Meredith and I were both Apprenticed to the same Wizard.”

“Heavens, so you were. I’d never thought of it like that,” said Marcia.

“I try not to myself,” said Alther. “Septimus had hoped that the more senior Apprentice could fix the junior’s mess. But as I am no longer Living the rules don’t apply. I only wish they did.” Alther sighed. “So it is down to you, Marcia. Your dragon awaits. As indeed does your Apprentice.”

“And that little piece of vermin.”

“Indeed, although I doubt Merrin Meredith is exactly *awaiting* you.”

A few minutes later Marcia closed the Dragon Window with a bang.

“*He won’t come.* The wretched beast is *ignoring* me!”

“Well, if the dragon won’t come to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, the ExtraOrdinary Wizard must go to the dragon,” said Alther.

“What—*up there?* At the top of the pyramid?”

“It can be done,” said Alther, “take my word for it. I wouldn’t recommend it, but desperate times call for . . .”

“Desperate measures,” said Marcia, steeling herself.

Some minutes later, if anyone had been able to see through the **Darke Fog**

they would have picked out the arresting sight of Marcia Overstrand climbing shakily up the stepped sides of the Golden Pyramid on top of the Wizard Tower. The wind blew her purple cloak out behind her like the wings of a bird as she moved through the fuzz of **Magyk** beneath the **Magykal** indigo and purple lights, following the fainter figure of a ghost—similarly clad in purple—who was guiding her up toward a dragon that roosted on the flat square at the very top of the pyramid.

As soon as Marcia reached the dragon’s tail she grabbed hold of one of the spines. “Got you!” she gasped.

Spit Fyre raised his head sleepily and looked around. *Drat*, he thought, *it’s that irritating one in purple again*. Spit Fyre’s Pilot had never told him to come when the Purple One **Called**, but he had instructed him to let the Purple One fly him. She wasn’t very good at it from what he could remember.

Spit Fyre patiently allowed Marcia to clamber into the Pilot Dip and waited while she **Reversed** her cloak to give some protection from the **Darke Domaine**. When she told him “Spit Fyre, follow that ghost,” he stretched out his wings and, with great control, he flew slowly upward, following Alther as the ghost headed up toward the tiny expansion gap where the four **SafeShields** joined. As he approached, Spit Fyre performed a rare arrow maneuver—he folded his wings close to his body and then flipped into a completely vertical position, leaving Marcia to use the Panic Spine for what it was meant for—hanging on in a panic. With his nose pointing up to the sky, like a dragon-shaped bolt from a crossbow, Spit Fyre shot through the expansion gap at a tremendous speed and left it as undisturbed as he had done when he had arrowed in two days earlier.

Ghost and dragon flew off through the **Darke Fog**, heading for the Maker’s Mile Tally Hut.

Down below in Marcia’s rooms, the big purple door recognized Silas Heap. It opened and Silas stepped inside.

“Marcia?” he whispered.

There was no reply. The firelight flickered, casting weird shadows on the wall of . . . a dwarf and . . . someone balancing a pile of doughnuts on his head?

Silas felt a little spooked. “Marcia—are you there? It’s only me. I came to see if you were all right. I . . . well I thought you looked a bit lonely. Might need some company? *Marcia?*”

There was no reply. The bird had flown.

Chapter 45

Dragons



It's so lovely out." *The* Witch Mother's voice carried like a bell through the **Darke**. From the cover of the Maker's Mile Tally Hut, Jenna, Septimus and Nicko watched the five shadowy figures of the Port Witch Coven stroll by, as carefree as if they were out for a walk on a summer's day. A slightly less carefree figure—Nursie under a **Darke** blanket—scuttled behind them.

"There goes your Coven, Jen," whispered Septimus.

"*Stop it, Sep,*" hissed Jenna. The sight of the five misshapen shadows trolling past made her remember how scared she'd been in Doom Dump. She suddenly felt a little less fond of her witch's cloak as they watched the witches disappear jauntily down the Ceremonial Way.

Jenna, Septimus and Nicko were waiting for Spit Fyre. They had chosen somewhere out of the way where the dragon could easily land. Alther had gone to collect Spit Fyre; he had promised to be as quick as he could, but they all knew so much could go wrong. Every minute in the Tally Hut felt like an hour, but the moment when they saw the shadow of a dragon hovering above felt like forever. No one—not for one second—thought it was Spit Fyre.

So different from the elegant Spit Fyre in flight, the six-winged **Darke** dragon descended clumsily through the **Fog** and, after three attempts, landed with a resounding *thud* on the raised circle that marked the center of the Makers' Mile. It shook the Tally Hut to its foundations.

Jenna, Septimus and Nicko shrank back into the depths of the hut,

convinced that the dragon **Knew** they were there. The frantic beating of its wings during its landing attempts had cleared away the **Fog** and they could see the **Darke** dragon frighteningly clearly. Its massive size was the first shock—it made Spit Fyre seem like a delicate dragonfly in comparison. The dragon squatted awkwardly, shifting its bulk from one tree trunk leg to another, while a white forked tongue flicked in and out of its red slash of a mouth. It shook its lumpen head and rolled its eyes—all six of them—as it looked around. The eyes were arranged so that the dragon had virtually 360-degree vision—its blind spot was a mere ten degrees compared with the standard dragon blind spot of ninety degrees. The all-seeing eyes swiveled like glistening red ball bearings as the dragon surveyed the ramshackle remains of the market. Pointed spines barbed like fish hooks ranged down the dragon’s back, and its four huge feet were equipped with curved black talons, each one shaped like—and as sharp as—a scimitar. It was a terrifying sight, but the most horrifying thing of all was that one talon had speared a scrap of blue cloth, which had something red and meaty stuck to it. Jenna covered her face. That, she thought, had once been someone, someone who lived in the Castle—someone like her.

A sharp nudge from Septimus made Jenna look up again.

“Look,” whispered Septimus. “In front of the Pilot Spine. *There’s someone there.*”

The **Darke** dragon’s Pilot Spine was, like Spit Fyre’s, the tallest of all the spines. But unlike Spit Fyre’s, which was solid and straight, with a rounded top, it curved forward with a razor-sharp barb on the end of it. Sitting in the Pilot Dip was a figure swathed in grubby scribe robes. Jenna knew exactly who it was.

“*Merrin Meredith,*” she whispered.

“Yeah,” said Septimus. “He’s gotten serious now, hasn’t he? He’s not just an irritating little tick anymore—he’s for real.”

“I can hardly believe it,” whispered Jenna. “He’s so pathetic, but he’s caused all *this* to happen.”

“It’s the **Darke**, Jen. He’s got that ring and now he’s got its power. And he’s so stupid, he doesn’t care what he does with it. He just wants to destroy everything.”

“You in particular.”

“Me?”

“Beetle said he was ranting on about you, Sep. You know, about how he was Septimus Heap first. How he was going to get you. Then he’d be Septimus Heap. With a ten-times-better dragon.”

“Yeah. Well, he’s got a ten times *bigger* one, that’s for sure.”

“Not better though.”

“No way. Spit Fyre’s the best.”

Suddenly the **Darke** Dragon raised all six wings and brought them down fast; a terrific rush of wind swooshed into the Tally Hut along with a foul smell that sent the occupants reeling. It also dispersed the re-gathering **Fog** and gave them a clear view of what happened next. The dragon shuffled awkwardly around and began a lumbering run down the broad space of the Ceremonial Way, its wings rising and falling like black sails. They watched it go, getting faster and faster until it reached the Palace gates, where it finally took off, rose slowly into the **Fog** and disappeared into the night.

“Phew,” breathed Nicko. “It’s gone.”

“I was so scared Spit Fyre would come while that thing was here,” whispered Jenna.

Septimus nodded. He had been too, although he had not dared to think it. He believed what Aunt Zelda always said: *the thought is the seed for deed*.

But a few minutes later something happened that Septimus had definitely not thought of: the **Darke** dragon came back. It landed with a thud, the Tally Hut shook, the red eyes swiveled and everyone held their breath. And then once more it lumbered into a turn and galumphed down the Ceremonial Way until at last it took off. Three times the **Darke** dragon came back and each time the occupants of the Tally Hut prayed that Spit Fyre would not choose that moment to arrive. Each time they became more frightened, convinced that the dragon knew they were there—why else would it keep returning? It was not until the third time when the dragon was a little more skillfully heading into his takeoff that Jenna realized what was going on.

“He’s practicing,” she whispered. “It’s the only space in the Castle where a dragon that big can land and take off.”

And they all knew what the dragon was practicing for—the assault on the Wizard Tower.

A few minutes after the **Darke** dragon had taken off for the fourth time, the smaller, more delicate—and infinitely more welcome—two-winged shape of Spit Fyre came down through the **Fog**, heralded by the swooping figure of Alther, arms outstretched in his favorite flying mode.

Spit Fyre landed lightly on the very spot the **Darke** dragon had so recently vacated. He sniffed the air uneasily, in the way a house cat might sniff a pile of lion poo left outside its cat flap. The next thing Spit Fyre knew, three figures were hurtling toward him, one of which was his Pilot. Spit Fyre felt relieved. It had been a nightmare flying with The Purple One. Now she would get off and let his Pilot sit in his rightful place.

The Purple One, however, did not get off.

Pleased as he was to see Marcia once again, Septimus was not prepared to let her fly Spit Fyre. They needed to get away fast and he doubted her ability to do it. He got to the point right away.

“Get off!” he yelled through the weight of the **Darke Fog**.

“Hurry up, Marcia,” said Alther, who shared Septimus’s opinion of Marcia’s flying skills. “Get off and let the Pilot fly his dragon.”

“I’m *getting* off. My cloak’s caught. Oh these *stupid* spines . . .”

Septimus was hopping from one foot to another in impatience. He yanked the **Reversed** cloak off a small spine and Marcia clambered down. She surprised Septimus with a fierce hug, helped him up to his seat in front of the Pilot Spine and then took Jenna’s place behind him in the Navigator seat. Jenna stifled her irritation—this was neither the time nor the place to argue about where she sat—and she and Nicko squeezed on behind Marcia.

Septimus took Spit Fyre up fast with Alther keeping pace alongside. Marcia tapped him on the shoulder.

“Manuscriptorium!” she yelled into the clear air created by the beating of Spit Fyre’s wings.

Septimus wanted to get Spit Fyre out of danger. He most definitely did not want to fly to the Manuscriptorium. “Why?” he yelled.

“Merrin Meredith. **Code!**”

“Merrin Meredith’s *cold*?”

“Not cold, **Code! Paired Code**. He’s got it! He’s at the Manuscriptorium!”

Now Septimus understood.

“He’s not there!” he yelled. At that moment a massive shadow cruised overhead, accompanied by a foul downdraft of air. “He’s up there!”

They all looked up. The wake of the **Darke** Dragon cleared the **Fog** just enough for them all to see the cruel talons, black and bloodied against the white underside of its belly. For the first time ever Septimus heard Marcia say a very rude word.

“I’m taking Spit Fyre out after that *thing*,” said Marcia. “I’ll get Merrin Meredith if it’s the last thing I do.”

Septimus thought it probably would be.

“Septimus, fly Spit Fyre back to the Wizard Tower at once. Land him on the dragon platform. You three can get off.”

Septimus had no intention of getting off his dragon, but he knew better than to argue just then. He turned Spit Fyre around and headed back to the Wizard Tower. Spit Fyre arrowed through the join and took them into the bright, buzzing, **Magykal** air that surrounded the Wizard Tower. He landed perfectly on the dragon ledge.

“Wait there, I’ll open the window,” said Marcia, slipping down from the Navigator seat. She ushered Jenna and Nicko inside and stood waiting impatiently for Septimus to relinquish his place in the Pilot Dip.

“Hurry up, Septimus. Let me get on.”

Septimus did not move.

“Septimus, get off. I am ordering you!”

“And I am refusing,” said Septimus. “*I’ll* get him.”

“No, Septimus. Get off at once.”

The stalemate might have lasted a while had not the orange warning lights zipping up and down the outside of the **SafeShield** suddenly stopped flashing.

Marcia gasped. “The **SafeShield**’s failing! Septimus get off! Now!”

The blue and purple skin of the **SafeShield** began to take on a dull, reddish hue. A movement above caught Septimus’s eye—tendrils of **Darke Fog** were beginning to drift down through the join. Suddenly a great curved black claw reached down through the gap.

Septimus knew what he had to do.

“Up, Spit Fyre,” he said. “Up!”

Before Marcia could do anything to stop him, Pilot and dragon flew up through the dim glow of the failing **Magyk** to meet dragon and pilot.

Chapter 46

Synchronicity



Septimus and Spit Fyre burst through the top of the **SafeShield** and Spit Fyre's nose spine slammed into the **Darke** dragon's soft white underbelly with a jarring thud. Spit Fyre was sent reeling backward, but the **Darke** dragon seemed no more upset than if it had been stung by a wasp.

Spit Fyre recovered fast and snorted with excitement. He was at the age when, in ancient times when the world was full of dragons, he would have been looking for his first fight. In those days the dragon community would not have regarded him as an adult until he had fought another dragon—and won. And so, deep down in his dragon brain, Spit Fyre *wanted* a fight.

So did the **Darke** dragon's pilot. Merrin leaned out between the bristling spines, his eyes wild with excitement. Using a popular Castle insult for Apprentices, he yelled, "I'll get you, caterpillar boy!"

"No chance, rat face!"

Merrin pointed his left thumb at Septimus like a pistol. "You're *dead*. And your toy dragon. Yeah!"

In answer Septimus and Spit Fyre shot up past the **Darke** dragon before it had time to register what was happening. They whizzed by so close that Septimus could see Merrin's zits blazing out of his pale face and the look of hatred in his eyes—which shocked him more than the close-up view of the **Darke** dragon. As Spit Fyre shot past, Septimus made a very rude sign at Merrin. He left behind a stream of obscenities hemorrhaging into the **Darke**

Fog.

Septimus and Spit Fyre stopped at the very edge of the **Fog** and looked back. Far below them, at the bottom of the clear tunnel of air that their wake had created, they saw the huge bulk of the **Darke** dragon. Behind it they could see the fading blue and purple **Magykal** glow of the Wizard Tower changing slowly to a dull red.

As they hovered above the **Darke Domaine**, suspended between the stars above and the blanket of silence below, a stillness spread through Septimus and his dragon and together they entered a state that is much sought after by dragon Imprintors but rarely achieved. It is known in dragon manuals (see *Draxx*, page 1141) as **Synchronicity**. Dragon and Imprintor became **One**, thinking and acting in perfect harmony. They hovered for a moment on the edge of the **Darke Domaine** and looked down at the **Darke** dragon far below at the end of the trail They had left in the **Fog**. They knew they must use the line of sight while they had it.

Suddenly They tipped forward and went into a nosedive. Septimus slammed into the broad, flat spine in front of him and wedged there, exhilarated as the air rushed past. They hurtled down like a bullet falling to earth and saw Merrin looking up, yelling and kicking at his dragon. In a beautifully controlled movement, the **Synchronized** pair decelerated, swooped to the left and headed for the rear set of the **Darke** dragon's wings. Their nose spine ripped through them. In a shower of splintering wing bones and folds of foul flapping skin they shot out the other side, wheeled around and stopped to view their handiwork.

The **Darke** dragon tumbled out of control. Its pilot's terrified screams were absorbed by the **Fog** as it catapulted down toward the Wizard Tower. With a dull *boom* that traveled through the **Fog** like distant thunder, the **Darke** dragon slammed against the failing **SafeShield**, sending sparks of **Magyk** into the air and setting off a chain of red distress lights that rippled down to the ground like a lightning strike. Tail flailing, its four undamaged wings beating frantically, the **Darke** dragon bounced off the **SafeShield** and fell toward the rooftops of the houses that looked out over the Wizard Tower courtyard. The **Synchronized** ones watched triumphantly—They hadn't dreamed it would be this easy to get rid of the **Darke** dragon.

It wasn't. Four wings are enough to fly a dragon—even one as cumbersome as the great beast that Merrin had **Engendered**. In a hail of smashed chimney pots and roof tiles, his dragon righted itself, perched for a moment on a roof, and, as the rafters caved in under its weight, it rose up into the air, and its six eyes locked onto Spit Fyre. The next moment the **Darke** dragon was heading straight for Them, mouth wide open, revealing three rows of long, tightly knit teeth like needles.

They waited, daring the dragon to come dangerously near. And when it was

so close They could see the tiny black pupils in all six red eyes (but neither of the pilot's—he had his eyes tightly closed) They shot around behind the monster's tail into the ten-degree blind spot, arrowed down underneath the white belly, and then zoomed up in front of the boxy head—which was still staring upward, wondering where They had gone. And then They swiped it hard on the nose with the barb of Their tail. *Wap*. Dragons' noses are a sensitive spot and a roar of pain followed Them as They shot out of reach once more.

“I'll get you for that!” They heard Merrin shouting as They zoomed around in a tight circle, way out of reach.

“You wish!” They yelled.

And so They taunted the **Darke** dragon and its pilot: diving down, flying circles around it, swooping out of sight only to reappear in exactly the opposite direction from where the dragon was looking. They landed sideswipes with Their tail; They stabbed the underbelly with Their nose spine; They even caught the tops of another two wings in a short burst of **Fyre** that They managed to summon from an empty fire stomach. The **Darke** dragon responded to every move—but about five seconds too late. Often it was countering the last attack while the next one was underway, and before long the monster was bellowing with fury and frustration and its pilot was whimpering in terror.

After some minutes, breathless and buzzing with excitement, they swooped up through the **Darke Fog** for a brief consultation. Hovering on the very edge of the dome of the **Darke Domaine**, buffeted by the breeze, They breathed in fresh night air untainted by the **Darke**. Above Them shone a glitter dust of stars and below them the tendrils of **Fog** waved like seaweed in an ocean current. They felt exhilarated, on top of the world.

But far below the **Darke** dragon still lurked. They decided it was time to lure the monster out of his **Domaine**. They figured that the dragon was now so frantic to get hold of Them that it would follow Them anywhere. They took a deep breath of clear air, then dropped down into the **Fog** once more. They saw the six blazing red pinpoints of Their quarry's eyes—and headed straight for them.

Taking care that the **Darke** dragon always had Them in his line of sight, They began a cat-and-mouse game with Merrin and his monster, venturing temptingly near for swipes of the scimitar claws—but never quite near enough to make contact. Once or twice the claws came a little too close for comfort and They felt the breeze ruffle Their hair as the blades flew past Their head. And so, taunting and teasing, parrying and feinting like a skilled swordsman, They lured the **Darke** dragon onward and upward—with no resistance from its whimpering pilot.

They shot out of the **Darke Fog** like a bullet. Focused only on the tempting

barb of Their tail, which was less than a wing's breadth in front of its nose spine, the **Darke** dragon followed. It hit the cold clear air like a wall. Stunned, it stopped dead. For the first time in its short and nasty life it was without a **Darke** safety net—there was nothing but the cold black river running below. Its pilot opened his eyes, looked down and screamed.

Feeling its powers begin to trickle away, the **Darke** dragon threw back its head and bellowed with distress. Released from the muffling effect of the **Darke Domaine** the noise was loud and terrible. It sounded out across the countryside and sent people for miles around diving for cover under their beds. Far below, in Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House, Sarah Heap and Sally Mullin looked anxiously out into the night.

"Oh, Sally," whispered Sarah. "It's so *awful* . . ."

Sally put her arm around Sarah's shoulders. There was nothing she could say.

Outside, beside the newly returned *Annie*, Simon Heap was pacing the pontoon with Marcellus Pye. Simon had been telling Marcellus that he had decided to go into the Castle. He had so much to offer, so much knowledge of the **Darke**. At last he had an opportunity to put it to use for *good*—and that was what he intended to do. But Marcellus had not heard a word Simon said. His last sight of Septimus in the little coracle spinning into the whirlpool haunted him; it played over and over in his head and he could not escape it. The more he thought about it, the more Marcellus doubted Septimus had survived. He had led his dearest Apprentice to his death. Marcellus felt utterly wretched.

The **Darke** dragon's roar cut through his thoughts. Marcellus looked up to see Spit Fyre, illuminated by the lights shining from Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House, dropping out of the night sky. The dragon had come to exact revenge and Marcellus didn't care. He deserved it.

Sally Mullin saw Marcellus looking up into the sky. "Some-thing's going on up there," she whispered.

"I wish Simon would come inside," Sarah said. "I wish . . ." But right then Sarah wished for far too many things to even begin, although at the top of the list was a wish to see Septimus again. To take her mind off the hundred awful things that Sarah had imagined might have happened to Septimus, she watched Marcellus.

"He's a bit of a drama queen, isn't he?" Sally whispered mischievously, hoping to cheer Sarah up.

Right then Marcellus did look rather dramatic. The light from the lamps in Sally's long line of windows caught the gold embellishments on his cloak as he raised his arms up in the air, hands outstretched. They saw him suddenly spin around and shout something to Simon, who came running.

"What *is* going on?" muttered Sally. "Oh! Oh my goodness. Sarah! Sarah!"

It's your Septimus. Look!"

Sarah gasped. Hurling toward the river and—she was convinced—to certain death, was her youngest son on his dragon. And when she saw the horrific shape of the **Darke** monster that was chasing Them, Sarah screamed so loudly that Sally's ears rang. Sarah and Sally watched the **Darke** dragon diving like a hawk after a sparrow, its razor claws poised and ready to grab, and when it drew so close to Spit Fyre that it must surely tear the dragon and its rider to pieces any moment, Sarah could bear it no longer—she gave a cry of despair and buried her head in her hands.

A few feet above the surface of the river the **Synchronized** pair suddenly—as planned—changed course, but in the moment They slowed, the longest claw on the **Darke** dragon's right foot made contact with Their head. Sally suppressed a scream. It would not do Sarah any good right now. She watched Spit Fyre reel back, wings frantically beating the air. Seconds later a massive plume of river water rose into the air.

The **Darke** dragon hit the surface and sank like a house.

Sally Mullin gave a great whoop of excitement. "You can look now," she told Sarah as Spit Fyre flew back shakily just above the surface of the river. "They're all right." Sarah burst into tears. It had all been too much.

Sally comforted Sarah while keeping one eye on events outside. When she saw Septimus jump into the middle of the fast-flowing river she decided not to tell Sarah.

* * *

The freezing water took Septimus's breath away. He swam quickly toward Merrin, who was flailing about in the water, yelling, "Help me! Help me! I can't swim! Help!" This was not strictly true, for Merrin could doggie paddle a few yards, although not enough to reach safety from the middle of the river.

Septimus was a strong swimmer and after the night exercises in the Young Army, swimming in the river did not frighten him. He grasped Merrin around the chest from behind and began the slow swim to the safety of Sally Mullin's pontoon. Above him Spit Fyre, dripping blood from a deep tear on the top of his head, circled anxiously, but on instructions from Septimus he flew off and landed on the wide stones of the New Quay. The current in the river was sweeping Septimus past Sally Mullin's pontoon and he knew better than to fight it. He swam diagonally across, heading always for the bank, with Merrin a dead weight in his arms.

Simon watched anxiously. He reflected that not so long ago he would have been pleased to see his youngest brother struggling in the icy river, and he felt ashamed of his old self. He saw where the current was taking Septimus and his burden, so he set off down to the next easy landfall, the New Quay where Spit Fyre had just landed. As Simon jogged down the path he heard a yell

from the water followed by some wild splashing. He raced to the quay and saw Septimus struggling with Merrin some yards away—the exact distance, in fact, that Merrin could swim.

Merrin appeared to have miraculously recovered and was now pushing Septimus below the water. Septimus struggled, but the delicate fabric of his **Darke Disguise** was torn and ragged and it was no match for the power of the Two-Faced Ring, which strengthened tenfold any attempt at murder. As Merrin pushed the spluttering and fighting Septimus once more beneath the water, Simon dove in.

With the power of the Two-Faced Ring—and Merrin himself—fully occupied in drowning Septimus, Simon’s old-fashioned punch to Merrin’s head had the desired effect. Merrin let go of Septimus, took in a huge mouthful of water and began to sink. Septimus looked at his rescuer, shocked.

“You okay?” asked Simon.

Septimus nodded. “Yeah. Thanks, Simon.”

Merrin gave a gurgle and slipped beneath the water.

“I’ll get him,” gasped Simon, teeth chattering as the icy cold began to take effect. “You get to the steps.”

But Septimus did not trust Merrin. He swam alongside Simon as he towed Merrin back and when they reached the New Quay, Septimus helped him haul Merrin out of the water and up the steps. They lay Merrin facedown on the stones like a dead fish.

“We’ll have to get the water out,” said Simon. “I’ve seen them do it at the Port.” He kneeled beside Merrin, placed his hands on Merrin’s ribcage and began to push gently but firmly. Merrin coughed faintly. Then he coughed again, spluttered and suddenly retched up a huge amount of river water. Something went *clink* onto the stone. At Septimus’s feet lay a small silver disc with a raised central boss. Trying not to think about where it had just come from, Septimus picked it up. It lay heavy in his palm, glinting in the light from the single torch burning on the quay.

“It must have hurt swallowing that,” he said.

Simon, however, was not surprised. When Merrin had been Simon’s assistant at the Observatory he had swallowed a variety of metal objects. But that was not a time in his life Simon wanted to remember—or wanted Septimus to remember either. So he said nothing.

At their feet Merrin stirred. “Give it back,” he moaned weakly. “It’s *mine*.”

Both Septimus and Simon ignored him.

Simon looked at the disc lying in Septimus’s palm. “It’s the **Paired Code!**” he said excitedly. “We must get this to Marcia at once.”

Septimus did not like the sound of “we.” “I’ll take it,” he said, putting the disc into his Apprentice belt.

“But *I* know how to use it,” protested Simon.

Septimus was dismissive. “So does Marcia,” he said.

“How can she? She doesn’t know where to begin.” Simon sounded exasperated.

“Of course she does,” snapped Septimus.

The sound of running footsteps broke up the argument. Sarah, Sally and Marcellus were racing down to the New Quay. Not wishing to become embroiled in a reunion just then, Septimus gave them a hasty wave and, clutching the **Paired Code**, he ran off toward Spit Fyre, who looked triumphant. He had won his first fight. He was now a fully fledged, adult dragon.

A few seconds later Septimus and Spit Fyre were airborne. Drops of dragon blood marked their flight path all the way to the Wizard Tower.

Speechless with frustration, Simon watched Spit Fyre and his pilot disappear up over the **Darke Fog**.

“Simon.” Sarah gently touched his arm. “Simon love, you’re frozen. Come inside. Sally’s got the fire lit.”

Simon felt grateful that she hadn’t even mentioned Septimus. He looked at his mother, who was herself shivering despite one of Sally’s blankets thrown around her shoulders. He felt so sad for her, but right then there was nothing he could do about it—except what he was about to do.

“I’m sorry, Mum,” he said gently, “I can’t. I’ve got to go. You go back with Sally. Tell Lucy I . . . I’ll see you all later.” And he walked briskly away, striding up the well-worn path to the South Gate.

Sarah watched him go without a protest, which worried Sally. Sarah seemed defeated, she thought. Sally led her friend back to the café and sat her down beside the fire. Nicko, Lucy, Rupert and Maggie gathered around her but Sarah neither moved nor spoke for the rest of the night.

Marcellus Pye put the shivering, bedraggled Merrin in one of Sally’s more dismal, windowless bunkhouses with a pile of dry blankets. As he went to lock the door his prisoner glared at him.

“L-Loser!” Merrin spat, his nose streaming as his cold returned with a vengeance. “Your st-stupid little key won’t keep *m-me* in.” He jabbed his left thumb at Marcellus. The green faces on the Two-Faced Ring shone malevolently. “H-He who wears *this* is indestructible. *Atchoo!* I wear it, therefore *I* am indestructible. *I* can do what I like. *B-Buckethead!*”

Marcellus did not deign to reply. He closed the door and locked it. He looked at Sally’s flimsy tin key and reflected that even without the power of the Two-Faced Ring, Merrin could probably get out—but for the moment, freezing cold and in shock from nearly drowning, he didn’t think Merrin was in a state to do anything.

On the chilly footpath outside the bunkhouse, Marcellus kept guard, pacing

up and down to keep warm, his shoes flip-flapping on the frosty stone. Over and over again Merrin's defiant words came back to him. Unlike much of what Merrin said, they were true. While he wore the Ring, Marcellus knew that Merrin himself was indeed indestructible—and free to wreak havoc. There was no doubt in Marcellus's mind that while Merrin had the ring, the Castle and all who lived there were in grave danger.

Marcellus thought of the shivering, sniffing boy alone in the bunkhouse. A feeling of pity flashed through him but he pushed it to one side. He made himself remember the Two-Faced Ring glinting on the taunting thumb and he knew that as soon as Merrin recovered he would be wreaking revenge. There was little time to lose—something had to be done. *Fast. Now.*

Marcellus walked briskly up the steps to the Tea and Ale House. He wondered how sharp Sally's kitchen knives were . . .

Chapter 47

The Great UnDoing



Marcia was about to put the **Paired Code** together. Her tiny study was packed and the atmosphere was electric. Even Nicko, who was not hugely interested in **Magyk**, was watching intently.

The tiny study window glowed an eerie red with the dimming of the **SafeShield**, but the study itself was bright with the light from a forest of candles dripping from a tall candelabrum set on Marcia's desk. Two books—*The Undoing of the **Darkenesse*** and *The **Darke** Index*—lay open on Marcia's desk. In the shadow of the books a small silver box and a tiny silver disc rested on a piece of purple velvet.

Alther had a bird's-eye view. To avoid the danger of being **Passed Through**, the ghost was sitting on the top step of a library ladder. He was watching the process with great interest. The use of the **Paired Code** was something Alther had known about in theory only. In his time as ExtraOrdinary Wizard both books that held the keys to deciphering the **Code** had long been lost. Marcia had found *The Undoing of the **Darkenesse*** in Aunt Zelda's cottage a few years back and she knew that somewhere within its pages lay **The Great UnDoing**—the legendary **Anti-Darke** incantation that practitioners of the **Darke** feared above all else. But its words were spread randomly throughout the book; to find them, the index to the book—*The **Darke** Index*—was required.

However, it was not that simple. Uncovering **The Great UnDoing** required

more than merely using an index—it required using the correct pages of the index. This was where the **Paired Code** came in. In order to know which sections of *The Darke Index* gave the right sequence of page and word numbers in *The Undoing of the Darkeness*, the **Paired Code** had to be read. Correctly.

And now that was about to happen. Under the rapt attention of Silas, Septimus, Jenna and Nicko—and the perching Alther—Marcia began to put the **Paired Code** together.

Marcia lifted out the Wizard Tower half of the **Code** and placed it on the velvet square on which its **Pair**—recently used to much less salubrious surroundings—lay waiting. She picked up the much smaller Manuscriptorium **Code** and placed its boss into the central indentation of the Wizard Tower **Code**. There was a brilliant blue spark and suddenly the Manuscriptorium **Code** was floating a fraction of a millimeter above the Wizard Tower **Code**. The Manuscriptorium **Code** now began to spin. Slowly at first, then faster and faster it went until it was no more than a flash of spinning light. There was a sharp *click* and the spinning disc stopped dead.

Everyone craned their heads for a closer look. The discs seemed to have fused into one and it was clear that the lines that radiated out from the Manuscriptorium **Code** joined up with some of those on the Wizard Tower **Code**. Each one of these led to a symbol. There was an awed hush. These were the symbols that would begin **The Great UnDoing** that would **UnDo** the **Darke Domaine** and set the Castle free.

Marcia got out her **Enlarging Glass** and peered at the symbols.

“Ready, Septimus?” she asked.

In his hand Septimus had his precious Apprentice diary, his pen poised at the top of a clean page. “Ready,” he said.

The red glow from the failing **SafeShield** was beginning to fill the study, drowning out the candlelight. It fell on the smooth, blank page of Septimus’s diary and cast threatening shadows across the room. Septimus knew it would not be long before the **SafeShield** was breached—it could happen any minute now, he thought. He waited, poised to write down the sequence of symbols that would lead them to **The Great UnDoing**. Why didn’t Marcia begin reading out the symbols? There was no time to lose.

Jenna had guessed why but she hoped—desperately—that she was wrong. Unable to bear the suspense, she decided to test out her new *Right to Know*.

“But Marcia, how do you know which symbol to start with?”

Aware that she now had to answer all the Princess-in-Waiting’s questions “*truthfully, fully and without delay*,” Marcia looked up at Jenna and met her gaze.

“I don’t,” she said.

The little room fell horribly quiet as the implications of Marcia’s reply sank

in.

Simon pushed his way through the **Darke Fog**, terrified that at any moment a **Thing** would recognize him. He'd been lucky on the South Gate. The **Thing** on guard had done no more than stretch out a bony arm and pull him in without even looking at him. He knew he might not be so lucky next time. Simon wished that Lucy had not made him throw away his **Darke Robes**—"disgusting old things," she had called them. Right now he could have used them. Without their protection, the **Darke Fog** was suffocating—far worse than it had been in the Palace when it was still new. Now it had gained strength from all those it had overcome and it pressed down on Simon like a smothering pillow, closing off his ears and eyes, making each breath a huge effort.

Feeling as though he were walking underwater in lead boots, Simon struggled up Wizard Way, heading for the telltale red light of the of the Wizard Tower's failing **SafeShield**. As he waded past the Manuscriptorium he saw dim shadows of **Things** emerging and heading for the Great Arch, where they were gathering, waiting for the moment when the Barricade would fail. In a nightmare of slow motion Simon crossed to the other side of the Way and pushed on down the narrow lane that ran around the Wizard Tower courtyard wall. He was heading for the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's **Hidden** side gate, which was not visible from the outside and so, he hoped, would not attract the attention of any **Things**.

When Simon arrived at the lintel that marked the presence of the **Hidden** gate his head was spinning and he felt as though the **Fog** was inside his brain. He longed to rest his heavy limbs, to lie down for a moment, just a moment . . . he leaned against the wall and felt not stones but wood and a latch beneath him. Slowly his eyes closed and he began to slide to the ground.

Strange things happen in the dying phases of a **Living SafeShield**. The separate components begin to make their own decisions. So when Simon slid down the **Hidden** gate it **knew** it needed to let him in. It swung open and he half rolled in. The gate did a nifty flick, pushed him inside and closed as fast as it could. A few tendrils of **Fog** curled in with him but stopped when the gate became one with the wall once more.

The clear air inside the Wizard Tower courtyard soon woke Simon up. He got shakily to his feet and took a deep breath. He looked up at the Tower rearing high above him, almost dark now—the only light the red of the dying **SafeShield**—and he felt quite overawed. Shakily he headed across to the wide marble steps that led up to the silver doors that guarded the Tower.

Once again the **Living SafeShield** recognized help when it saw it. The tall silver doors opened noiselessly and Simon, heart beating fast, stepped into the Great Hall. As the doors swung closed, Simon took stock. He could hardly

believe that he was actually inside Wizard Tower. For so long he had dreamed that one day he would set foot in the Tower and rescue it from danger, and now that that was exactly what he was doing, it did not seem real.

But things in the Wizard Tower had changed. Simon had not been in the Great Hall since he was a boy. He remembered it as a bright, joyful place buzzing with **Magyk**, with beautiful pictures flitting across the walls and a fascinating floor that wrote your name when you stepped on it. He had loved the mysterious smell of the **Magyk** and the sharpness of the air, and the purposeful hum of the gently turning silver spiral stairs. And now it was all very nearly gone.

The lights were low and dull, the walls dark, the floor blank and the silver spiral stairs were **Stopped**. Every-thing was winding down. Shadowy figures of Wizards and Apprentices were scattered about the Great Hall, the younger ones wandering anxiously to and fro, the older ones slumped with exhaustion as they concentrated on the uphill struggle of adding their tiny piece of **Magykal** energy to the **SafeShield**.

Hildegarde stepped out of the shadows. Pale and drawn, with dark circles under her eyes, she watched Simon walk to the stairs. She did not stop or question him. It was a waste of energy. If the Tower had let him in, he was here for a reason. She just hoped it was a good one.

Simon ran up the **Stopped** stairs. Up through the darkened floors he occasionally heard a weary murmuring of a **Magykal** chant, but mostly he found nothing but silence. Outside he could see the red light fading fast and he knew that once it had gone, the **Darke Domaine** would enter the Wizard Tower. Simon did not know how long that would take but he guessed it was minutes rather than hours.

On the twentieth floor he jumped off the stairs, ran along the broad corridor that led to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's purple door and threw himself against it.

Inside the study Marcia was dictating the symbols that the lines on the Manuscriptorium **Code** had picked out. She had decided that the only thing to do was to begin with each one in turn. There were forty-nine matches. This meant there were forty-nine words in **The Great UnDoing**—and forty-nine possible beginnings, of which there was no way of telling which was the right one. As **The Great UnDoing** was an ancient incantation, Marcia knew that it would not necessarily make any sense, so there would be no clue as to what might be the first word. It was a huge risk, but she had no alternative. It was just possible they might find the correct order right away. It was the only chance they had and Marcia knew she had to take it.

And so she was rapidly dictating. “Zero, star, three, **Magyk**, labyrinth, gold, **Ankh**, square, duck—yes, I *did* say duck—two, twin, seven, bridge—*oh!*” Marcia looked up suddenly.

“My door . . . it’s let someone in,” she whispered. “There’s **Darke** on them. From *outside*.”

There was a sharp intake of breath. “I’ll go and check it out,” said Silas, heading for the study door.

“Silas, wait.” Alther got up from his perch. “I’ll go. **Bar** the door when I’ve gone.”

“Thank you, Alther,” said Marcia as the ghost quickly **DisComposed** himself and walked through the door. “Now, where were we? Oh, *drat*, I don’t know. Septimus, I’ll start again. Zero, star, three, **Magyk**, labyrinth, gold, **Ankh**, square, duck, two, twin, seven, bridge, spiral, four, ellipse, plus, tower—*Alther, is that you?*”

“Yes. **UnBar** the door please, Marcia. Quickly. I have someone to see you.”

Everyone exchanged questioning glances. Who could it be?

Alther ushered in Simon to a stunned silence. “Before you say anything, Marcia, this young man has some important information. He knows where to begin.”

“*He does?*” Marcia frowned. “Alther, there are other **Invocations** on this **Code**—and some are downright dangerous. How can I be sure he will tell me where to begin the *correct* one?”

Septimus, Nicko and Jenna looked at each other. *Other invocations?* So Marcia was gambling that they would reach the right one first. Things were even worse than they had thought.

“I’ve known him since he was born,” said Alther. “I believe you can trust him.”

“You *can* trust me. I promise,” said Simon quietly.

Marcia looked at Simon. He was soaking wet, trembling with cold, and there was desperation in his eyes—a desperation that mirrored exactly what she was feeling that very moment. She made her decision.

“Very well, Simon,” she said. “Would you show us where **The Great UnDoing** begins?”

And so Simon found himself somewhere he had never thought possible. At the top of the Wizard Tower, sitting at the desk of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, surrounded by fabled **Magykal** books and objects—including, he noticed, his very own **Sleuth**. And now, watched by his father and his youngest brother, he was about to tell the ExtraOrdinary Wizard something that would save the Castle.

“The starting point is given in the index of *The Darke Index*,” he said.

With trembling hands Simon picked up the book. For a moment it felt like an old friend, until he remembered that, in truth, it was an old enemy. The countless cold, lonely, and sometimes terrifying nights he had spent reading it came back to him and he remembered the last time he had held it when, in an

early attempt to give up the **Darke**, he had stuffed it into the back of a cupboard and locked the door. He had never dreamed that the next time he held it he would be in the Wizard Tower.

Gingerly he opened *The Darke Index* at the inside of the back cover. Muttering a short incantation, he ran his finger across the well-worn endpaper and, as he did so, letters began to appear beneath his fingers.

An irritated *tut* came from Marcia. A simple **Reveal**—why hadn't she thought of that?

Beneath Simon's moving finger an alphabetical list began to **Reveal** itself. His finger slowed at G and everyone waited, but **The Great UnDoing** was not listed. Simon's finger slowed at the T but **The Great UnDoing** was not there. A palpable lack of confidence began to fill the little room and when Simon reached the letter U his hand began to shake. Suddenly "**UnDoing. Great. The.**" appeared. Smiling with relief, Simon handed the **Revealed** index to Marcia.

"**UnDoing. Great. The.** Begin with **Magyk**, end with **Fyre**," she read aloud. "Thank you, Simon."

Simon nodded. He did not trust himself to speak.

Marcia sat down. She put her spectacles on and opened *The Darke Index*. "Now, Septimus, read the symbols out to me again, beginning with **Magyk**. Slowly, please."

And so Septimus went through the list. At each symbol he paused while Marcia quickly leafed through the pages, grubby and grease-stained from Merrin's sticky hands. Each page had one of the symbols at the beginning of the text. At the foot of the page—looking to the casual observer like page numbers—were two numbers. Marcia noted down the numbers, then said briskly, "Next." It seemed to take forever but it was only a matter of minutes before Marcia had a column of forty-nine pairs of numbers.

Marcia handed Septimus the numbers and then she opened *The Undoing of the Darkenesse*.

"Read the numbers out to me please, Septimus."

The red glow suffusing the study went out like a light. There was a collective gasp.

"**SafeShield**'s out," Marcia said grimly.

* * *

Far below, the Barricade smashed to the ground and the first **Thing** walked across it, into the Wizard Tower courtyard. Twelve more followed, along with a stream of **Darke Fog**.

At the top of the Tower Septimus read out the first number of the first pair. "Fourteen."

With urgent fingers Marcia flipped the thick pages of *The Undoing of the Darknesse* to page fourteen.

Septimus read out the second number of the first pair. “Ninety-eight.”

As fast as she could Marcia began to count along the words on page fourteen until she reached the ninety-eighth word.

“Let.” It seemed a very small word for all the trouble finding it.

And so, agonizingly slowly, Marcia began to put together **The Great UnDoing**.

Outside the Wizard Tower, on the topmost marble step, a **Thing** reached out a long bony finger and pushed against the tall silver doors. They swung open like shed doors left unlatched in a summer breeze. The **Thing** walked into the Wizard Tower and the **Darke Domaine** tumbled in after it. The lights went out and someone screamed. In the shadows of her tiny office Hildegarde was suddenly certain that her little brother, who at the age of seven had disappeared during a Do-or-Die exercise in the Young Army, was outside the door. She ran to open it and the **Darke Fog** rushed in.

Things streamed in across the threshold, bringing the **Darke Domaine** with them. They milled around, squashing the dying floor beneath their feet, watching Wizards and Apprentices slump to the ground. As the **Darke Fog** began to fill the hall, the **Things** wandered across to the **Stopped** stairs and began to climb. Behind them the **Darke Domaine** moved slowly up through the Wizard Tower, filling every space with **Darknesse**.

At the very top of the Tower, Marcia had in her hands a piece of paper with a string of forty-nine words on it, which formed, she sincerely hoped, **The Great UnDoing**. She and Septimus were running up the narrow stone steps to the Pyramid Library with Alther following in their wake. They flung themselves through the little door and Marcia hurried over to the window that led outside. She turned to Septimus.

“You really don’t have to come,” she said.

“Yes, I do,” said Septimus. “You need all the **Magyk** you can get.”

“I know,” said Marcia.

“So I’m coming with you.”

Marcia smiled. “Out we go then. Don’t look down.”

Septimus looked neither down nor up. Focusing only on the hem of Marcia’s purple cloak, he followed her up the stepped side of the golden Pyramid. Alther flew slowly behind.

And so, for the second time that night, Marcia stood on the tiny platform at the top of the golden Pyramid. For some reason, she wasn’t sure why, she took off her purple python pointy shoes and stood barefoot on the ancient silver hieroglyphs that were incised into the hammered gold top. She waited for Septimus to join her and then together, in voices that cut through the

Darke Fog, they began the forty-nine-word incantation of The **Great UnDoing**.

“Let there be . . .”

Far below, the leading **Thing** poked its finger lazily at the great purple door that guarded Marcia’s rooms. Twelve **Things** stood behind it expectantly, waiting to take over their new abode. The door swung open. The **Thing** turned to its companions with what was possibly a smile. They stood, savoring the moment, watching the **Darke Fog** tumble in and swirl around Marcia’s precious sofa.

At the top of the golden Pyramid, Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and her Apprentice, Septimus Heap, spoke the last word of The **Great UnDoing**.

With a great *crash* Marcia’s door slammed in the **Things**’ faces. A loud whirring ensued—the door **Barred** itself and, for good measure, sent out a **Shock Wave**. Thirteen **Things** screamed. A scream of thirteen **Things** is not one of the most harmonious sounds, but to Septimus and Marcia, teetering at the top of the golden Pyramid, it was the sweetest thing they had ever heard.

And then they saw the most beautiful sight they had ever seen—the **Darke Fog** rolling away. Once more they saw the Castle they loved—its higgledy-piggledy roofs, its turrets and towers, its crenulated battlements and tumbledown walls, all outlined against the pink sky of the dawn of a new day. And as they watched the sun rise, dispelling the shadows that lurked below, the first heavy snowflakes of the Big Freeze began to fall. Marcia and Septimus smiled at each other—the **Darke Domaine** was no more.

Some minutes later, a broadly smiling Marcia was ushering everyone into her sitting room, busily opening the windows to get rid of the dank smell of the **Darke**. Jim Knee was curled up in his usual place on the sofa with Jillie Djinn beside him, just as Marcia had left them. But there was something about the Chief Hermetic Scribe that made Marcia hurry over to her.

“She’s dead!” Marcia gasped. And then, much more dismayed, she cried, “She’s dead *on my sofa!*”

Jillie Djinn was slumped backward, mouth a little open, eyes closed as if asleep. Her body was there, but she herself had clearly gone—whatever it was that had been Jillie Djinn was no more. The **Great UnDoing** had been her undoing also.

Chapter 48

Restoration



Marcia, *Septimus and Jenna* emerged from the Great Arch and paused for a moment, looking down the newly liberated Wizard Way. It was a beautiful frosty morning. The sun was creeping out from behind a bank of clouds and slanting rays of the early morning light glanced low along Wizard Way. The first serious snowflakes of the Big Freeze were beginning to fall; they drifted lazily in the fleeting sunlight and settled onto the frosty pavement.

Marcia took a deep breath of the clear, sparkling air and a wave of happiness very nearly overcame her—but she could not allow herself to be completely content until she had successfully **UnSealed** the Hermetic Chamber. *And found Beetle alive.*

Marcia had steeled herself to expect many things waiting for her in the front office of the Manuscriptorium but she had not expected the Port Witch Coven. They had taken a trip to see the last moments of the Wizard Tower and, becoming bored with how long it was taking, they had crowbarred the planks off the door to the Wild Book and Charm Store. They were just emerging, covered in fur, feathers and a light sprinkling of scales when, to their collective horror, they saw that not only had the lovely **Darke Fog** disappeared but that that ghastly ExtraOrdinary Wizard woman was waiting for them. Dorinda's piercing scream spoke for them all.

To Jenna's delight, Marcia saw the Port Witch Coven off the premises with great effectiveness. They left so fast—even the Witch Mother managed a rapid hobble in her spikes—that they forgot about Nursie, who sat unnoticed beside a collapsed pile of books. Nursie had discovered a stash of dusty licorice snakes in the back of a drawer and was contentedly chewing them. Nursie had what she called a penchant for licorice.

Marcia raced into the Manuscriptorium itself, closely followed by Jenna and Septimus. The place was strewn with upturned desks, ripped paper and

broken lamps. Everything was covered with a sticky gray dust, which Septimus realized to his disgust was shed **Thing** skin. Quickly they picked their way through the debris. At the stone arched entrance to the Hermetic Chamber they stopped.

“The **Seal** is gone,” Marcia said heavily. “I fear the worst.”

The seven-cornered passage looked ominously well used—there was a slimy **Thing** trail on the floor. Like giant slugs, thought Septimus. He stepped into the passage and called tentatively into the dark. “Beetle . . . *Beetle.*” There was no reply.

“It sounds . . . dead in there,” he whispered.

“I think,” said Jenna slowly, “that it sounds more like something is blocking the passageway farther up.”

“It is just possible that the **Seal** is still holding farther in,” said Marcia.

“Can it do that?” asked Septimus. “I thought it would all go at once.”

“We’ll just have to see, won’t we?” Marcia said briskly and she disappeared into the seven-cornered passage. Septimus and Jenna set off after her.

As he rounded the sixth corner, Septimus cannoned into Marcia. “*Oof!*”

Marcia was standing at a dead end of pitted stone. “It’s still **Sealed**,” she whispered excitedly. “It really is quite amazing. The **Seal** has been chipped away but I think . . . I think it’s still okay.”

“Does that mean that Beetle is . . .” Septimus could not finish his question. The thought that Beetle might *not* be okay made him feel sick.

“We can but hope,” said Marcia grimly.

Grimacing Marcia placed her hands on the filthy, sticky surface of the **Seal**. In the light of the Dragon Ring, Jenna and Septimus watched as the surface of the **Seal** healed itself. Soon it was smooth and shimmering with **Magyk** purple once more, lighting up the seven-cornered passage and showing the revolting film of slime and **Thing** skin in glorious detail. Septimus thought of how the **Seal** must have shone through the **Darke** when the **Things** had first arrived and taunted them—no wonder they had attacked it. *He* would have added a **Camouflage**.

Now Marcia began the **UnSeal**. Jenna retreated from the sudden onslaught of **Magyk**, which was highly concentrated in the narrow confines of the passageway and made her feel queasy. But Septimus was fascinated. He watched the shiny surface glow even brighter and slowly begin to retreat before them. Step by step Marcia and Septimus followed the **Seal** until it stopped at the end of the passageway. They waited anxiously, watching the diamond-hard surface slowly become translucent until they began to see the shadowy impression of the Hermetic Chamber beyond.

The **Seal** thinned until there was no more than a shifting swirl of **Magyk** dividing them from the Chamber. Through it Septimus could see Beetle

slumped at the table. He could not tell whether he was alive or dead.

Once more Marcia stretched out her hands—which Septimus noticed were trembling—and laid them on the last vestige of the **Seal**. At her touch it melted away and a rush of air *whooshed* past them into the Chamber.

“Beetle!” Septimus ran across and shook his friend by the shoulder. Beetle felt so cold that Septimus jumped back in horror. Jenna appeared at the entrance to the Chamber. They both looked at Marcia in panic.

Marcia strode over to the siege drawer, which lay upturned on the table with a tangle of licorice bootlaces spilling out from it. *Where was the Suspension Charm?*

“He’s cold,” Septimus said. “*Really* cold.”

“Well, he will be cold if . . .” Marcia looked at the licorice. It did not bode well.

“If what?” asked Septimus.

“If he’s managed the **Suspension**.” Marcia sounded worried.

And he will be if he hasn’t, thought Septimus, but he said nothing. They watched Marcia gently lift Beetle so that he was sitting up, but Beetle’s eyes were closed and his head flopped forward like a dead thing.

Jenna gave a gasp of dismay.

“Beetle,” Marcia said, shaking him gently by his shoulders. “Beetle, you can come out now.” There was no response. Marcia glanced at Jenna and Septimus. There was dread in her eyes.

Time seemed to slow down. Marcia crouched down so that she was level with Beetle’s face. She placed her hands on either side of his head and gently lifted it up so that his face was level with hers. Then she took a deep breath. The buzz of **Magyk** filled the Hermetic Chamber once again, and from Marcia’s mouth came a long stream of pink mist. It settled over Beetle’s face, covering his nose and mouth.

Hardly daring to breathe themselves, Septimus and Jenna watched. Still Marcia breathed out. Still Beetle did not react, the dead white of his face shining through the pink mist above it. And then, like smoke drifting up a chimney, Septimus saw tendrils of the mist begin to disappear up Beetle’s nose. *He was breathing*. Very slowly Beetle’s eyes flickered opened. He looked glassily at Marcia.

Septimus rushed to Beetle’s side. “Hey, Beetle, *Beetle*, it’s us. Oh, *Beetle!*”

Marcia smiled with relief. “Congratulations, Beetle,” she said. “The heart of the Manuscriptorium is untouched, thanks to you.”

Beetle rose to the occasion with aplomb. “Gah . . .” he said.

They had gathered in the wasteland of upturned desks. Beetle looked pale and was shakily drinking a fortifying **FizzFroot**, which Septimus had found stashed away in Beetle’s old kitchen in the Manuscriptorium backyard. Jenna,

Beetle noticed, had not hung around; she had rushed off to the Palace as soon as she could. Beetle, clear-headed after his **Suspension**, saw what that meant. If it had been *Jenna* who had just survived two days being **Sealed** in an airless Chamber, *he* would not have run away at the first opportunity. *Get real, Beetle*, he told himself.

Marcia's voice broke into his thoughts.

"The **Pick** for the new Chief Hermetic Scribe must begin tonight," she was saying. "I must go. I intend to visit each and every scribe myself. I want to see if they are all still . . . available."

Beetle thought of Foxy and Partridge and Romilly. He thought of Larry. Of Matt, Marcus and Igor at Gothyk Grotto, even the oddly irritating people at Wizard Sandwiches. How many of them were still . . . *available*?

Marcia stopped for a quiet word with Beetle. "It's such a shame," she told him, "that you are no longer part of the Manuscriptorium. I would very much have liked your pen to have gone into the **Pot**."

Beetle flushed with pleasure at the compliment. "Thank you," he said. "But it would never have **Picked** me. I'm far too young. And I was never a proper scribe."

"That is of no consequence," said Marcia. "The **Pot Picks** who is right." She refrained from adding that she had no idea why it had **Picked** Jillie Djinn. "But perhaps you'd like to stay until the **Draw** and stand guard. I don't want to leave the Manuscriptorium unattended."

Once again Beetle was flattered, but he was already getting to his feet. "Sorry, but I'd better go and see Larry. Don't want to lose my job there too."

"I quite understand," said Marcia, opening the door to the front office for him. She realized that she should not have asked—Beetle clearly still found the Manuscriptorium an upsetting place to be. Marcia watched Beetle walk out into the morning sunshine and called back into the Manuscriptorium, "Septimus! You're in charge. You have my permission to use a full **Restore**. I shall be back soon with *all* the scribes."

From the other side of the partition Septimus then heard Marcia say loudly, "The Manuscriptorium is closed today. I suggest you come back tomorrow when it will be under new management. *What?* No, I have no idea where the witches have gone. No, I am *not* a witch, whatever gave you that idea? I am, madam, the ExtraOrdinary Wizard."

As the sounds of Nursie being rapidly escorted off the premises came through the flimsy partition, Septimus smiled. Marcia was back to her normal self again.

* * *

Outside the Manuscriptorium, Marcia found herself plagued with unwelcome intrusions. Nursie was sticking to her like **Thing** skin and, to top it all, she

now saw the familiar figure of Marcellus Pye approaching. Marcia decided to pretend she hadn't seen him.

"Marcia! Marcia, *wait!*" Marcellus called.

"*Sorree*. Must dash!" she called out.

But Marcellus was not to be put off. He speeded up, dragging behind him an unwilling companion. As the pair drew near Marcia saw who it was.

"Merrin Meredith!" she spluttered.

Nursie's hearing was not what it had been. "Yes?" she said.

"And I thought I told *you* to go home," Marcia snapped at Nursie.

But Nursie did not hear anything. She was staring at the shambling, sniffing figure that Marcellus was dragging behind him.

A red-faced and very harassed Marcellus reached Marcia and Nursie.

"Marcia. I have something for you," said Marcellus. He burrowed into a deep pocket, drew out a small brown box made of cheap card and handed it to Marcia.

Marcia looked at it impatiently. "Springo Spigots," she read. "Marcellus, what on earth would I want with *Springo Spigots?*"

"It's the only box that Sally had," said Marcellus. "And it's not spigots—whatever they are. I'd rather spigot a spigotty-thing any day than . . . well, you'd better take a look."

Marcia's curiosity got the better of her impatience. She opened the end of the flimsy cardboard box and drew out a small piece of bloodstained cloth. Something heavy fell into her hand. She gasped.

"Good grief, Marcellus. How did you get this?"

"How do you think?" Marcellus replied quietly. He looked pointedly at Merrin, who was staring at the ground.

Marcia took a closer look at Merrin and saw that his left hand was swathed in a bandage. An ooze of deep pink was showing on the inside of it where—Marcia now knew—his thumb no longer was. She stared at the Two-Faced Ring that lay heavy and cold in her hand and felt almost afraid.

"May I suggest that this ring be destroyed," Marcellus said quietly. "Even in the most **Hidden** of hiding places it will one day give some new fool—or worse—overweening powers."

"Yes, it must be destroyed," Marcia agreed. "But we no longer have the **Fyres** to do it."

Marcellus felt nervous as he offered his solution. "Marcia, I hope you trust me enough by now to consider my offer seriously. I would like to return to my old Alchemie Chamber. If you allow this I could start up the **Fyre** and within a month we could rid the Castle of the pernicious ring forever. I give you my word I will preserve the Ice Tunnels and meddle with nothing."

"Very well, Marcellus. I accept your word. I shall place this ring in the **Hidden Shelf** until then."

“Um . . . I have one more request,” Marcellus said tentatively.

Marcia knew what it was. “Yes,” she said with a sigh. “I will second Septimus to you for the next month; I can see you will need his help. We are all in this together now. We need the **Alchemie** as well as the **Magyk** to keep the **Darke** in balance. Do you not agree?”

Marcellus smiled broadly as his old life opened up to him once more with all its amazing vistas. A wave of happiness spread through him. “Yes, I do agree. I most *definitely* do.”

* * *

While this conversation had been going on, Nursie had taken hold of Merrin’s bandaged hand and was tut-tutting over the bandage, which was, even Marcellus could see, a mess. Marcia looked at the pair and felt exasperated. What was she to do with Merrin? She blamed the evil influence of the Two-Faced Ring for much that he had done, but there was no denying that he had chosen to put it on in the first place.

Marcia knew that Nursie was the landlady of *The Doll House*, a dingy guesthouse in the Port where Jenna and Septimus had once spent an eventful night. Some time ago Aunt Zelda had told Marcia something about Nursie that she had not taken much notice of at the time—but now, as she looked at Nursie and Merrin together, and she saw the awkward way they both stood, their beaky noses and sallow skin, Marcia knew that what Aunt Zelda had told her must be true. She turned to Nursie and said, “Do you take in lodgers?”

Nursie looked surprised. “Why? You fed up with the Tower, are you? Too much cleaning, I suppose. And all those stairs must be hard on the knees. Well, it’s half a crown a week, payable in advance, hot water and bedding is extra.”

“I am perfectly happy in the Wizard Tower, thank you,” said Marcia icily. “However, I would like to pay a year in advance for this young man here.”

“A *year* in advance?” Nursie gasped, not able to believe her luck. She could get the house repainted and, best of all, she could afford to stop working for those ghastly witches.

“To include nursing services and general care and attention,” said Marcia. “Also hot water, bedding *and* food. No doubt the young man would be happy to help around the house once his hand is better.”

“It won’t ever be better,” growled Merrin. “It hasn’t got a thumb anymore.”

“You’ll get used to it,” said Marcia cheerfully. “You are free of the Ring now and you have to make the best of it. I suggest you take my offer to go with the Nurse here. Otherwise all you will be seeing for the foreseeable future is the inside of the Wizard Tower Secure Chamber.”

“I’ll go with her. She’s all right,” said Merrin.

Nursie patted Merrin's good hand. "There's a good boy," she said.

"Marcellus, do you have six guineas on you?" asked Marcia.

"Six *guineas*?" Marcellus squeaked.

"Yes. You're always rattling with gold. I'll pay you back."

Marcellus delved into his pockets and very reluctantly he handed over six shining new guineas. Nursie's eyes bulged. She had never seen so much gold. Marcia added a crown from her own pocket and presented the money to the dumbstruck landlady.

"Slightly over, I think you'll find," said Marcia briskly. "But it will cover your fare back to the Port. If you hurry you will catch the evening barge."

"Come on, dearie." Nursie linked her arm through Merrin's good one. "Let's get out of this place. I never did like the Castle. Nasty memories."

"Me too," said Merrin. "It's a dump."

Marcellus and Marcia watched Merrin and Nursie head off. "Well, they seem well suited," Marcellus said.

"So they should be," said Marcia. "They're mother and son."

Foxy was the first scribe Marcia tracked down and sent off to the Manuscriptorium. On his way Foxy met Beetle coming out of Larry's Dead Languages.

"Wotcha, Beet!"

"Wotcha, Foxo!"

They surveyed each other for a moment, smiling broadly.

"You all right, Foxo?" asked Beetle.

"Yeah." Foxy grinned.

"You weren't outside when it got you then?"

"Nah. Fell asleep by the fire and woke up two days later. Mouth felt like the bottom of a parrot's cage, but apart from that all was fine. But . . ." Foxy sighed. "My auntie's missing. She was out when the **Domaine** came over our way. Never made it back. Can't find her anywhere. And now . . . well, now they're saying about a Dragon *taking* people." He shuddered.

"Oh, Foxy," said Beetle. "I am so sorry."

"Yeah." Foxy changed the subject. "But hey, you don't look so good. Was it bad in the Chamber?"

"Yeah," said Beetle. "Lots of hammering and trying to get in."

"Not nice," said Foxy.

"No. And I *never* want to see a licorice bootlace *ever* again."

"Oh. Right." Foxy decided not to ask why. Beetle had looked strangely desperate as he'd said "licorice bootlace."

Foxy decided to change the subject. "So, um, how's Larry?"

"Not nice either," said Beetle. "Just got fired, in fact. For coming in late."

"*Late*?"

“Two days late.”

Foxy put his arm around Beetle’s shoulders. He’d never seen Beetle look so down. “It’s all rubbish, isn’t it?” he said.

“It’s not great, Foxy.”

“Want a sausage sandwich?”

Beetle saw the welcome lights of Wizard Sandwiches glowing through the dimming light of the late winter afternoon and he suddenly felt ravenous. “You bet,” he said.

Jenna walked slowly up to the Palace, her footprints showing trampled grass through the snow. Ahead of her the Palace was dark against the late afternoon sky, with the winter sun already having dropped down behind the ancient battlements. It was an eerie sight, enhanced by the occasional crow call from the tops of the cedars down by the river, but Jenna did not see it that way. She had turned down offers from Silas and Sarah to come with her. This was the way she wanted to return to her Palace—on her own.

The ancient double doors were half open, left ajar by Simon when he had fled with Sarah in his arms. And guarding them was a familiar figure.

“Welcome home, Princess-in-Waiting,” said Sir Hereward.

“Thank you, Sir Hereward,” replied Jenna as she stepped inside. A flurry of snow entered with her. Jenna hung up her witch’s cloak in the cloakroom and closed the door on it with feelings of fondness. It had served her well and who knew? She might need it again one day.

“You’d better come in too,” she said to Sir Hereward, who was still out in the snow.

“Strictly speaking, Princess, now that you have taken possession of the *whole* Palace rather than just your room, I should stay outside,” Sir Hereward replied.

“I’d rather you came in,” said Jenna. “I could use some company, if you don’t mind.”

A smiling Sir Hereward strode in, and Jenna quickly pushed the doors together. They closed with a *bang* that echoed through the empty building. Jenna looked around the entrance hall, which was full of shadows and ghosts. She reached into her pocket for the **CandleLight Charm** Septimus had given her that afternoon and began lighting the first of many extinguished candles.

Later that evening Jenna was sitting in Sarah’s old sitting room with a bewildered duck in her arms when she heard footsteps coming down the Long Walk. These were not the soft *tip-tap* of ghost steps but solid boot-wearing human ones. Sir Hereward, who had been standing guard beside the fire, strode off to investigate. He returned—to Jenna’s surprise and delight—with Aunt Zelda and Wolf Boy.

Aunt Zelda swept her up into a huge, padded hug and Wolf Boy grinned

broadly.

“We’re really, *really* sorry we missed your party,” he said. “But it was weird—we couldn’t get out of the Queen’s Room for two whole days.”

Aunt Zelda settled herself beside the fire. She looked at the duck in Jenna’s arms. “That creature has been in the **Darke**, dear,” she said to Jenna a little disapprovingly. “I do hope you are not dabbling with things you shouldn’t. Some Princesses of your age have done so in the past.”

“Oh . . .” Jenna did not know what to say. It was as if Aunt Zelda knew about her Port Witch Coven cloak hanging in the cupboard.

“Now, Jenna dear,” said Aunt Zelda, “tell me *all* about it.”

Jenna put some more coal on the fire. It was going to be a long evening.

Chapter 49

The Chief Hermetic Scribe



It was *MidWinter Feast Day*. Jenna looked out the Palace ballroom window and watched the snow falling fast, covering the lawns, festooning the bare branches of the trees and obliterating all traces of the **Darke Domaine**. It was beautiful.

Jenna was hosting a *MidWinter Feast*. She was determined to get rid of all traces of the **Things** in the Palace and she had decided that the best way to do that was to fill it with everyone she cared about. Silas, Sarah and Maxie had come over from the *Ramblings*. After a tearful reunion—on Sarah’s part, anyway—between Ethel and Sarah, they began to help Jenna get the Ballroom ready for that evening. There was, Jenna said, a lot to do.

Silas smiled. “That’s just what your mother would say,” he said.

The winter morning drew on. Snow piled up outside the long windows, while the Ballroom was transformed with holly and ivy, red ribbons, huge silver candlesticks and a whole box of streamers that Silas had been keeping for a special occasion.

At the other end of *Wizard Way*, the **Pick** for the new Chief Hermetic Scribe was underway.

The previous afternoon Marcia had successfully gathered all scribes together in the Manuscriptorium. In a solemn ceremony she had placed the traditional enamel **Pot** on the table in the Hermetic Chamber, and then each scribe had gone in and put his or her Manuscriptorium pen into the **Pot**. The **Pot** had been left in the Hermetic Chamber overnight, and Marcia had spent an uncomfortable night in the Manuscriptorium guarding the entrance to the Chamber.

Now it was time for the **Pick**. All the scribes had gathered, robes freshly washed, hair combed. They filed into the dimly lit Manuscriptorium, glancing

at each other, wondering who among them would be the next Chief Hermetic Scribe. Partridge had been running bets but no clear favorite had emerged.

A small, beautifully patterned square of carpet had been laid on the floor and Marcia told the scribes to gather around. The older ones looked puzzled—there had been no square of carpet at the last **Pick**.

Marcia began with a few carefully chosen words about Jillie Djinn, to which the scribes listened respectfully, and then she made a surprise announcement.

“Scribes. It has been a terrible time and, although most have weathered the storm, some people did not. Our thoughts go out to all who have lost anyone.”

There were sympathetic glance at scribes who still had relatives and friends unaccounted for. Marcia waited a little and then continued.

“However, I do believe good has come of this. Since The **Great UnDoing** yesterday, we in the Wizard Tower have seen many stubborn pockets of **Darke Magyk** disappear and I think the same will have happened here. We have, I hope, at last got our **Magyk** back in balance with the **Darke**.”

Marcia paused as a small round of applause broke out.

She continued. “During the last few days in the Wizard Tower, when I was trying to find a way to defeat the **Darke Domaine**, I made many important discoveries. One of them affects us all here today. Recently, in my opinion, the choice of Chief Hermetic Scribe has not been exactly . . . ideal. I believe there may be a reason for this. Over the years the Hermetic Chamber has seen much **Darke Magyk**, and I suspect the **Pick** has become corrupted. Now, with everything back as it should be, I am expecting the **Pick** to take a different form and give us a true result.”

The scribes glanced at each other. What did Marcia mean?

Marcia allowed her comment to sink in and then she announced—loudly, to quell the murmuring—“Will the youngest scribe please step forward?”

Romilly Badger, blushing bright red, was pushed forward by Partridge and Foxy.

“Go on,” whispered Partridge. “You’ll be fine. Really, you will.”

“Romilly Badger,” said Marcia, sounding very official. “As youngest scribe I ask you to enter the Hermetic Chamber and *bring out the Pot*.”

A muttering spread around the room. Normally the youngest scribe was told to bring out the *pen* that lay on the table, not the **Pot**.

“These are the original words as laid down in *The Undoing of the Darknesse*,” Marcia told the scribes. “And if—as I hope—the **Pick** has reverted to its original form, there will be *one* pen only left in the **Pot**, with the rest thrown out onto the table. The pen in the **Pot** will belong to your next Chief Hermetic Scribe. Of course, if there is only one pen on the table and all the rest are in the **Pot**, then we will have to accept that choice as we have done in the past—though personally I believe this method to be flawed. Does

everybody agree?”

There was some general muttering and discussion, the upshot of which was agreement.

“So, Romilly,” said Marcia, “if there is only one pen on the table, you will bring that out. But if there is a pile of pens, bring out the **Pot**. Understand?”

Romilly nodded.

Marcia carried on with the prescribed words.

“Romilly Badger, I ask you to do this so that the new Chief Hermetic Scribe may be lawfully and properly **Picked**. Do you accept the task? Yea or Nay?”

“Yea,” whispered Romilly.

“Then enter the Chamber, scribe. Be true and tarry not.”

Romilly walked self-consciously into the seven-cornered passage. After what felt like an hour—but was less than a minute—her footsteps were heard coming back along the passage. A spontaneous round of applause broke out when she appeared carrying the **Pot**.

Marcia broke into a broad grin. She had instantly regretted her words about the **Pick**, thinking that if the old method remained, then whoever was **Picked** would not have total authority. But now all was well. The **Pick** had reverted to the true method and all that remained was for Romilly to take the pen from the **Pot**.

“Scribe Romilly, place the **Pot** on the carpet,” said Marcia.

Hands shaking, Romilly put the pot down. It stood tall, its ancient dark blue enamel pitted and worn.

“Scribe Romilly, place your hand in the **Pot** and draw out the pen.”

Romilly took a deep breath. She didn’t want to put her hand in the **Pot**—she could not get out of her head thoughts of large, hairy spiders lurking inside—but she bravely reached into the cold, dark space.

“How many pens are there?” Marcia whispered.

“One,” Romilly whispered back.

Marcia felt relieved. The **Pot** had worked.

“Scribe Romilly, take out the pen and show it to the scribes.”

Romilly took out a beautiful black onyx pen with a swirling jade green inlay.

“Scribe Romilly, read the name scribed upon the pen.”

Romilly peered at the pen. The convoluted swirls made it very difficult to tell what the name actually was.

“A candle, someone please,” said Marcia.

Partridge grabbed the candle and held it up so that Romilly could read the letters. Foxy saw the pen clearly for the first time and the blood drained from his face. The next moment there was a *crash*. Foxy had fainted.

Marcia had a bad feeling. Foxy had recognized the pen—surely the new

Chief Hermetic Scribe could not be Foxy? *Surely not.*

Forgetting the formal language of the **Pick**, Marcia said urgently, “Romilly—*whose pen is it?*”

“It says . . .” Romilly squinted hard. “Oh! I see. It says *Beetle!*”

A loud cheer broke out from all the scribes.

Foxy had a tiny room in a grubby part of the Ramblings and he’d invited Beetle, summarily evicted from his room in Larry’s Dead Languages, to sleep on his floor until he found somewhere to live.

When Foxy burst in, red-faced from running all the way from the Manuscriptorium, Beetle was busy scraping some burned soup off the bottom of the pan. He hadn’t known it was possible to burn soup—there was more to cooking than he had realized.

“Wotcha, Foxy,” he said, a little preoccupied. “So who’s the next boss, then?”

“You!” yelled Foxy.

“Barnaby Ewe? Oh well, could be worse. I think I’ve killed your saucepan. Really sorry.”

Foxy rushed over to the tiny sink and grabbed the pan out of Beetle’s hands. “No, you dingbat—it’s *you*. You! Beetle, *you* are Chief Hermetic Scribe!”

“Foxy, don’t kid around,” Beetle said, irritated. “Give me that pan. I was cleaning it.”

“Bother the stupid pan. Beetle it *is* you. Your pen was **Picked**. It was, Beetle. I swear it.”

Beetle stared at Foxy, pan scourer dripping in his hand. “But it *can’t* have been. How could it get into the **Pot**?”

“I put it in. Remember when you got fired and you wouldn’t take your pen? Well, I kept it. And that’s *why* I kept it. There are no rules to say you have to be a serving scribe to go into the **Pot**. I looked it up specially. All that matters is your pen goes in. So that’s what I did. I put it in.”

Beetle was dumbfounded. “But *why*?”

“Because you deserve to be Chief Hermetic Scribe. Because, Beet, you are the *best*. And because you saved the Manuscriptorium. You risked your life to do that. Who else could be Chief now? *No one*, Beet, that’s who. No one but *you*.”

Beetle shook his head. Things like this did *not* happen.

“Come on, Beet. Marcia’s sent me to fetch you for your Induction. She’s got the Cryptic Codex ready. *And* the Seals of Office. Everyone’s waiting for you. Come *on*.”

“Ah . . .” Slowly Beetle was beginning to believe Foxy. He was aware that he had just crossed over one of those rare watersheds. His life a few minutes

ago bore no resemblance to his life now. It was a total turnaround. He felt stunned.

“Beetle . . . are you all right?” Foxy was beginning to be concerned.

Beetle nodded and a wave of happiness suddenly washed over him. “Yeah, Foxy,” he said. “I am. I am *very* all right.”

The Big Freeze came in fast. It was rare for it to begin on the MidWinter Feast Day but everyone in the Castle welcomed the blanket of white, covering all traces of the **Darke Domaine**, turning the Castle into a **Magykal** place once more. Even those who had lost family and friends—and there were more than a few—welcomed it; the silence of the snow felt right.

Walking to the Palace that evening, Septimus met Simon going the same way.

“Hi,” Septimus said, a little awkwardly. “No Lucy?”

Simon smiled tentatively. “She’ll be along later. Gone to collect her Mum and Dad. They’re okay, but her Mum’s making a fuss.”

“Ah.”

They walked through the Palace Gate and headed for the Palace. Breaking the rather uncomfortable silence, Septimus said, “I wanted to say thank you.”

Simon looked at his brother. “What for?” he asked, puzzled.

“For saving me. In the river.”

“Oh. Oh well. I owed you.”

“Yeah. Well. And I’m sorry I didn’t listen about the **Paired Code**.”

Simon shrugged. “Why should you? Stuff’s happened. And I’m sorry too.”

“Yeah. I know.”

Simon turned to Septimus. “Quits?” he asked, smiling.

“Quits,” Septimus smiled back.

Simon put his arm around his brother’s shoulders—noticing that he was very nearly the same height—and together they made their way up to the Palace, leaving behind them a trail of two pairs of footprints breaking through the frosty covering that coated the blanket of snow.

That night the Palace Ballroom was ablaze with light and—for the first time for many, many years—full of people. Even Milo, Jenna’s father, was there, having arrived back from a voyage a little late for her birthday, as ever. At either end of the table, at Jenna’s insistence, sat Sarah and Silas. When they had first moved into the Palace, Sarah and Silas had sometimes taken those seats as a joke, with Jenna perched uncomfortably somewhere in between, but now the long table between them was full of people, laughter and conversation.

At Sarah’s end of the table sat Milo, his red and gold silk robes shimmering in the candlelight while he regaled her with the details of his latest voyage. Opposite Milo was the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, who was, naturally, seated next to the Chief Hermetic Scribe. Sarah had insisted that Jenna sit next to her

father, but she made a point of talking mainly to Septimus, who was placed next to her, just across the table from Beetle. Septimus looked over at his friend, resplendent in his new robes, and saw how well they suited him. Already Beetle seemed at ease in the heavy dark blue silk with the sleeves hemmed with gold, the colors echoing his Admiral's jacket which, Septimus noticed, he still wore underneath. Beetle had a glow of happiness about him that Septimus had never noticed before—it was good to see.

A burst of raucous laughter came from Silas's end of the table, where Nicko was sitting with Rupert, Maggie and Foxy. Nicko was making seagull noises. Toward the middle of the table Snorri and her mother sat quietly talking, while Ullr lay on guard beside them. Every now and then Snorri glanced disapprovingly at Nicko. Nicko did not seem to notice.

Next to Septimus was Simon. Simon's attention was mainly taken up by Lucy, Gringe and Mrs. Gringe, who were talking about the wedding—or rather listening to Lucy talking about it. Occasionally Simon glanced down to a small wooden box sitting on his lap and smiled, his green eyes—unclouded for the first time in four years—gleaming in the candlelight. Written on the box was the word “Sleuth.” It was a thank-you present from Marcia and it meant more to Simon than any present he had ever received.

Igor, with Matt and Marcus and his new employee, Marissa, were in deep conversation with Wolf Boy and Aunt Zelda.

Jenna, who was sitting on the other side of Septimus, nudged him. “Look at Wolf Boy. Without his long hair, don't you think he'd look just like Matt and Marcus?”

“Matt and Marcus?”

“From Gothyk Grotto. Look.”

“Almost identical. That is so weird.”

“They sound the same too, you know. Do you know anything about Wolf Boy's family, Sep? Does *Wolf Boy* know anything?”

“Never said anything to me. It was the Young Army way, Jen. I never knew I had a family until I bumped into the bunch of you.” Septimus grinned.

“Bit of a shock, I bet.” Jenna smiled back.

“Yeah . . .” Septimus did not often think about how he might never have known who he truly was but right then, among his friends and family, a feeling akin to terror passed over him as he thought how different life might have been if Marcia had not rescued him from the snow only four years ago. He looked at Wolf Boy and realized that *he* had never found his family—surely he must have one?

“Tomorrow I shall go and ask to look at the Young Army records. There might be something in there about 409. You never know.”

Jenna smiled—she'd just remembered something. She took a small present out from her pocket. “Happy birthday, Sep. It's a little late but we've been a

bit busy recently.”

“Hey, thanks, Jen. I got you something too. Happy birthday.”

“Oh, Sep, *thank you*, that’s lovely.”

“You haven’t seen it yet.”

Jenna ripped open her present to reveal a very small and very pink crown encrusted with glass beads, sporting trailing ribbons and a pink fur trim. She burst out laughing. “That is so *silly*, Sep.” She put the crown on and tied its pink ribbons under her chin. “There, that makes me Queen now. Open yours.”

Septimus ripped open the red paper and extracted the set of Gragull teeth.

“Brilliant, Jen!” He put them in and the two yellowing canines slipped neatly over his lower lip. In the light of the candles Septimus looked so realistic that when Marcia finally finished her conversation with Beetle and turned to Septimus to ask him something, she screamed.

Queen and Gragull spent the rest of the evening fooling around opposite the two great dignitaries of the Castle—the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and the Chief Hermetic Scribe. Jenna felt indescribably happy. She had her old Septimus back and—as another burst of laughter and seagull noises erupted—her old Nicko too.

In the shadows two ghosts looked on contentedly.

“Thank you, Septimus,” Alther had said, when asked to join the party at the table, “but I’d just like to sit quietly and be with my Alice. You Living, you’re a noisy bunch.”

And they were. All night long.

As the sun rose the windows to the ballroom were flung open. The party climbed out into the snow and made their way down to the Palace Landing Stage. A lone ghost saw their approach and slipped away onto the trading barge that was moored at the Landing Stage, ready to leave before the Big Freeze began to ice up the river. The ghost of Olaf Snorrelssen wafted down into the cherry-wood cabin that, long ago, he had made for his wife, Alfrún. He sat waiting for his wife and daughter to arrive, as he knew they surely would, and smiled. He was home at last.

But the party had not come to say good-bye to Snorri and her mother, who were not leaving until the next day. They had come to bid a final farewell to Jillie Djinn, who lay silent and snow-clad in her Leaving Boat, ready to be cast adrift to float down to the sea on the outgoing tide.

As they watched the Leaving Boat drift down the river, a rich blue silk banner fluttering from its flagstaff, Jenna turned to Beetle.

“I bet you hope she doesn’t come back and haunt the Manuscriptorium,” she said.

The Chief Hermetic Scribe grinned. “I’ve got a bit of peace and quiet first,” he replied. “You know where she’ll be for the next year and a day.”

Jenna giggled. “Oh! *Of course*—the place where she entered Ghosthood. Marcia’s so going to love that!”

What Happened in the Darke Domaine— and Afterward

VICTIMS OF THE **Darke Domaine**

Marcia's **Great UnDoing** came just in time—three days and three nights is the longest most people can survive in a **Darke Trance**. Most of the Castle children woke up feeling fine, but the majority of the adults did not feel so good. They woke with a thumping headache, a raging thirst and ached from head to toe. Many assumed they had been to an extremely lively party the night before and could remember nothing about it. There were, however, some who never woke from the Castle's worst party ever.

Those who fell into the **Darke Trance** while in the open air fared the worst. Many succumbed to the cold and it was feared—from bloodstains found on the more exposed areas of the Castle—that the **Darke** dragon had taken those who were missing. Some people had been overtaken by the **Darke Domaine** at a dangerous moment—one died when climbing a ladder, two while trying to escape from a high window and five people fell into a fire they were tending. Three could not be woken and were taken to the Wizard Tower sick bay for **DisEnchanting**.

Two names on the commemorative plaques placed around the Castle will be familiar:

Bertie Bott. Ordinary Wizard. Missing, presumed eaten.

Una Brakket. Housekeeper. Found frozen in Little Creep Cut.

MAIZIE SMALLS & BINKIE

Maizie Smalls was overtaken by the **Darke Domaine** in her mother's house just off Wizard Way. They were sitting down to their traditional Longest Night supper prior to going out to see the lights when their front door blew open and the **Darke Fog** came tumbling in. They both survived, although Maizie's mother was ill for some time afterward.

The first thing Maizie did on waking up—once she knew her mother had survived—was to rush to the Palace to try and find her cat, Binkie. Although Binkie was apparently fine, it did not take Maizie long to realize that there was something odd about the cat.

Binkie, like all the Castle cats, had been greatly affected by the **Darke**. The cats had acted like sponges, soaking up the stubborn pockets of **Darke** that lingered in dark corners and hidden places where cats liked to go. Binkie was no longer a house cat. He snarled, he spat and he scratched Maizie when she

tried to stroke him. He would no longer eat the cat food that Maizie lovingly brought him—Binkie wanted blood: birds, baby rats and mice. And what Binkie wanted, Binkie got.

Five days after **The Great UnDoing**, Binkie left the Palace with Maizie as she set out to light the Wizard Way torches. Maizie was much encouraged by her cat's sudden desire for companionship as he followed her down the drive—but she never saw him again. Binkie stalked up Wizard Way, padded across the Castle drawbridge just before it was raised for the night and went to join the growing band of newly **Darke** Castle cats in the Forest. Within a few weeks there were—much to Stanley's delight—no cats at all left in the Castle.

STANLEY AND THE RATLETS

Stanley and his ratlets spent the rest of the **Darke Domaine** on the Outside Path. While Stanley fretted about Jenna, Flo, Mo, Bo and Jo had a great time racing up and down the path, playing Silly Statues. When the **Darke** dragon roared, the one who struck the silliest pose—and kept it for the duration of the roar—won.

Once the **Darke Domaine** ended, Stanley and the ratlets cleaned up the Rat Office—or rather, Stanley cleaned up while the ratlets had a broom fight and then went off to hang out with their friends. Stanley did not object; he was just pleased to have everything back to normal once more and his ratlets safe.

Stanley soon found that his worries about staffing the Message Rat Service were unfounded. As word got around the Port rat community that the Castle was a cat-free zone, Stanley found he had the pick of “quality staff,” as he called them. The Message Rat Service began to thrive once more—and it even acquired new drains.

EPHANIAH GREBE

Ephaniah Grebe, Conservation, Preservation and Protection Scribe at the Manuscriptorium, very nearly did not survive the **Darke Domaine**. He locked himself in his Fume Cupboard but the **Darke Fog** seeped in and overpowered him. Ephaniah was weakened by his two previous encounters with the **Darke**: the permanent rat hex when he was fourteen and, more recently, being **InHabited** by a **Thing**.

The new Chief Hermetic Scribe found his missing Con-servation Scribe squashed into the Fume Cupboard, his little rat mouth open and his tongue lolling out. Beetle thought he was dead, but a sudden twitch of Ephaniah's rat tail told him otherwise. Ephaniah joined Syrah and three other victims of the **Darke Domaine** in the **DisEnchanting** Chamber.

Marcia hopes that careful reading of *The Darke Index* may find a way of

speeding up the process of **DisEnchantment**—the **DisEnchanting** Chamber is getting a little crowded.

SYRAH SYARA

Syrah survived, but only just. The **DisEnchanting** Chamber was a closed environment and, like a freezer when the power goes off, it would have been fine for a few hours, providing no one opened the door. But it had a narrow escape. A **Thing** had just pushed open the first door of the antechamber when Marcia spoke the last words of **The Great UnDoing**. At once the **Magyk** reasserted itself and the **Thing** was hurled across the sick bay and smashed against the wall. The sick bay duty Wizard had to scrape it up and take it out in a wheelbarrow. Rose was excused from helping.

Septimus came to visit Syrah later that day, after he had got his **Darke Week** assessment from Marcia. The sick bay was busy preparing the new occupants for the **DisEnchanting** Chamber. Septimus squeezed in past Syrah's first new roommate—a young boy who had not yet come out of the **Trance**—and, remembering the last time he had visited her, suddenly felt amazingly happy and relieved that his **Darke Week** was over and everything was as it should be. When he told her he was safely back—with Alther—he thought he saw her eyelids flicker, just for a fraction of a second. Septimus was soon shooed out by Rose and the duty Wizards, who were bringing in another occupant. He didn't mind. Everything was all right. He walked out of the **DisEnchanting** Chamber with a spring in his step and went to see if anyone wanted a snowball fight.

SOPHIE BARLEY

On the opening day of the Traders' Market, Sophie Barley had just set up her stall when she found herself surrounded by five very odd customers swathed in black. One of them picked up a beautiful pendant—a winged heart with a seahorse hanging from it. She dangled it in front of Sophie's eyes and swung it back and forth . . . back and forth . . . back and forth. That was the last thing Sophie remembered.

Sophie awoke in the attic of Doom Dump, bound hand and foot, and there she languished while the witches took over her stall, waiting for their Princess to come along like a hunter waits beside his bait. Dorinda, who every evening fed Sophie her supper of stewed mice or coddled cockroaches, took a liking to her prisoner and began to creep away to talk to her. Sophie had just managed to get Dorinda to untie her when the **Darke Domaine** arrived. Unlike the witches, who reveled in the **Darke**, Sophie fell into a **Darke Trance**. She survived, and when she awoke she found Doom Dump empty. She took her

chance and fled. After a reviving Springo Special Ale and a very large slab of Barley Cake at Sally Mullin's, Sophie caught the first Port barge and swore never to return to the Castle.

Jenna was worried about what had happened to Sophie. As soon as she could she went to the Port and found Sophie safe in her workshop beside the fishermen's quay. Jenna bought a beautiful pair of earrings for Sarah's birthday—and a seahorse pendant for herself.

MARISSA LANE

Marissa—along with Igor, Matt and Marcus—was trapped in Gothyk Grotto by the **Darke Domaine**. They retreated to Igor's own extremely secret—and embarrassingly small—**SafeChamber**. It was a horrible time for them all, but it did give Marissa a chance to reflect on her life. Talking to Igor made her realize what a dangerous and unpleasant path she was treading with the Port Witch Coven and she decided to **Unravel** her witch vows as soon as she could. After she had made her decision, Igor offered her a job as assistant in Gothyk Grotto—much to Matt and Marcus's delight. They both liked Marissa very much indeed. Igor, however, was unaware that he was storing up trouble . . .

YOUNG ARMY RECORDS

Because Septimus had already been reunited with his family he was refused access to the Young Army registers. But Beetle stepped in to help. Making use of his Access-All-Areas status in the Castle, Beetle went to the Young Army Records Office, which was housed in a small building near Terry Tarsal's shoe shop. Most of the records were available for anyone to see, but those relating to families were considered private and could be seen only by those still searching for their family—or those with AAA status.

Beetle asked for the Register of Expendable Boy Soldiers. Under the watchful eye of the records clerk (who considered him far too young to be Chief Hermetic Scribe), Beetle turned to the page headed *Numbers 400 to 499 Inclusive*. He ran his finger down the page until he came to these listings:

- 409 Mandy Marwick. Status: Forced Conscription. Traitor Family.*
- 410 Marcus Marwick. Status: Forced Conscription. Traitor Family.*
- 411 Matthew Marwick. Status: Forced Conscription. Traitor Family.*
- 412 Merrin Meredith. Status: Foundling. Mother denies child.*

The first three entries were what Beetle had suspected—Wolf Boy was one of triplets. He grinned. He hadn't suspected he'd be called *Mandy*, though.

Beetle was, however, dismayed by the entry for 412, which he knew had

been Septimus's Young Army number. Surely Sep wasn't really Merrin Meredith? And then he remembered what Septimus had told him one rainy afternoon in the back kitchen of the Manuscriptorium over a mug of **FizzFroot** . . .

"I saw it, Beetle. Aunt Zelda was scrying in her pond and we saw moving pictures of what happened. It was weird—and really sad too. . . . The midwife snatched me away from Sarah—I mean Mum—when I was only a few hours old. She told Mum I was dead, but it was a plot. I was wanted by DomDaniel to be his Apprentice—because I am the seventh son of a seventh son. The midwife took me to the Young Army Nursery, where DomDaniel's Nurse was going to come and collect me. But when she arrived she was in a hurry and really flustered and she just grabbed the first baby she saw—the midwife's baby. I think because the midwife was cuddling him when the Nurse arrived. The midwife went crazy—really crazy—when the guard stopped her from chasing after her own baby.

"Serves her right," Beetle remembered saying.

"Yeah. I s'pose it does. But what a horrible thing to happen—to her baby, I mean. And of course the midwife would have told everyone that I was not her child but they wouldn't have listened. They never listened to anything. As far as they were concerned I was the midwife's baby who she had suddenly abandoned. And that is how I got taken into the Young Army. I suppose I am in the Young Army register under the name of the midwife's child, which is weird. But the weirdest thing is I now know that I've met the midwife again—she was the landlady of that horrible guesthouse that Jen took us to in the Port. Aunt Zelda found that out and told me."

Beetle closed the register and handed it back to the clerk—along with the pair of white cotton gloves she had made him put on. *So it was true, Merrin Meredith was Nurse Meredith's—Nursie's—son.*

Beetle walked slowly back to the Manuscriptorium, thinking of those few moments just over fourteen years ago that had affected so many people's lives. Now he understood Marcia's reply when he had questioned her about the wisdom of letting Merrin go free. "Everyone deserves a chance to be with his mother, Beetle," she had said. At the time Beetle had actually spent so long gathering the courage to ask Marcia the question—and was so amazed when she had actually answered him civilly—that he had not liked to ask what she meant. Now he understood.

SNORRI AND ALFRÚN

Snorri and her mother, Alfrún, were away for the Longest Night and missed the **Darke Domaine**. They returned the morning of **The Great Undoing**.

The previous year, Snorri had rescued her trader's barge—which actually

belonged to her mother—from some boat thieves who had stolen it from Quarantine Dock. She had brought the *Alfrún* back to the Castle where Jannit Maarten's boatyard restored it.

Snorri had become unhappy living in the Palace with the Heaps. She missed her home and, she was surprised to find, she missed her mother too. It seemed to Snorri that she and Nicko had spent enough time together. Five hundred years, she said to Nicko, was long enough for anyone. It was time for them to do something new with their lives. Nicko had not answered, which had annoyed Snorri. The arrival of *Alfrún* Snorrelssen had made Snorri's decision for her. It was time to go home.

And so Snorri and her mother took the *Alfrún* out to sea for a test run. The barge performed perfectly and the decision was made—they would return home to the Land of the Long Nights. Snorri dreaded telling Nicko; she was sure he would not understand but to her surprise he did.

Snorri, Ullr and *Alfrún* left the day after the MidWinter Feast. As they waved good-bye to the little group gathered on the Palace Landing Stage, Snorri was surprised at how tearful she felt seeing Nicko waving to her as they drew away from the Palace and headed for the fast waters in the middle of the river. Snorri waved until the *Alfrún* disappeared around Raven's Rock and she could see Nicko no more, then she went below into the beautiful cherrywood cabin that her father, Olaf, had built. As Snorri sat in the cabin, looking up through the hatch at her mother on the tiller, an unexpected feeling of happiness came over her. She was going home. All would be well. It was then she saw the ghost of Olaf Snorrelssen sitting on the bench in the shadows opposite, smiling at her.

Snorri whispered, "*Papa?*"

Olaf nodded happily. "Snorri," he said. He smiled. They were a family once more.

On the Palace Landing Stage, Nicko stood gazing through the thickly falling snow at the departing *Alfrún*. And when, at last, the trading barge had disappeared from view, Nicko felt as if a weight was lifted from his shoulders. He was free.

THE ROOM BEHIND THE BIG RED DOOR

Sarah and Silas set up home once more in the room behind the Big Red Door. Sarah went over to the Palace every day to see Jenna, but the Palace was now Jenna's home—not hers. The room behind the Big Red Door soon regained its previous lived-in look, and sometimes Sarah found it hard to believe they had ever left.

Thunder survived the **Darke Domaine** and took up residence in the stables at the back of a small house on Snake Slipway. Sarah cleaned the room from

top to bottom until there was no clue that a horse had once spent a week there, although, in damp weather, Sarah still thought she could smell horse poo.

Ethel was never quite right after the **Darke Domaine**. The duck had had a difficult start in life and now became so nervous that she would not let Sarah out of her sight. Sarah made a duck bag—with two holes for Ethel’s legs to poke through—and she carried Ethel with her wherever she went. Silas harrumphed a lot about *that daft duck bag* but Sarah and Silas were far too happy being back home again to let a duck in a bag come between them.

THE DRAGON TRAIL

Dragon blood is indelible and the drips of blood from Spit Fyre’s head wound left a track right across the Castle, from the South Gate to the Wizard Tower. While some drips fell onto roofs, most left a winding trail along tiny alleyways. The dragon blood track soon became a favorite trail for Castle children and visitors alike.

Spit Fyre recovered well from his injuries and, now that he was truly an adult dragon, he began to calm down a little—but only a *little*.

Darke Week: RESULTS

Septimus passed his **Darke Week**.

Immediately below, for your interest, is part of a piece of paper found ripped to pieces in Marcia’s wastepaper bin. Following that is Septimus’s report sheet with Marcia’s comments.

WIZARD TOWER SAFETY COMMITTEE

Basic Health and Safety Report for Apprentice projects. Must be completed by Wizard Tutor.

APPRENTICE PROJECT: Darke Week
NAME OF APPRENTICE: *Septimus Heap*
WIZARD TUTOR: *Marcia Overstrand*
AREA OF OPERATION: *the Darke Halls*

Risk-benefit analysis scaled 0 to 49 (where 49 is the greatest and 0 is the least).

RISKS: 49++ *What do you expect?*
BENEFITS: 49+++

- Do you consider that the risk-benefit ratio was acceptable? *Of course I do.*
- Would you undertake this assessment in the same manner again? *Never again, thank you.*
- What sanitary facilities were provided? *Oh, for goodness’ sake . . .*

EXTRAORDINARY APPRENTICE DARKE WEEK ASSESSMENT

TUTOR: *Marcia Overstrand. ExtraOrdinary Wizard.*

APPRENTICE: *Septimus Heap. Senior ExtraOrdinary Apprentice.*

Apprentice Assessment scaled 0 to 7 (where 7 is the greatest and 0 is the least).

RELEVANCE OF CHOSEN DARKE TASK: 7.

Highly relevant.

METHOD OF ENTERING THE DARKE: 6.

Septimus, I dock one mark due to your unauthorized use of the Darke Disguise. I do realize that without it you would not have survived, but even so, I feel the rules must be given some respect here.

MAGYKAL SKILL: 7.

Your Revoke of the Banish was word perfect first time. You used your past connection with the Flyte Charm to great effect (see me later about supervised access to this from now on). You also attained Synchronicity with a dragon. What more can I say?

DECISION-MAKING AND INITIATIVE: 7.

You used your initiative to decide where to enter the Darke and why. You used logic to reason your way through the Darke Halls. Excellent.

GENERAL CONDUCT: 7.

You were polite to the young ghost and showed great presence of mind when encountering Tertius Fume. Very good indeed.

METHOD OF EXITING THE DARKE: 7.

Very good.

SUCCESS OF DARKE TASK: 7.

Totally successful.

TUTOR'S ASSESSMENT OF SUITABILITY OF CANDIDATE TO INCORPORATE A BALANCED AND RESPONSIBLE USE OF THE DARKE IN HIS OR HER FUTURE STUDIES: 8.

I consider this candidate eminently suitable. I also reserve my right to give what mark I choose.

TOTAL SCORE OUT OF 49: 49.

DARKE WEEK RESULT: *(strike through those that do not apply)*

~~FAIL:-no retake permitted~~

~~FAIL:-retake permitted~~

~~BORDERLINE~~ ~~Pass:-retake theory only~~

PASS

PASS WITH ~~M~~ERIT

PASS WITH DISTINCTION

*Signed: Marcia Overstrand
And on behalf of: Alther Mella. Thank you, Septimus.*

[About the Author](#)

ANGIE SAGE was born in London and grew up in the Thames Valley, London, and Kent. She now lives in Somerset in a very old house that has a secret tunnel below it. The first five books in the Septimus Heap series are international bestsellers. She is also the author of the Araminta Spookie series. Visit her online at www.septimusheap.com or follow [@AngieSageAuthor](https://twitter.com/AngieSageAuthor) on Twitter.

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins authors.

[Also by Angie Sage](#)

*Septimus Heap, Book One: **Magyk***

*Septimus Heap, Book Two: **Flyte***

*Septimus Heap, Book Three: **Physik***

*Septimus Heap, Book Four: **Queste***

*Septimus Heap, Book Five: **Syren***

*Septimus Heap: **The Magykal Papers***

*Araminta Spookie: **My Haunted House***

*Araminta Spookie: **The Sword in the Grotto***

*Araminta Spookie: **Frognapped***

*Araminta Spookie: **Vampire Brat***

*Araminta Spookie: **Ghostsitters***

Credits

JACKET ART © 2011 BY MARK ZUG

JACKET DESIGN BY JOEL TIPPIE

Copyright

Septimus Heap Book Six: Darke
Text copyright © 2011 by Angie Sage
Illustrations copyright © 2011 by Mark Zug

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse-engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.
ISBN 978-0-06-124242-7 (trade bdg.) — ISBN 978-0-06-124243-4 (lib. bdg.)
ISBN 978-0-06-204943-8 (international edition)

Epub Edition © 2011 ISBN: 9780062084576
Typography by Joel Tippie
11 12 13 14 15 CG/RRDH 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
25 Ryde Road (P.O. Box 321)
Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia
www.harpercollins.com.au/ebooks

Canada

HarperCollins Canada
2 Bloor Street East - 20th Floor
Toronto, ON, M4W, 1A8, Canada
<http://www.harpercollins.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollins.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollins.co.uk>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollins.com>

SEPTIMUS HEAP

✦ BOOK SIX ✦

Darke

Index



ANGIE SAGE

National Bestselling Author

SEPTIMUS HEAP

✦ BOOK SEVEN ✦

Fyre



THE
STUNNING
CONCLUSION
TO THE
MAGYKAL
SERIES!

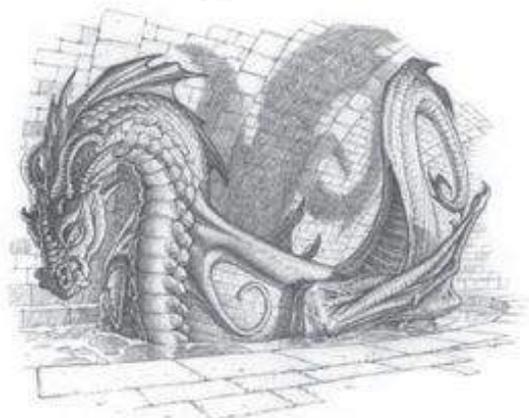
ANGIE SAGE

National Bestselling Author

SEPTIMUS HEAP

✦ BOOK SEVEN ✦

Fyre



ANGIE SAGE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK ZUG



KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS
An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Dedication

*For my father and mother,
thank you*

CONTENTS

[Dedication](#)

[Map](#)

[Prologue: Harbinger](#)

[1 - What Lies Beneath](#)

[2 - A White Wedding](#)

[3 - Puddles](#)

[4 - Migration](#)

[5 - The Great Chamber of Alchemie](#)

[6 - Listening](#)

[7 - False Trails](#)

[8 - Keeper's Cottage](#)

[9 - Triplets](#)

[10 - The Cloud Flask](#)

[11 - Dragon Fyre](#)

[12 - The Chamber of the Heart](#)

[13 - Welcome Back](#)

[14 - **DisEnchantment**](#)

[15 - The Last Day](#)

[16 - Missing](#)

[17 - Falling](#)

[18 - Transports](#)

[19 - What Might Have Been](#)

[20 - Witchery](#)

[21 - What Is to Be](#)

[22 - Relations](#)

[23 - The Alchemie Chimney](#)

[24 - Not a Good Morning](#)

[25 - The Stranger Chamber](#)

[26 - Bad Timing](#)

[27 - Mystery Reading](#)

[28 - Bait](#)

[29 - Doorstepping](#)

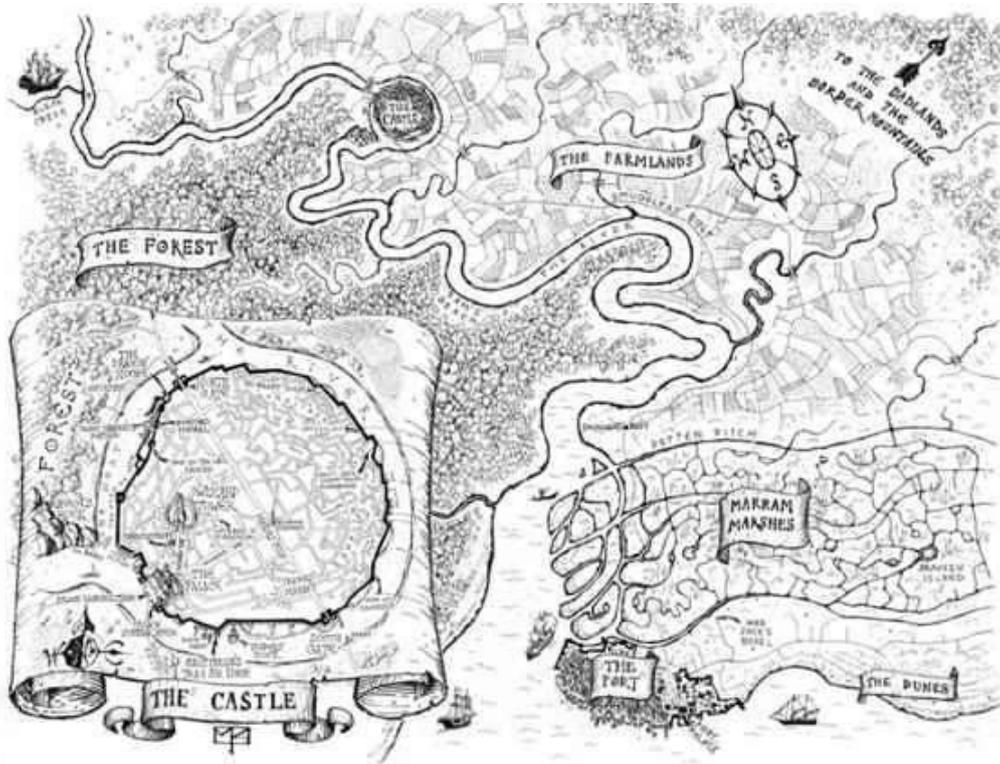
[30 - Port Palace](#)

[31 - Jenna's Journey](#)

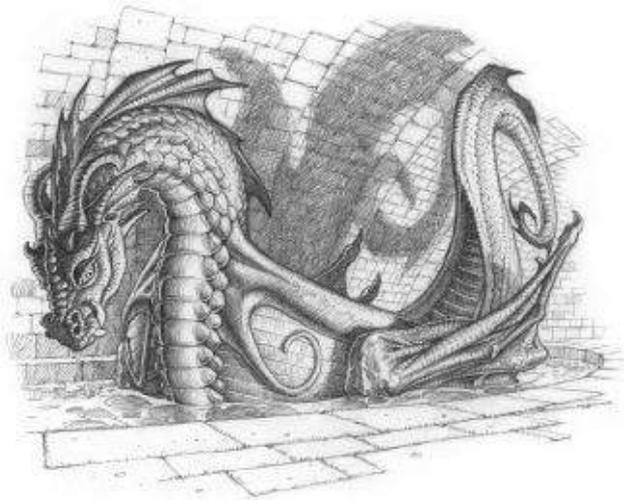
[32 - Heaps versus Heaps](#)
[33 - Scorpion](#)
[34 - Smugglers' Bolt](#)
[35 - Sprung](#)
[36 - To the Castle](#)
[37 - Exits](#)
[38 - Dragons Away](#)
[39 - Intruders](#)
[40 - Keepers](#)
[41 - Deep Trouble](#)
[42 - Foryx](#)
[43 - Rocky Times](#)
[44 - Somewhere](#)
[45 - Flood](#)
[46 - Showdown](#)
[47 - **Fyre**](#)
[48 - A Queen](#)
[49 - An ExtraOrdinary Wizard](#)
[Endings](#)
[Thank You](#)

[About the Author and Illustrator](#)
[Also by Angie Sage](#)
[Praise for Septimus Heap](#)
[Credits](#)
[Back Ad](#)
[Copyright](#)
[About the Publisher](#)

Map



PROLOGUE: **HARBINGER**



A flame burns at midnight. On an island in the wild Marram Marshes, a young woman holds up a lantern. Her long dark hair blows in the warm wind, salty from the sea; the lantern light glints off the gold circlet around her head and the golden edging to her long red robes—the robes of a Castle Queen.

The Queen is not alone. Beside her is an old man with long, wavy white hair held back with an ExtraOrdinary Wizard headband. He is resplendent in purple robes richly embroidered with **Magyk** symbols—this is the very first ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Hotep-Ra.

The island on which they stand is an ancient **Listening Place**, and Hotep-Ra is **Listening** carefully. As he stands statue-still, absorbed in something far away, his frown deepens. “It is as I feared,” he whispers. “They have discovered me at last.”

The Queen does not understand **Magyk**, but she respects it because it once saved her daughter’s life. She nods sadly. She knows that this will take Hotep-Ra away from her forever.

A flame burns at half past midnight. The Queen and Hotep-Ra are underground, and the light from the lantern shows a smooth white wall covered in bright columns of hieroglyphs. The Queen is searching for a symbol. She soon finds it: a blue-and-gold circle enclosing a dragon. She places her hand on the circle and they wait. The Queen sees Hotep-Ra twist the ring on his right index finger: a delicate gold dragon with its tail in its mouth and a bright-green emerald for its eye. The ring is beautifully made,

but the loveliest thing about it is the soft yellow light that comes from deep within and glows in the shadows of his hand.

And now, with a deep, slow rumble, the wall of hieroglyphs begins to move, rolling back to reveal a dark, wide space before them. The Queen smiles at Hotep-Ra. He returns her smile a little sadly and together they step forward.

The Queen holds up her lantern and its light illuminates a pair of brilliant white marble columns that rise up into the darkness. They walk between the columns, and progress slowly across the mosaic floor, bright with reds, yellows, whites and greens. And then they are there. The Queen hands her lantern to Hotep-Ra and he holds it high so that its light shines on the most beautiful creature he has ever seen: his faithful Dragon Boat.

The Dragon Boat's hull is broad and sturdy, built for the sea, and recently Hotep-Ra has gilded it. This—and the mast with its azure sail—is the inanimate part of the boat. The rest is living dragon. Tucked neatly alongside the hull are the dragon's wings, shimmering folds of green. Her head and neck are the prow and her tail is the stern. The half boat, half dragon lies in a deep sleep, alone in the darkness of an ancient underground temple, but she is awakened by the opening of the wall. Drowsily she raises her head, arching her neck upward like that of a swan. The Queen approaches the dragon quietly, careful not to alarm her. The dragon opens her eyes, she bows her head and the Queen loops her arms around the dragon's neck.

Hotep-Ra hangs back. He looks at his Dragon Boat, resting on the mosaic floor as if waiting for the water to rise and carry her away to distant lands. Indeed, that was what he had planned for her, to take her on the last journey of his old age. But now that his enemies have tracked him down, Hotep-Ra knows he must leave his Dragon Boat hidden safe below the ground, keeping her secrets from them. He sighs. The Dragon Boat must await the time when she will be needed by another Dragon Master. Hotep-Ra does not know who that will be, but he knows that one day he will meet him.

The Queen promises the Dragon Boat that she will return in a year to the day, but Hotep-Ra promises the Dragon Boat nothing. He pats the dragon's nose, then turns and walks quickly from the temple. The Queen runs after him and together they watch the wall of hieroglyphs rumble closed once more.

They walk slowly along the sandy passageway, which takes them to one of the hidden exits near the edge of the island. There, Hotep-Ra pulls off his Dragon Ring. To the Queen's amazement, he tosses the ring onto the sandy floor as if it were nothing to him. It lies on the floor, its light fading away.

“But that's your *ring*,” whispers the Queen, shocked.

Hotep-Ra gives a weary smile. “Not anymore,” he says.

The Queen and the ExtraOrdinary Wizard return to the Castle, but Hotep-Ra

does not leave right away. He knows he is running the risk of drawing his enemies to all that he cares about, but there are things he wishes to do in order to make the Castle and its Queen as safe as he can.

Hotep-Ra **Engenders** protected Ways to allow the Queen to visit the Dragon Boat and other places that are special to her in safety. He fills his Wizard Tower with all the **Magykal** power he can spare and sets up a system of **Questes** for the brightest and best ExtraOrdinary Apprentices. That way he believes that he will still get news of the Castle and will be able to give advice if needed. He asks the Queen to visit his beloved Dragon Boat every MidSummer Day, and deep in the Castle wall he creates a Dragon House as a place for the Dragon Boat to rest when one day it will be safe for her to come to the Castle.

But Hotep-Ra has stayed too long.

Forty-nine hours after he **Listened** to his enemies approaching, Hotep-Ra is on the Palace landing stage, saying farewell to the Queen. It is a dark and thunderous day, with a spattering of rain that mirrors the Queen's feelings about Hotep-Ra's departure.

Her barge lies ready to take him to the Port, where he has a ship waiting. As Hotep-Ra is about to step aboard there is a massive clap of thunder and the Queen screams. But she does not scream because of the thunder; she screams because of what she sees flying out from the black cloud overhead—two Masters of the **Darke** Arts, Warrior Wizards, Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn. The Wizards shoot down from the sky, a trail of darkness streaming from their robes, which spread out like ravens' wings, showing their iridescent blue-green armor beneath. Like two huge birds of prey the Wizards drop down, their piercing green eyes focused on their quarry below.

Hotep-Ra's enemies have found him.

The last time they found him, Hotep-Ra was saved by the Dragon Boat, but now he knows he will have to face them alone. The Queen, however, has other ideas. From her belt she takes a tiny crossbow and loads it. And then, as Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn swoop in for what they think will be the kill, the Queen shoots the bolt.

It hits Dramindonnor just below the fourth rib on his left-hand side. He crashes to the ground, and the landing stage shudders with the force. But the **Darke** Wizard merely winces and as the blood gushes out, he **Seals** his heart. Meanwhile the Queen has reloaded her crossbow and is lining up the second bolt. Hotep-Ra panics; he knows the Queen has no idea what she is dealing with. He throws a **SafeShield** around the Queen—much to her disgust—but not before she has also shot Shamandrigger in the heart. The Warrior Wizard drops to the ground, but he too **Seals** the wound just in time.

The Wizards get to their feet, and the Queen is horrified to see they are

huge—ten feet tall—and clasp the notorious **Volatile Wands** that Hotep-Ra has described to her. Like machines, in perfect time—*one-two, one-two*—they advance on the **SafeShield**. They speak one sentence between them.

“For this.”

“We will.”

“Kill you and.”

“Your descendants.”

“We will.”

“Never.”

“Forget.”

Under the assault of the **Volatile Wands**, the Queen’s **SafeShield** begins to fail. Hotep-Ra grasps his **Flyte Charm** and shoots up into the air, knowing that the Wizards will follow him.

And they do.

In these ancient days, the Art of **Flyte** is yet to be lost. But it is still unusual enough to bring the Castle below to a standstill, especially as it involves a fight between three powerful Wizards. But soon the spectators are racing for cover as **Thunderflashes** are thrown and the foundations of buildings begin to shake. The Castle people become anxious. Although many remember a time when there was no Wizard Tower or ExtraOrdinary Wizard, they have grown to like Hotep-Ra. He has been a good man and no problem has been too small for his **Magyk** to help. As they peer nervously from their windows, they become very worried. Two Wizards against one is not fair. And it looks like Hotep-Ra is getting the worst of it.

Hotep-Ra may be old and no longer strong, but he is still clever. He lures the **Darke** Wizards to the golden pyramid at the top of the Wizard Tower where he stands, delicately balanced on its very tip—a tiny silver square—concentrating all his **Magykal** power for one last chance.

To the **Darke** Wizards, Hotep-Ra looks like a wounded animal at bay. They sense victory and begin a favorite **Destruction**. They fly around the top of the pyramid, encircling Hotep-Ra in a blistering circle of **Fyre**. This, however, suits Hotep-Ra very well. He begins to chant a long and complex **Illusion Incantation**, the sound of which the roaring of the flames conveniently drowns.

But the circle of **Fyre** draws ever closer and the two **Darke** Wizards hover, waiting for the moment it will meet and finally **Hex** Hotep-Ra. Then they will have a little fun with their enemy—with the help of a spider or two.

Hotep-Ra is reaching the end of his **Incantation**. The heat of the **Fyre** is blistering; he can smell the wool of his robes singeing and he can wait no longer. To the shock of the **Darke** Wizards, Hotep-Ra shoots up through the circle of **Fyre**, trailing flames behind him. He shouts the last words of the **Illusion Incantation** and becomes **Invisible**.

The **Illusion** works perfectly. Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn stare at each other in horror—in place of his friend, each sees Hotep-Ra and draws the conclusion that Hotep-Ra has killed him. From within his **Invisibility**, Hotep-Ra watches as, maddened with fury and grief, the **Darke** Wizards chase each other across the rooftops and head out from the Castle.

Hotep-Ra would like to leave them to their fate, but he knows he must make sure they do not return. As he flies off after the Wizards, Hotep-Ra hears a tremendous crash. He looks down to see the top of the golden pyramid buried point down in the Wizard Tower Courtyard below—the circle of **Fyre** has cut through it like a wire through butter.

Hotep-Ra tails the Warrior Wizards to Bleak Creek, where he watches them battle for a day and a night—so evenly matched that neither can gain any advantage. Finally, in a frenzy, they circle each other faster and faster, swooping low over the water until they create a deep, dark whirlpool just outside the mouth of the creek. The force of the whirlpool is so great that it drags the Wizards down with it, shrieking with rage as they go.

Hotep-Ra follows. Using the **Darke** Art of Suspension Under Water (Hotep-Ra is a Master of many **Darke** arts, although he usually chooses not to use them) he dives in after the Wizards to make an end of them. But at the bottom of the whirlpool he finds that the vortex has broken through the riverbed and entered a cavern in the **Darke Halls**, which is an ancient refuge for all things evil. Hotep-Ra drags the Wizards from the entrance to the **Darke Halls**; the Wizards fight him all the way but desperation lends Hotep-Ra strength. With his last remnants of energy he hauls the Wizards up to the surface and, like a cork from a bottle, he emerges from the depths, dragging the **Darke** Wizards with him.

The Queen's barge is waiting for him. She has followed him to Bleak Creek, and now the barge's rowers are circling while the Queen stands at the prow, anxiously staring at the vortex: she knows that Hotep-Ra is somewhere beneath the water. But when he surfaces, the Queen is horrified—all she can see are the two **Darke** Wizards.

Hotep-Ra is now too weak to sustain his **Magyk**. First his **Illusion** and then his **Invisibility** slip away. Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn see each other for the first time in twenty-four hours—and then they see Hotep-Ra floundering beside them. For a few long seconds all three Wizards stare at one another, shocked. Clutching the **Flyte Charm**, Hotep-Ra rises up from the water. Saarn and Naarn grab on to his robes and a tangle of Wizards lands on the Queen's barge.

The Queen knows that Hotep-Ra is too weak to win the fight. She takes off the **Magykal** gold ring he has given her to protect her from her enemies—a ring that may only be destroyed in pure Alchemical **Fyre**. “**Commit** them,” she says, handing him the ring. “**Quick!**”

“It is your ring,” Hotep-Ra whispers, handing the ring back to her. “You must say the **Committal**. You do remember?”

The Queen nods—of course she remembers. How could she forget something made especially for her? (It is, in fact, the only **Magyk** that the Queen does remember.)

The Queen begins to chant the **Committal**. The words roll over the **Darke** Wizards like the shadow of an eclipse; they struggle but they are too weak to fight back. Hotep-Ra listens anxiously to each word but he does not need to worry—when a Queen wishes to remember something, she remembers it. At last the Queen reaches the **Keystone** word, “Hathor.” There is a blinding flash of purple light and the Queen throws the ring into it. Darkness falls. The Queen speaks the last seven words of her **Incantation** and at the last word, “**Commit**,” Time itself is suspended. For seven long seconds the world stands still.

From within the blackness come two roars of anguish, like the sound of wounded beasts. A great howl of a hurricane descends on them, the screeching of the wind drowning out the screams of the Ring Wizards, and hurls the Queen and Hotep-Ra to the deck. The wind circles three times and then it is gone, leaving the Queen’s barge in tatters, the rowers prostrate with terror, and an unearthly silence, which is broken by a delicate *plink*. A gold ring with two green faces imprisoned in it tumbles to the deck and rolls into a pool of dirty water.

When Hotep-Ra returns to the Wizard Tower his old Apprentice, Talmar Ray Bell, tells him that the fallen top of the pyramid has shrunk. She does not know why.

But Hotep-Ra knows why. He knows he has narrowly escaped a most dreaded **Darke Hex**. A **Hex** that does not kill an opponent right away but reduces his size so that he becomes prey to the most terrifying creatures of all: insects. It is an ancient **Darke** pastime, to place a victim of such a **Hex** into a spider’s web and watch the result through an **Enlarging Glass**. Hotep-Ra shudders. He has a fear of spiders.

The tiny top of the golden pyramid lies on the bottom of a large pyramid-shaped crater—a sparkle of gold on the red Castle earth, still shrinking. An anxious group of Wizards are guarding it. (The reputation of the Wizard Tower has spread and it now houses thirteen Ordinary Wizards.) Talmar Ray Bell clammers down into the crater, picks up the miniature golden pyramid and gives it to Hotep-Ra.

Hotep-Ra puts a **Stop** on the **Hex**. The little pyramid sits heavy in his hand, a fiery gold, glinting in the sun. Hotep-Ra smiles. “You will be the **Keye**,” he tells the pyramid.

Once again Hotep-Ra is on the Palace landing stage, saying a sad farewell to the Queen. This time he is not alone. Talmar Ray Bell has insisted on coming with him—Hotep-Ra is so weakened by his fight with the **Darke** Wizards that Talmar fears he will not be able to make the journey on his own.

Hotep-Ra gives the Queen a farewell gift. It is a little book called *The Queen Rules*. It is bound in soft red leather with gold corners and an intricate clasp, and on it is embossed a drawing of the Dragon Boat. It is not his fault that a thousand or so years later the binding falls to pieces, the pages drop out and the **Committal** is lost. No bookbinder, not even a **Magykal** one, can make a book last forever. But memories will last, if they are handed down through the generations.

Hotep-Ra takes the Queen's barge to the Port. There, a ship is waiting for him and they set sail. The sea is calm and the sun shines. Hotep-Ra spends most of his time on deck, storing up memories of the open air and sea breezes to tide him over the long enclosed times ahead in his final resting place—the House of Foryx.

Night falls and the ship approaches the **Enchanted**—and much feared—Isles of Syren. Hotep-Ra sees the **Lights** shining from the four cat-shaped lighthouses that surround the Isles. He waits until the ship is safely past and all but he have gone below to sleep. Then, by the light of the full moon, Hotep-Ra drops the Two-Faced Ring into the ocean. As it tumbles down through the water, moonlight glints on the gold and an ugly cowfish snaps it up.

And there begins the long journey of the Two-Faced Ring back to the Wizard Tower. Where it now lies. Waiting.

1

WHAT LIES BENEATH



In the Vaults of the Manuscriptorium, The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath was unrolled on a large table. Lit by a bright lantern that hung above the table, the large and fragile sheet of opalescent **Magykal** paper lay weighted down by standard Manuscriptorium paperweights—squares of lead backed with blue felt. *The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath* was a map of all the Ice Tunnels that ran below the Castle—apart from the section that traveled out to the Isles of Syren. As its name suggested, the *Live Plan* was a little more than just a plan. **Magykally**, it showed what was happening in the Ice Tunnels at that very moment.

Gathered around it were the new Chief Hermetic Scribe, O. Beetle Beetle; Romilly Badger, the Inspection Clerk; and Partridge, the new Scribe of Maps. If you had walked into the Vaults at that moment it would not have been clear who actually was the Chief Hermetic Scribe. Beetle's long blue-and-gold coat of office had been banished to a nearby hook because its gold-banded sleeves scratched the delicate *Live Plan* and he was wearing his comfortable old Admiral's jacket, which kept out the chill of the Vaults. With his dark hair flopping forward over his eyes, Beetle looked very much at home as he

leaned over the *Live Plan*, concentrating hard.

Suddenly Romilly—a slight girl with light brown hair and what Partridge thought was a cute, goofy smile—squeaked with excitement. A faint luminous splodge was moving along a wide tunnel below the Palace.

“Well spotted,” said Beetle. “Ice Wraiths are not easy to see. I reckon that’s Moaning Hilda.”

“There’s another one!” Romilly was on a roll. “Ooh . . . and look, what’s that?” Her finger stabbed at a tiny shadow near the old Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik.

Partridge was impressed. There was a minuscule blip at the end of Romilly’s finger. “Is that an Ice Wraith too?” he asked.

Beetle peered closer. “No, it’s too shadowy. And slow. Look—it is hardly moving at all compared to Moaning Hilda, who is way over there now. And it is too well defined; you can see it actually has a shape.”

Romilly was puzzled. “Like a person, you mean?”

“Yes,” said Beetle. “Just like a—*bother!*”

“It’s gone,” said Romilly sadly. “That’s a shame. It can’t have been a person then, can it? Someone can’t suddenly disappear. It must have been a ghost.”

Beetle shook his head; it was too solid for a ghost. But the *Live Plan* was telling him that all the Ice Tunnel hatches remained **Sealed**, so there was nowhere the person could have gone. Only a ghost could disappear from the middle of an Ice Tunnel like that.

“Weird,” he said. “I could have sworn that was human.”

It was human—a human named Marcellus Pye.

Marcellus Pye, recently reinstated Castle Alchemist, had just dropped down through a hatch at the bottom of an unmapped shaft, which went close enough to an Ice Tunnel to show on the *Live Plan*. As soon as he was through the hatch Marcellus knew he was safe—the *Live Plan* did not show anything lower than this level.

A pole with foot-bars led down from the hatch and Marcellus climbed down it with his eyes closed. He reached a flimsy metal platform and stood, not daring to open his eyes, not believing that after nearly five hundred years he was *back in the Chamber of Fyre*.

However, Marcellus did not need to open his eyes to know where he was. A familiar metallic sweetness that found its way to the back of his tongue told him he was back home, and brought with it a flood of memories—the tear that had run up from the base of the Cauldron, the sharp *crack* of the splitting **Fyre** rods and the heat of the **Fyre** as it spun out of control. Swarms of Drummins working ceaselessly, trying to contain the damage. The smell of burning rock as the flames spread beneath the Castle, setting the old timber

houses alight. The panic, the fear as the Castle threatened to become a raging inferno. Marcellus remembered it all. He prepared himself for a scene of terrible devastation, took a deep breath and decided to open his eyes on the count of three.

One . . . two . . . three!

A jolt of surprise ran through him—*it was as if nothing had happened*. Marcellus had expected black soot to cover everything, but there was none—quite the reverse. Illuminated by the neatly placed **Fyre** Globes, which still burned with their everlasting flames, the metal platform shone. Marcellus picked up a **Fyre** Globe, cupping it in his hands. Marcellus smiled. The flame inside the ball licked against the glass where his hands touched it, like a faithful dog welcoming its owner home. He replaced the ball beside his foot and his smile faded. He was indeed home, but he was home alone. No Drummin could have survived.

Marcellus knew that he must now look over the edge of the dizzyingly high platform on which he was standing. This was when he would know the worst. As he gingerly walked forward, he felt the whole structure perform a slight shimmy. A feeling of panic shot up through his feet—Marcellus knew exactly how far he had to fall.

Nervously he peered over the edge.

Far below lay the great **Fyre** Cauldron, its mouth a perfect circle of blackness ringed by a necklace of **Fyre** Globes. Marcellus was immensely relieved—*the Fyre Cauldron was intact*. He stared down into the depths, allowing his eyes to become accustomed to the dark.

Soon he began to make out more details. He saw the metal tracery that was embedded in the rock and covered the cavern like a huge spider's web gleaming with a dull silver shine. He saw the peppering of dark circles in the rock that marked the entrance to the hundreds, maybe thousands, of Drummin burrows. He saw the familiar patterns of **Fyre** Globes that marked out paths of the walkways strung across the cavern hundreds of feet below and, best of all, he could now see inside the Cauldron the graphite glitter of one hundred and thirty nine stars—the ends of the **Fyre** rods that stood upright like fat little pens in an inkpot.

Marcellus shook his head in utter amazement. He had found his **Fyre** Chamber cleaned, repaired, neatly put in mothballs and, by the look of it, ready to go. The Drummins must have survived much longer than he had realized. They had worked so hard and *he had never even known*. Something caught in his throat; he swallowed hard and wiped his eyes. Suddenly Marcellus experienced what he called a Time Slip—a flashback to all those years ago, when he had been standing on the very spot where he was now.

His loyal Drummins are swarming around him. Julius Pike, ExtraOrdinary

Wizard and one-time friend, is on the upper platform, yelling above the roar of the flames, “Marcellus. I am closing this down!”

“Julius, please. Just a few hours more,” he is begging. “We can control the **Fyre**. I know we can.” Beside him on the platform old Duglius Drummin is saying, “ExtraOrdinary, we Drummins do guarantee it, we do.”

But Julius Pike doesn’t even recognize a Drummin as a living thing. He completely ignores Duglius. “You have had your chance,” Julius yells. “I am **Sealing** the water tunnels and **Freezing** them. It is over, Marcellus.”

He is dragged toward the hatch by a bunch of thickset Wizards. He grabs hold of Duglius, determined to save at least one Drummin. But Duglius looks him in the eye and says sternly, “Alchemist, put me down. My work is not done.”

The last thing he sees as the hatch slams shut is the old Drummin sadly returning his gaze—Duglius knows this is the end.

After that, Marcellus had cared no more. He had handed Julius his Alchemie **Keye**; he had even helped to **Seal** the Great Chamber of Alchemie and done nothing more than shrug halfheartedly when Julius, smiling the kind of smile a pike would if it could, had told him that all memories of the Chamber of **Fyre** would be expunged. “Forever, Marcellus. It shall never be spoken of again. And in the future, no one will know what is here. No one. All records will be destroyed.”

Marcellus shook himself out of the memory and the distant echoes of the past faded. He told himself that all were long gone. Even the redoubtable Julius Pike was now no more than a ghost, said to have gone back to where he grew up—a farm near the Port. But he, Marcellus Pye, was still here, and he had work to do. He had the **Fyre** to start and the Two-Faced Ring to destroy.

Marcellus swung himself onto the metal ladder that led down from the upper platform and cautiously began the descent into the **Fyre** Chamber—or the Deeps, as the Drummins had called it. The ladder shook with each step as Marcellus headed doggedly downward toward a wide platform far below from which yet more **Fyre** Globes winked up at him. Some ten long minutes later, he set foot on what was known as the Viewing Station, and stopped to take stock.

Marcellus was now level with the top of the **Fyre** Cauldron. He peered down at the star-shaped tops of the **Fyre** rods glistening with the dull shine that undamaged **Fyre** rods possessed. The last time he had seen them they were on fire, disintegrating before his eyes and now . . . Marcellus shook his head in admiration. How had the Drummins done it?

A narrow walkway known as the Inspection Circle ran around the rim of the Cauldron. It was made of metal lattice, which Marcellus could see had been repaired where it had buckled in the heat. Very carefully, he stepped

down onto it, holding tight to the guardrails on either side. From his tool belt he took a small hammer, known as a drummer, and clasp it tightly he set off. Every few paces he stopped and tapped the metal rim of the **Fyre** Cauldron, listening intently. To his ears it appeared to be sound, although he knew his hearing was nowhere near as acute as it needed to be for the job.

This was what the Drummins had done all day, all night, all the time. They had swarmed over the Cauldron, drum, drum, drumming with their tiny hammers, listening to the sounds of the metal, understanding everything it told them. Marcellus knew he was a poor substitute for a Drummin but he did the best he could. After walking the Inspection Circle, he returned to the Viewing Station, knowing that he could put off no longer the thing he had been dreading the most. He must go down to the floor of the Chamber of **Fyre**.

A flight of curved metal steps wound their way around the belly of the Cauldron down into the dimness below, which was lit by a few scattered **Fyre** Globes. Slowly, Marcellus descended into the depths and the smell of damp earth came up to meet him. On the bottom step, he stopped, gathering the courage to step onto the ground. Marcellus was convinced that the cavern floor must be strewn with the remains of the Drummins and he could not bear the thought of crunching their delicate little bones like eggshells underfoot.

It was some minutes before Marcellus stepped off. To his relief there was no sickening crunch. He took another step—on tiptoe—then another, and felt nothing below his feet but bare earth. Carefully, Marcellus tiptoed around the base of the Cauldron, tapping it with his hammer, listening, then moving on. Not once did he tread on anything remotely crunchy. He supposed that the delicate bones had already turned to dust. After a circuit of the underside of the Cauldron, Marcellus knew that all was well.

It was now time to begin the **Fyre**.

Back on the Viewing Station, Marcellus headed off along another frighteningly flimsy walkway that was strung out across the cavern, thirty feet up. He walked cautiously, glad of the light from a corresponding line of **Fyre** Globes placed on the ground. At last he arrived at a chamber burrowed into the rock face at the back of the cavern and stepped inside. He was back in his old control room.

Below the coating of hundreds of years' worth of dust, Marcellus could see that the walls had been repainted white and everything shone—there was no sign of the greasy soot that had covered everything. Marcellus walked across to the far wall where, beside a line of iron levers, there was a large brass wheel set into the rock. Taking a deep breath, Marcellus grasped the wheel. It moved easily. As he slowly turned it, Marcellus could feel the slip and slide, the *clunk* and the *thunk* of the chain of command, which reached up through the rock into the depths of the UnderFlow. Somewhere far above him a sluice

gate opened. A great gurgle echoed around the sooty darkness of Alchemie Quay and the sluggish waters began to move. Marcellus felt the rumble inside the rock face of the tumbling water as it poured through ancient channels and began to fill the reservoir deep within the cavern walls.

Now Marcellus turned his attention to a bank of twenty-one small wheels farther along. Once the **Fyre** was begun, he must have a way of getting rid of excess heat. In the old days the heat had been dispersed through what were now the Ice Tunnels and used to warm the older buildings of the Castle. Marcellus had given the current ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Marcia Overstrand, his word that he would preserve the Ice Tunnels. This meant he needed to open up the secondary venting system—a network of pores that snaked up to the surface of the Castle.

Marcellus dared not risk discovery yet. He needed precious time to set the **Fyre** going, time to prove that it was not a danger to the Castle. Although Marcia had agreed that he could start up the **Fyre**, Marcellus knew that she assumed that the **Fyre** was the small furnace in the Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik. Indeed, that was what he had led Marcia to think. Julius Pike had told Marcellus that he would make sure that no ExtraOrdinary Wizard would *ever* give permission to open up the Chamber of **Fyre** again—and Marcellus had believed him.

And so now Marcellus turned his attention to the little brass wheels that would open heat vents scattered throughout the Castle and wick excess heat safely away from the awakening **Fyre**. Marcellus had given this some thought—the trick was to open vents in places where the unusual heat could be explained away as something else. He took a rumpled piece of paper from his pocket and consulted a list. Counting carefully along, he spun nine selected wheels until they stopped. Marcellus checked his paper again, checked the wheels and stood back satisfied.

By now a red pointer on a dial was telling him that the reservoir was nearly full; Marcellus turned the wheel to close the sluice gate, rechecked his list and left the control room. Job done.

Two hours later, the water was flowing through the Cauldron and the **Fyre** was beginning the slow, gentle process of coming alive once again. Wearily, Marcellus pushed his Alchemie **Keye** into the dip on the lower **Fyre** hatch. He remembered the time, when they were both growing old, that Julius had come to see him. He had given Marcellus back the Alchemie **Keye** because, “*I trust you, Marcellus. I know you will not use it.*” And he hadn’t.

Well, not until now.

Romilly and Partridge had long gone back to work, but in the Vaults, Beetle still watched the *Live Plan*—he knew that what goes down must come up. Beetle’s stomach rumbled and as if on cue, Foxy, Chief Charm Scribe, poked

his head around the half-open door. Beetle looked up.

*Marcellus climbed through the lower **Fyre** hatch. Once again, he was a blip on The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath.*

“Ta-da!” said Foxy. “Sausage sandwich!” He put a neatly wrapped package beside Beetle’s candle. It smelled wonderful.

*Marcellus closed the lower **Fyre** hatch and began to climb—fast.*

“Thanks, Foxy,” said Beetle. He looked back at the plan but his eyes, tired after so much staring, did not focus well enough to see the Marcellus blip. He glanced at the sausage sandwich longingly. He had no idea he was so hungry.

“I’ll unwrap it for you,” said Foxy. “You don’t want sticky stuff on the *Live Plan*.”

Beetle peered at the plan once more.

“Seen something?” asked Foxy.

“Yeah—I think . . .” Beetle pointed to the Marcellus blip.

Foxy leaned forward and his beaky nose cast a shadow over the blip.

*Marcellus reached the upper **Fyre** hatch.*

“Shove over, Foxy,” said Beetle, irritated. “You’re blocking the light.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Beetle looked up. “Sorry, Foxo. Didn’t mean to snap. Thanks for the sandwich.”

*Marcellus was through the upper **Fyre** hatch and off the Live Plan.*

Beetle bit into his sausage sandwich.

And down in the Deeps, the **Fyre** began to wake.

2

A WHITE WEDDING



The Big Freeze had come in, covering the Castle in a deep blanket of snow.

On a sunny late afternoon in the breathtakingly still air, pencil-thin columns of smoke rose from a thousand chimneys up into the sky. Along Wizard Way a crowd had gathered to watch a wedding procession walk from the Great Arch to the Palace. As the procession passed by, people from the crowd dropped in behind and followed, chattering about the young couple who had just gotten married in the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower: Simon and Lucy Heap.

Simon Heap, with his curly straw-colored hair neatly tied back in a ponytail, wore new blue robes—which, as the son of an Ordinary Wizard, he was entitled to do on his wedding day. The freshly dyed blue was bright and trimmed with traditional white wedding ribbons, which trailed behind him. Lucy Heap (née Gringe) was wearing a long, white, floaty woolen dress, which she had knitted herself and edged with pink fur. She had lovingly

embroidered entwined blue and pink letters “S” and “L” across the skirt. Her mother had objected to this, saying it was bad taste, and for once in matters of taste Mrs. Gringe was probably right. But it was Lucy’s Big Day and what Lucy wanted to do, Lucy was going to do. *No change there, then*, her brother, Rupert, had remarked.

The wedding party progressed down Wizard Way toward the Palace, crunching through newly fallen snow. The sky was a brilliant winter blue, but a small snow cloud directly above obligingly provided a few fat snowflakes, which floated down and landed on Lucy’s beribboned long brown hair, where they settled like confetti. Lucy and Simon were laughing and talking happily to each other, Lucy twirling in the snow to show off her dress and sharing a joke with her new brothers.

Next to Lucy walked her own brother, Rupert, and his girlfriend, Maggie. Simon had considerably more companions: his adoptive sister, Princess Jenna, and his six brothers, including the four Forest Heaps: Sam, twins Edd and Erik, and Jo-Jo.

Mrs. Theodora Gringe, mother of the bride, walked right behind her daughter, occasionally treading on Lucy’s train in her eagerness to be at the front. When they had emerged from the Great Arch, Mrs. Gringe had had to be restrained from actually leading the wedding party down Wizard Way. Lucy’s mother was the proudest mother of the bride that the Castle had seen for a long time. Who would have imagined, thought Theodora Gringe, that the guests at her daughter’s wedding would have included the great dignitaries of the Castle? The ExtraOrdinary Wizard, the Princess and the Chief Hermetic Scribe, and even that weird Alchemist fellow: they were all here. There was no doubt about it—the Gringes were on the way up.

But it was a shame, she thought, about the Heaps. They were a disreputable-looking bunch, and there were so *many* of them. Everywhere she looked she saw the distinctive curly straw-colored Heap hair topping a scruffy-looking individual. The Gringes were massively outnumbered.

A shout of laughter drew Theodora Gringe’s attention to a group of four noisy men who reminded her of Silas Heap and who, she supposed (correctly), were his brothers. Mrs. Gringe grimaced and cast her critical eye over the Heaps she recognized. She grudgingly admitted to herself that Silas and Sarah looked smart enough in their blue and white wedding clothes—if a little eccentric with Sarah carrying that ridiculous duck-in-a-bag. Mrs. Gringe eyed up the duck: ready-plucked, perfect for a stew. Deciding to suggest that to Sarah later, she scrutinized the Heap boys with mixed feelings. The two youngest, Nicko and Septimus, weren’t too bad.

Septimus in particular looked rather fine in his impressive formal Apprentice robes with the long purple ribbons dangling from his the sleeves. He was taller than Mrs. Gringe remembered and she noticed that his typical

Heap hair had actually been combed. She didn't approve of Nicko's sailor's braids wound through his hair, although she supposed that his sober navy-blue boatyard tunic with its rather fetching sailor's collar was acceptable.

But at the sight of the remaining Heaps, Theodora Gringe's mouth puckered in distaste. The four Forest boys were a *disgrace*. She tutted as she watched Sam, Edd, Erik and Jo-Jo straggle along beside the bridegroom like—she searched for the right words—yes, that was it, like a pack of wolverines. At least they could have had the decency to keep to the back.

(While the wedding party had been in the Wizard Tower Courtyard, Mrs. Gringe had tried to push the Forest boys to the back. A struggle had ensued and her husband, Gringe, had had to drag her off. "Let it be, Theodora," he'd hissed. "They are Lucy's brothers now." Mrs. Gringe had felt quite faint at the thought. She had had to take a long look at their trophy guest, Madam Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard, to get over it—which had been a little embarrassing as Marcia had asked her, rather sharply, if there was something wrong.)

Mortified by the memory, Mrs. Gringe sighed and then realized that she had been overtaken by the crowd. Happily unaware that the tall, pointy felt triangle perched on top of her hat gave onlookers the impression that a shark was cruising through the wedding party, stalking the bride, Mrs. Gringe began to elbow her way back up to the front.

At last they reached the Palace Gate. The onlookers clustered around, offering congratulations, gifts and good wishes. Lucy and Simon accepted them all, laughing, exclaiming, handing the gifts to various friends and relations to carry for them.

Sarah Heap linked her arm through Silas's and smiled at him. She felt unbelievably happy. For the first time since the day Septimus had been born, she had all her boys with her. It seemed as though a heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders—in fact right then Sarah felt so light that she would not have been surprised if she had looked down and seen her feet floating a few inches above the pavement. She watched her gaggle of Forest boys, all young men now, laughing and joking with Simon as though he had never been away. ("Away" was the word Sarah used to describe Simon's **Darke** years.) She saw Septimus, confident in his Apprentice robes, talking with her little Jenna, who looked so tall and Queenly now. But best of all, Sarah saw her oldest son's eyes—bright green once more—shining with happiness as he looked around, no longer an outcast, back where he belonged. In the Castle. With his family.

Simon could hardly believe it himself. He was stunned at all the good wishes and the feeling that people actually seemed to *like* him. Not so long ago, when he had lived below the ground in a **Darke** place, he'd had dreams just like this. But he would wake from them in the middle of the night,

distraught when he realized they were only dreams. Now, to his amazement, they had come true.

The crowd continued to grow and it looked as if Simon and Lucy were going to be at the Palace Gate for a while yet. On the edge of the crowd, Marcia Overstrand cut an imposing figure. She was wearing ceremonial ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes of embroidered purple silk lined with the softest, highly expensive Marshmouse fur. From below the robes two pointy shoes made of purple python skin peeked out into the white snow. Marcia's dark wavy hair was held back in a formal gold ExtraOrdinary Wizard headband, which glinted impressively in the winter sunlight. Marcia looked impressive—but prickly. Her green eyes found Septimus and she beckoned irritably to her Apprentice. Septimus excused himself from Jenna and hurried over to Marcia. He had promised Sarah that he would “make sure Marcia didn't take over,” and he could see the warning signs.

“Septimus, have you seen that mess?” Marcia demanded.

Septimus followed the direction of Marcia's pointing finger, although he knew exactly what she was talking about. At the end of Ceremonial Way—which led straight up from the Palace Gate—a tall column of scaffolding covered with a brilliant blue tarpaulin reared up, garish against the snow. Around it were scattered untidy piles of bricks and a clutter of builders' equipment.

“Yes,” Septimus replied—not very helpfully, in Marcia's opinion.

“It's Marcellus, isn't it? What is he doing starting already?”

Septimus shrugged. He didn't see why Marcia was asking him, especially as Marcia still hadn't set a date for him to begin his month with Marcellus. “Why don't you ask *him*?” he said.

Marcia looked a little guilty. “Well, I promised your mother when she came to see me that there would be no . . . er, arguments.”

“Mum came to see you?” asked Septimus, surprised.

Marcia sighed. “Yes. She brought me the guest list and said that if there was anyone on it I didn't like, she would quite understand if I didn't come. Naturally I said that *of course* I was coming to Simon's wedding and it didn't matter at all who was there. She didn't look convinced, I must say. I ended up promising her that I would be, well”—Marcia pulled a face—“*nice* to everyone.”

“Wow.” Septimus glanced across at Sarah Heap with new respect.

“Apprentice! Marcia!” Marcellus Pye's voice caught their attention. Marcellus had escaped the clutches of Mrs. Gringe and was desperate to talk to someone—even Marcia. “Well, well,” he said jovially. “You both look very splendid.”

“Not quite as splendid as you do, Marcellus,” said Marcia, eyeing the Alchemist's new set of black robes, the sleeves of which were slashed to

show the red velvet shirt he was wearing underneath. Both cloak and tunic were liberally sprinkled with gold fastenings that glittered in the sunlight. Septimus could tell that Marcellus had made a big effort. His dark hair was freshly cut in a short bob and brushed forward over his forehead in the old-fashioned style that the Alchemist still favored on special occasions, and he was wearing his favorite pair of red shoes—the ones that Septimus had given him for his birthday two years previously. Marcia noticed the shoes and tutted. They still gave her an uncomfortable twinge of jealousy of which she was not proud.

Marcia waved her arm in the direction of the tarpaulin. “I see you have already begun,” she said, a little disapprovingly. She forced herself to refrain from adding that Marcellus had agreed not to begin building the chimney until the Great Chamber of Alchemie had been reopened.

Septimus saw Marcellus give a guilty start. “Goodness! What, um, makes you say that?”

“Well, I should have thought it was obvious—that rubbish at the end of Ceremonial Way.”

Septimus saw a look of relief fly across Marcellus’s face. “Ah. The *chimney*,” he said. “I’m merely making preparations. I know you do not wish to keep the Two-Faced Ring for longer than necessary. Keeping that ring safe must be a nightmare.”

As she had promised Sarah, Marcia made an effort. “Yes, it is. But at least we have it, Marcellus. Thanks to you.”

Septimus looked impressed. His mother had done a remarkable job, he thought.

Marcellus felt encouraged. He decided to ask a favor. “I wonder, Marcia, if you would object to a change of name?”

Marcia was flummoxed. “I am perfectly happy with Marcia,” she said.

“No, no—I mean the Ceremonial Way. In the old days when the Great Chamber was operating and we had the chimney at the end of it—as we soon will again—it used to be called Alchemie Way. I wonder if you would allow it to resume its old name?”

“Oh,” said Marcia. “Well, I suppose so. It was called Alchemie Way before so it is only right that it is Alchemie Way once more.”

“Thank you!” Marcellus beamed. “And soon Alchemie Way will lead to the newly built Alchemie Chimney.” He sighed. “Well, it will when the builders bother to turn up.” A sudden outbreak of cheering and clapping signaled that the wedding party was beginning to head off to the Palace. Marcellus slipped away before Marcia had a chance to ask any more awkward questions.

Marcia felt dismal. An evening spent with a mixture of Heaps and Gringes did not figure anywhere on her good-nights-out list—not even at the very bottom. She glanced back longingly toward the Wizard Tower, wondering if

she could make a run for it.

Septimus intercepted her glance. “You can’t leave *now*. That would be very rude,” he told her sternly.

“Of course I’m not leaving now,” Marcia said tartly. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

The wedding supper carried on late into the night. Heaps and Gringes did not always mix well and there were a few tricky moments, particularly when Mrs. Gringe put the duck stew suggestion to Sarah Heap. But nothing, not even Mrs. Gringe’s insistence that *it would be no trouble at all to take the duck home, and seeing as it was nice and plump it would do enough for everyone and she could bring the stew over the next day to save Sarah the bother of cooking* could dent Sarah’s happiness for long. She had all her children with her for the first time *ever*, and that was enough for her.

Marcia was surprised to find that her evening was not as bad as she had feared. After some very tedious speeches by various increasingly merry Heap uncles, a welcome distraction appeared. Through the long windows of the Ballroom, which reached to the floor and looked out across the Palace lawns down to the river, a barge ablaze with lights was seen drawing up at the Palace landing stage.

“Goodness, who can that be?” Marcia commented to Jenna, who was sitting next to her.

Jenna knew who it was. “It’s my father. Late as usual.”

“Oh, how nice,” said Marcia. And then, hurriedly, “Not nice that he is late, of course. Nice that he has made it to the wedding.”

“Just about,” said Jenna.

Silas and the four Heap uncles, glad of an excuse to escape, went to inspect the barge and escort Milo back to the wedding supper. He arrived resplendent in what some people thought was the dress uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet and others were sure they had seen in the window of a fancy dress shop in the Port—but whatever it was he was wearing, Milo caused a stir. He strode up to the bride, bowed, kissed her hand and presented her with a tiny ship of gold in a crystal bottle, much to Lucy’s delight. Then he congratulated Simon and took his seat next to Jenna.

It was not long before Jenna made an excuse to go and talk to the Forest Heaps at the far end of the table. Milo then took Jenna’s place next to Marcia and from that moment Marcia found the evening was much improved. So much so that she stayed rather longer than she had planned.

3

PUDDLES



It was nearly two o'clock in the morning when Marcia made her way toward the Palace Gate across the well-trodden snow. A cold wind zipped in off the river and she pulled her winter purple cloak, lined with indigo blue fur, tightly around her. Her companion, the Chief Hermetic Scribe, did the same with his thick dark blue cloak. They made an impressive pair as they strode across the snow, cloaks fluttering in the wind. The new Chief Hermetic Scribe was now very nearly as tall as the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Marcia was convinced that Beetle had grown since he had been **Inducted** as Chief Hermetic Scribe—or maybe, she thought, he now stood up straight and held his head high. Either way, Beetle could easily look Marcia in the eye, as he was doing right then.

“I’d like your advice,” he was saying. “There’s one not too far out of your way, if you wouldn’t mind taking a look.”

Septimus was spending the night at the Palace and Marcia was only too happy to put off the moment she returned to her rooms alone, to the ghost of Jillie Djinn, the previous Chief Hermetic Scribe, sitting mournfully on her sofa. “Beetle,” she said. “I’d be glad to.”

As they walked out of the Palace Gate together, Marcia thought how this conversation would never have happened with the late (and little lamented)

Jillie Djinn. She realized how much easier, how much more pleasant and, yes, how much *safer* it felt to have someone she liked and understood as Chief Hermetic Scribe. She turned and smiled at Beetle. “So glad the **Pick** got it right this time,” she said.

“Oh!” Beetle blushed. “Well, thank you.”

The pair walked up the middle of the newly named Alchemie Way, making fresh footprints on the snow. The Way stretched out before them, empty, wide and lit only by the brightness of the snow reflecting the moonlight. Near the Palace it was particularly desolate. Here once was the Young Army Barracks, now boarded up and falling into ruin. Beetle and Marcia hurried by and the army buildings soon gave way to large houses, which were equally run-down and, at that time of night, dark and quiet. Many of the houses had boarded-up shopfronts on the ground floor. These were shops that had once serviced the thriving industry generated by the Great Chamber of Alchemie. But after the Great Chamber was closed down, the life went out of Alchemie Way and it had become an empty, windswept place—only to be briefly revived as the drilling ground for the Young Army and a venue for the lavish processions and displays that the Supreme Custodian enjoyed holding.

Beetle found it eerie and sad. He was pleased when a lantern hanging from a post showed the entrance to Saarson’s Scurry, the alley he was looking for. The Scurry, as it was commonly known, was much more cheerful. It was clearly occupied by sociable night owls: a hum of conversation and the merry *clink* of glasses drifted out of the tiny but well-kept houses. Lighted candles in the windows reflected off the snow and lit their path. A short distance into the alley, Beetle came to a halt by a puddle of water lying incongruously in the snow. Marcia crouched down and dipped her finger in the water. She looked anxiously up at Beetle. “How many of these did you say there were?”

“There are eight that I know about.”

Marcia made a teeth-sucking noise. “And you think they are all—what did you call them . . . vents?”

Beetle nodded. “Yes. Apparently it’s a system of cooling.”

“Really? What does it cool?”

“Well, that’s the thing,” said Beetle. “I don’t know. Romilly Badger found an old plan and—” A movement caught his eye. He looked around and saw three amazed faces at a window, staring out at the sight of the Chief Hermetic Scribe and the ExtraOrdinary Wizard inspecting a puddle outside their front door. “Best if I tell you as we go, I think.”

“Oh?”

Beetle nodded toward the window.

“Ah.” To the shock of the onlookers, Marcia—still buzzing from the excitement of the evening—gave them a cheery wave. Then she put her arm around Beetle’s shoulders and said, in a manner reminiscent of Milo Banda,

“Righty-ho, Beetle. Fire away.”

As they wandered along the snowy alleyways, heading toward Wizard Way, Beetle began to explain.

“Frankly, Marcia, the Manuscriptorium is in a real mess and we don’t know where half the stuff is. I decided to recatalogue everything, and last week I began with the Vaults. I was shocked. There are piles of paper all over the floor and in the tunnel section there’s a stack of stuff that’s been left to rot in a pool of water, which even Ephaniah says he can’t fix.”

“It must be bad,” said Marcia. Ephaniah Grebe was the Manuscriptorium’s Conservation Scribe, who was known to be able to restore pretty much anything.

“It is,” said Beetle. “We have lost an awful lot of information about what’s beneath the Castle. Anyway, I started with the Ice Tunnel shelves and I got Romilly Badger—she’s the Inspection Clerk—to help because I wanted her to understand as much as possible about them. You wouldn’t believe it, but she hadn’t even been given a proper map.”

“Unfortunately, I *would* believe it,” said Marcia.

“Yes. Well. So, after she had cleared the shelves Romilly found a scrunched-up piece of paper wedged down the back of one of them. It was black with soot and very fragile, and I couldn’t shake off the feeling that it was important. Luckily Ephaniah said he could fix that one.”

“And how *is* Ephaniah?” asked Marcia.

“He’s getting stronger now. Still gets nightmares, I think.”

“That, unfortunately, is to be expected,” said Marcia.

They had reached Terry Tarsal’s shoe shop and Marcia stopped a moment to peer through the door and see what was on the shelves inside. Something rocked under her feet.

“Careful!” said Beetle. “There’s another one!”

Marcia leaped nimbly onto firmer ground. “At least Terry’s had the sense to put something over it,” she said, poking the wobbly piece of wood with her foot. “That makes nine, then. Tell me, Beetle, what *is* on this bit of paper?”

They set off along Footpad Passage toward the bright lights of Wizard Way and Beetle began to explain. “At first I thought it was a drawing of a spider’s web, but then Romilly pointed out that it fit the shape of the Castle. So Ephaniah floated it in the **Enhancing Tray** to see if he could get anything else to show up. And it did. A very faint map of the Castle appeared and *then* we saw the title.”

“Which was?” asked Marcia.

“Vents: Cauldron cooling system.”

“*Cauldron* cooling—is this some kind of witch thing?”

“I don’t think it is. It is far too technical to be a witch thing and besides, they don’t really write stuff down, do they?”

“True,” said Marcia.

“Romilly pointed out that there were lots of breaks in the web and they all ended in a dot—as if someone had rested the pen on the paper for just a little too long. And we noticed that all the dots were in quiet alleyways. It was intriguing. So Romilly and I went out hunting, to see if there was anything visible aboveground.”

“And was there?” asked Marcia.

Beetle sighed. “No. It was the day after the Big Freeze came in and the snow had covered everything. At the time I thought that was really bad luck and that we’d have to wait until the thaw. But then last week Foxy came into work soaking wet and said he’d fallen into a puddle. Well, we all laughed—how could he possibly have fallen into a puddle with everything frozen solid? But Foxy got really annoyed and insisted on taking me to see the puddle.”

“I’d have thought a Chief Hermetic Scribe had better things to do than go and see a *puddle*, Beetle,” Marcia teased.

“Yeah. Well, it was either go and see the puddle or no more sausage sandwiches. Not from Foxy. Ever.”

“Ah. I see.”

“To my amazement there *was* a puddle. So sausage sandwiches were on me that day. The next day I heard about another one from Partridge and then another and another. It felt like all the scribes were at it, finding puddles. I got Partridge to draw a map of where they were and I had a weird idea. I superimposed it on the Vent web. And every puddle matched the dot at the end of a line. *Every single one.*”

“Well, well, well,” said Marcia.

They had reached Bott’s Cloaks, which proudly proclaimed above the door: WIZARD CLOAKS: OLD AND NEW, GREEN AND BLUE. PERFECT, PRELOVED CLOAKS ARE OUR SPECIALITY. Bott’s Cloaks was a large and normally rather exuberant shop opposite the Manuscriptorium, but now it was sadly subdued because its proprietor, Bertie Bott, was missing, presumed eaten. Mrs. Bott had draped the usual garish statues in black cloth, and a solitary candle burned in the window.

“Poor Bertie.” Marcia sighed and gazed at the window. “I feel responsible. If I hadn’t insisted on him being on guard . . .”

“But *someone* had to be on guard,” said Beetle. “If it hadn’t been Bertie it would have been another Wizard. And it wasn’t *you* that killed him. It was—well, actually, it was Merrin.”

“No,” said Marcia. “It was the **Darke**. Merrin was its tool, just as Simon was. The **Darke** finds people’s weaknesses and exploits them.”

“I guess so,” said Beetle. The talk of the **Darke** had made Beetle a little spooked and the thought of the empty Manuscriptorium was not inviting. Even though it was late, he said, “Ephaniah is doing a final **Enhance** on the

Vent diagram tonight. He thought he saw the shadow of some handwriting and he's going to have a closer look. I know it's late, but would you like to come and take a look?"

"Most definitely," Marcia said without hesitation. The thought of the ghost of Jillie Djinn staring at her empty-eyed when she came home was no more inviting for Marcia than the Manuscriptorium was for Beetle.

Down in the quiet, still whiteness of the Conservation basement, a bulky shape swathed in white robes was holding a transparent tray up to the light. Ephaniah Grebe, half man, half rat, turned to Marcia and Beetle. The lower half of Ephaniah's face was, like his body, swathed in white. The shape beneath the silk wraps betrayed its ratness but his human brown eyes sparkled behind his spectacles as he gave a thumbs-up sign. Ephaniah put the tray down on the workbench and pushed a small white card across to Beetle and Marcia. It said: MILK, NO SUGAR, PLEASE.

"Huh?" said Beetle, puzzled.

Ephaniah made a sound that could have been a rat-laugh. He turned the card over. It now said: THE ENHANCEMENT IS COMPLETE.

Beetle and Marcia peered at the now thick and shiny piece of white paper lying in front of them. Ephaniah's long, narrow ratlike finger traced some faint handwriting that was scrawled across the foot of the drawing like an afterthought. Marcia drew out her **Enhancing Glass** and offered it to Beetle.

Beetle shook his head. "No, you first."

Marcia held the **Glass** close to the writing and peered intently. She tutted to herself as she read, then handed the **Glass** to Beetle. When he had finished reading, she said, "What did *you* think it said?"

"Julius FYI, M. Is that what you thought?"

"It is. Who was Julius Fyi, I wonder? Unusual name."

"It's not a name," said Beetle. "It's an old-fashioned abbreviation: For Your Information. No one uses it anymore."

"I see. So, how old do you think this paper is, Ephaniah?" asked Marcia.

Ephaniah flicked through his number cards and placed "475" in front of Marcia.

"Days? Weeks? Months?"

Ephaniah flipped a card from his calendar box: YEARS.

"Aha! Now that makes sense," said Marcia.

"Is does?" asked Beetle.

"Well, not all of it. But Julius must be Julius Pike, who was ExtraOrdinary Wizard at that time. And I'd bet the Wizard Tower to a wine gum that I know who the M is."

"Marcellus?" offered Beetle.

"Indeed. Our very own newly reinstated Castle Alchemist. Beetle, he *has* to

have something to do with these puddles.” Marcia turned to Ephaniah, who was rifling through his cards. “Thank you so much, Ephaniah,” she said.

Ephaniah’s eyes wrinkled with a smile. He placed a grubby card in front of her. IT HAS BEEN MY PLEASURE.

Beetle and Marcia headed back up to the Manuscriptorium. They walked through the empty room, its tall desks like dark sentries as the night candles burned down. Beetle pulled open the flimsy door that led into the Front Office; the moonlight from the snowy Way outside shone in, sending sharp shadows across the boxes of papers and reconditioned **Charms** waiting for collection in the morning. Beetle followed Marcia through the pattern of light and dark and as she reached the main door she stopped and said:

“I shall call Marcellus up to the Wizard Tower first thing tomorrow. I shall require an explanation.”

Beetle was not sure. “I think we should wait for a while and see what happens. I don’t expect Marcellus will admit to anything.”

Marcia sighed. “No, I don’t suppose he will.”

Beetle risked a joke. “No one likes to be accused of making puddles everywhere.”

To Beetle’s surprise, Marcia giggled. “Especially not when you have made a map of where they all are.” She pulled open the door and stepped out into the snow. “I will allow Septimus to begin his month with Marcellus tomorrow—that way I can keep a close eye on what that man is up to. We will keep this under review. Let me know if any more puddles appear. Thank you, Beetle.”

With that, Marcia closed the door and Beetle heard the sound of her pointy python shoes crunching away through the snow. They sounded kind of lonely, he thought.

4

MIGRATION



Number One, Snake Slipway.

From the desk of Marcellus Pye, Castle Alchemist.

Dear Marcia,

*Work has now begun on the Great Chimney and I suggest that, with a view to **DeNaturing** the Two-Faced Ring as soon as possible, we consider opening the Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik. Of course, the **Fyre** cannot be started until the chimney is reinstated, but the sooner we get going on the work belowground, the better. To this end I would request that ~~my Apprentice~~ Septimus commence his month working with me as soon as ~~possible~~ is convenient.*

Yours,

Marcellus

Marcia read the letter while she drank her second cup of breakfast coffee. She handed it to Septimus, who was finishing his porridge. “Well,” she said, “how about going to Marcellus today?”

Septimus had been looking forward to the break in routine. He was doing the advanced analytical **DeCyphering** module of his course and was finding it very tedious. “Might as well,” he said, not wishing to appear too eager and hurt Marcia’s feelings.

“Off you go and pack, then,” Marcia said briskly.

“Okeydokey.”

Marcia watched Septimus jump up from his chair and scoot out of the kitchen. She was not looking forward to the next four weeks without him.

Up in his room, Septimus was having trouble closing his backpack.

“Toothbrush?”

He looked up and saw Marcia’s head peering around the doorway. “Yes,” he grunted. “*And* my comb. Just like you said.”

Marcia’s gaze wandered around Septimus’s room. It was not big—Apprentices’ rooms in the Wizard Tower were always small—but it was, she was pleased to see, well organized and businesslike. The shelves were stacked with labeled boxes and papers from Septimus’s various **Magykal** projects and assignments; they also boasted a line of small lapis pots (a MidWinter Feast gift from her), which contained his slowly growing collection of **Charms** and **Talismans**. There was a large, shiny black desk under the window with six legs, which Septimus called “the insect,” on which were perched a pot of pens and stack of unused paper. Marcia avoided looking at the desk; with its spindly, hairy legs and its shiny, flat black top it put her in mind of a giant cockroach. Instead she glanced up at the dark blue ceiling with the constellations that Septimus had painted when he first arrived. The silver stars were still bright and they shone in the sunlight that was pouring through the window.

Marcia suppressed a sigh. She really was going to miss Septimus. Her gaze alighted on a folded pile of green woolen cloth with a telltale purple flash peeping out from it. “You’ve forgotten your spare Apprentice robes,” she said. “It’s the new set that arrived this morning. I ordered them specially.”

“Well, no. I haven’t forgotten,” Septimus said a little awkwardly. He pulled the last backpack buckle closed and heaved the pack onto the floor, where it landed with a hefty *thud*.

Marcia jumped. Septimus was getting very big and clumsy, she thought. Everything he did sounded so loud. “I suppose you don’t have room,” she said. “I’ll send a Wizard over with them later.”

“Actually,” Septimus said, “I won’t be needing them.”

Marcia sighed. “You cannot possibly wear the same robes for a whole month, Septimus.”

“No. I know, so—”

“So I’ll send them over.”

“Marcia, no. I won’t need them. I . . . I’ll be wearing my Alchemie Apprentice robes.”

Marcia nearly choked. “You’ll be wearing *what*?”

“My Alchemie robes. You did agree that I would be Marcellus’s Apprentice for a whole month.”

“I agreed to no such thing,” spluttered Marcia. “I agreed to send *my* Apprentice to help him for one month, and that is an entirely different matter altogether. And during that month you will remain my Apprentice, Septimus. You will *not* be an Alchemie Apprentice.”

“That’s not how Marcellus sees it,” muttered Septimus.

“I don’t give a brass baboon how Marcellus sees it,” snapped Marcia. “I shall send the spare robes over later. And I expect you to wear them.”

Septimus suppressed a sigh. He wished Marcia and Marcellus would stop fighting over him. “I thought you might say that,” he said.

Half an hour later, Septimus was perched on the old oak chest by the purple front door waiting for Marcia. In the past he would have found something interesting to read and sprawled comfortably on the squashy purple sofa while Marcia finished fussing about in her study, but now the dumpy ghost of Miss Jillie Djinn, the ex-Chief Hermetic Scribe, occupied Marcia’s once much-loved sofa. Jillie Djinn had, unfortunately, died on Marcia’s sofa a few months previously. And because ghosts must remain for a year and day in the place where they entered ghosthood, Marcia had nine long months of Jillie Djinn’s company still to go before the ghost was free to move on.

As a new ghost, Jillie Djinn was a bright figure: her dark blue robes had a crisp outline and the expression on her round face was easy to see—she looked annoyed, as though she were about to tell someone off. To Septimus and Marcia’s relief, Jillie Djinn had not yet spoken, although she was now reacting to what went on around her and had even managed to get rid of her recent companion on the sofa—Septimus’s jinnee, Jim Knee. One evening Jim Knee, who had been hibernating there, had suddenly got up and sleepwalked off to the spare bedroom, where he now lay snoring.

Jillie Djinn’s dark little eyes stared unblinkingly at Septimus. It was most disconcerting and it had not occurred to him before that ghosts do not need to blink. He was relieved when Marcia appeared.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yep.” Septimus picked up his backpack.

Marcia glared at Jillie Djinn. “Come along, Septimus, let’s get out of here.”

Marcia and Septimus stood silently on the silver spiral stairs as they gently revolved, taking them down through the Wizard Tower. Septimus breathed in the scent of **Magyk**, which was stronger than usual due to the extra energy being expended keeping the Two-Faced Ring secure in the **Sealed Cell**. Down and down the stairs took them, past each floor where the **Magykal** business of the day went purposefully on as the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and her Apprentice glided quietly by.

As they stepped off the stairs onto the soft floor of the Great Hall, Marcia

—loath to give up tutor mode just yet—stopped and said, “You haven’t seen the **Sealed Cell**, have you?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Time you did, I think. The Two-Faced Ring is due a check before we go.”

The long tunnel that led to the **Sealed Cell** was reached through the **Seal** lobby—a small room behind the spiral stairs. Outside the lobby, two Wizards were on guard. Marcia was taking no chances.

Inside the **Seal** lobby the atmosphere was hushed. The silver-walled room was suffused with **Magykal** purple light that shone from the **Seal** covering the door to the tunnel. Its polished silver walls and rounded corners were designed to confuse any entities or Live Spells that might escape—it certainly confused Septimus. When he walked in, he had the odd experience of seeing about five or six most peculiarly shaped versions of himself come in. And when Marcia closed the door behind them, it felt as though he were in the middle of a purple bubble.

Inside the lobby, a Wizard stood staring at the **Seal** to the tunnel, watching for any changes that would indicate a disturbance on the other side. **Seal Watch** was a boring task requiring little skill but a lot of concentration, and it was not a popular duty. A rotation of half-hourly shifts was kept, which used up a lot of Wizards every twenty-four hours.

Marcia approached the watcher. “I have come to do an inspection. If you would like to stand aside, please?”

There was nothing that Thomasinn Tremayne, the **Seal Watch** Wizard, would have liked better. She stepped to one side and shook her head. The flickering lights made her feel nauseous and gave her a thumping headache. It was a horrible job.

“I am taking my Apprentice with me to inspect the **Sealed Cell**,” Marcia said in a low voice. “You are to remain on guard. If we do not exit within ten minutes I authorize you, for security, to **ReSeal** the door.”

Septimus glanced at Marcia in surprise. That seemed a little drastic, he thought.

“Very well, Madam Marcia,” whispered Thomasinn. And then, “Shall I watch your backpack, Apprentice?”

“Oh—thank you.” Septimus shrugged off his backpack and it fell to the floor.

“Ouch!” gasped Thomasinn. “My *foot!*”

“Shhh!” shushed Marcia.

“Oh, gosh. I’m so sorry,” Septimus apologized.

“Really, Thomasinn, it’s only a little backpack,” said Marcia. “Come along, Septimus.”

Marcia held her hands out about an inch above the shimmering **Seal**, concentrating hard. Suddenly, she pushed her hands through and pulled them

rapidly apart, unzipping the **Seal** as she did so, to reveal a narrow silver door.

Marcia pushed the door open and squeezed through, “Come on, Septimus. Quickly.”

Septimus slipped inside and Marcia closed the door with a soft *ker-lunk*. She pressed her hand onto its smooth surface and a temporary **Seal** flashed across like purple lightning. Then she took a lamp from a hook beside the door, **Lit** it and set off. Septimus followed. Lamp held high, Marcia walked along the sloping brick-lined tunnel that snaked down to the **Sealed Cell**, which was buried in the bedrock below the Wizard Tower. They walked quickly, the sound of their footsteps absorbed by the thin clouds of **Magyk** hanging around the tunnel. Every seven yards, Septimus saw a small door set into the tunnel wall, beyond which he knew was a chamber used for storing all manner of potentially troublesome objects. Septimus was excited. He knew how the **Sealed Cell** worked and he had even, in the first year of his Apprenticeship, made a small model of it, but he had never actually been to the end of the tunnel and seen it—let alone been inside.

The **Sealed Cell** was the most secure place in the Wizard Tower. It was used for imprisoning the most dangerous and powerful **Magykal** objects, entities, **Spells** and **Charms**. Its last occupant had been Septimus’s jinnee, Jim Knee, securely confined until he had agreed to do Marcia’s bidding. But now it was the Two-Faced Ring that languished behind the tiny door to the **Sealed Cell** at the very end of the tunnel.

For more effective use of the **Sealing Magyk**, this door was only three feet high and even narrower than the entrance door. Not all previous ExtraOrdinary Wizards had actually been able to fit through it—DomDaniel himself had once got stuck, much to his then-Apprentice’s amusement (a memory that Alther still cherished). What the door lacked in height and width, it made up for in thickness. It was, like the great doors into the Wizard Tower, made from solid silver, which shone through the misty purple haze of the **Seal** that encased the door.

Marcia placed her lamp on a small shelf beside the door; then she put her hand into the purple and with a deft flick of her wrist she broke the **Seal**. She took three small silver keys from her ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt and placed them in three keyholes: one at the top of the door, one at the foot and one in the middle. Marcia turned the middle key and Septimus heard three old-fashioned barrel locks rotate in unison. The door swung open with a small squeak.

Marcia lifted off the long pair of **Protected** forceps (known as the Bargepoles) that hung on a hook beside the door, picked up her lamp and squeezed through the narrow opening into the cell. Septimus quickly followed.

With the door closed the lamplight turned the dark space—which was lined

in two-inch-thick solid silver—into a sparkling, shining jewel. But its brilliance did not disguise the fact that the **Sealed Cell** was tiny. Septimus felt sorry for Jim Knee, although it was, he supposed, better than the inside of a silver bottle. In fact, it felt not unlike being inside a very big silver bottle, for the shining walls were molded to the rounded contours of the end of the tunnel.

Set into the curved wall was a wide shelf, in the middle of which was the container that held the Two-Faced Ring: the **Bound Box**. It was a small black box made of layers of ebony interleaved with silver and secured with silver bands. Holding the Bargepoles in front of her, Marcia advanced upon the box rather as one might approach a small but deadly snake. Suddenly she gasped and said a very rude word. “Oops. Shouldn’t have said that. Look at this, Septimus.”

Septimus peered over Marcia’s shoulder. Erupting through the **Bound Box** like a nasty green boil was the Two-Faced Ring. Marcia pounced. Striking at the ring like a mongoose, she stabbed the Bargepoles into the boil-on-the-box and held them up triumphantly.

“Got it!”

At the end of Marcia’s forceps the Two-Faced Ring glittered angrily, its evil green faces glaring at them. Septimus looked away. He felt as though the faces could actually see him.

“I’m glad they’re not real,” he said with a shiver. The **Sealed Cell**’s peculiar echo whispered his words back to him.

Real real real.

Marcia flipped open the box and dropped the ring back in. Septimus imagined he could hear a stream of curses as the metal hit the wood. Marcia slammed the lid closed and began securing the bands around the box.

“They will be soon at this rate,” she said grimly. “Marcellus will have to get a move on.”

Move on move on move on.

Septimus was shocked. “You mean those two Wizards might actually come to life?”

Life life life.

Marcia put her fingers to her lips to shush him. She muttered a new **Lock** for the box. “Let’s go,” she said.

Go go go.

Septimus was more than happy to agree. He clambered out and waited for Marcia while she backed awkwardly out the narrow doorway, then slammed the door shut with a satisfying *thunk* and hung up the Bargepoles.

Back in the lobby, Marcia looked quite pale. “Madam Marcia, are you all right?” asked Thomasinn.

Marcia nodded. “Fine.” But her hands were trembling as she **Sealed** the

door to the tunnel.

Marcia was angry with herself. She realized she had delayed opening the Great Chamber of Alchemie dangerously long. Like all Wizards, Marcia had sworn an oath at her induction to “abjure all things Alchemical” and she took it seriously. It had been a difficult decision to allow Marcellus to light the **Fyre** once more in order to **DeNature** the Two-Faced Ring, and even though she knew it was the only way to destroy the ring, the lighting of the **Fyre** frightened her and she had hesitated to begin. It was a huge step for a Wizard to take and before the Chamber was opened, Marcia had wanted to understand what she was doing. However, the more she tried to find out about the **Fyre**, the less she understood. Nothing quite made sense. So many documents were missing, so much seemed to have been altered and she had been left with an unsettling impression that something was missing—something *big*. But now, whatever her fears, Marcia knew she could wait no longer.

Septimus shouldered his backpack and walked across the Great Hall with Marcia. “Did you mean that about the two Wizards?” he asked. “Could they really come back to life?”

Marcia sighed. “It is a possibility, that is all. The **Darke Domaine** has theoretically given it the power, which is why we are keeping it so securely.”

“So . . . could it happen soon?”

“No, no, Septimus. These things take years.”

Septimus felt relieved. “Marcellus won’t take *that* long to get the **Fyre** going,” he said.

Hildegarde Pigeon—sub-Wizard, but soon to be an Ordinary Wizard—stepped out from the porters’ cupboard.

“Still on door duty, Hildegarde?” asked Marcia. “I thought you were up at **Search** and Rescue now.”

Hildegard smiled. “Next month, Madam Marcia. But I enjoy it here. I have a letter for you. Mr. Banda left it this morning.”

“Did he? Well, thank you, Hildegarde.” Septimus thought Marcia went a little pink.

Hildegarde Pigeon handed an impressive envelope with a red-and-gold border to Marcia. Septimus noticed Hildegarde’s delicate blue lace gloves. Hildegarde was self-conscious about her fingertips, which had been damaged when the **Thing InHabiting** her had chewed them. They reminded Septimus how destructive the **Darke** was—and how important it was to get rid of the Two-Faced Ring.

The huge silver doors to the Wizard Tower had swung open. Marcia was dallying on the top step, reading Milo’s note. Septimus was impatient to be off.

“Come on, Marcia,” he said.

“Yes, yes. In a moment.”

Septimus set off down the steps. Marcia put the letter carefully in her pocket and followed. "It shouldn't take too long to open a dusty old door to a chamber," she said.

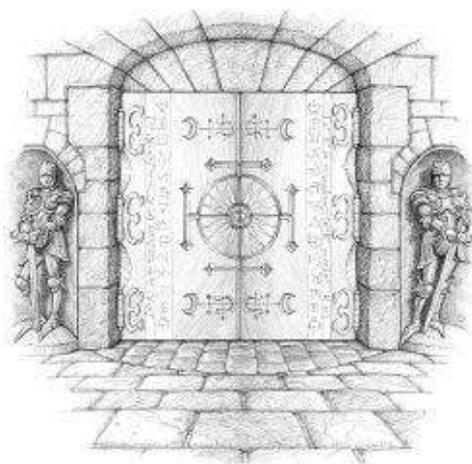
Septimus waited for Marcia at the foot of the steps. "I think opening the Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik might be a bit more complicated than that. And anyway, it hasn't got a door."

"All the better, then," said Marcia. "I shall just declare it open and then I'll shoot off. I shall be busy this evening."

Septimus had the distinct impression that Marcia was expecting to cut some kind of ceremonial ribbon and then go home. But he knew better than to say anything. He set off quickly.

Marcia hurried across the Courtyard, trying to keep up with her Apprentice. As she hurried through the Great Arch, her Wizard Induction vow came back to her. Marcia sighed. She felt as though she were on her way to betray the Castle.

THE GREAT CHAMBER OF ALCHEMIE



The atmosphere was strained but polite as Marcellus Pye ushered Marcia and Septimus into his house on Snake Slipway.

“Welcome, Marcia. Welcome, Septimus, or should I say, *Apprentice*,” he said, smiling.

Septimus heard a *tut* from Marcia but to his relief she said nothing more. He lugged his backpack inside and dumped it on the floor with a crash. Both Marcia and Marcellus winced. Septimus saw his black-and-red-velvet Alchemie Apprentice cloak with its heavy gold clasp hanging ready in the hallway. He gave Marcia an anxious glance and saw that luckily Marcia did not recognize what it was.

“Let’s get going, shall we?” said Marcia impatiently.

“Get going?” asked Marcellus.

“Yes, Marcellus. To the Great Chamber of Alchemie. Isn’t that the idea?”

Marcellus looked shocked. “What—are *you* coming too?” he said.

“Naturally I am coming too, as you put it. Surely you didn’t think I would allow you to open up that place on your own?”

That was precisely what Marcellus had thought. He fought down panic. The Chamber of **Fyre** was below the Great Chamber of Alchemie and the **Fyre** was beginning to come to life. What if Marcia noticed the warmth that had begun to spread upward—wouldn’t she think it was odd? Marcellus told himself sternly that Marcia would not know what was odd and what wasn’t. He must not give her any cause for suspicion.

“Er, no. Of course not, Marcia. Absolutely not,” he said. And then he added tentatively, “You . . . you’re not planning on *staying* there, are you?”

“I have *much* better things to do, thank you,” snapped Marcia, remembering Milo’s note.

“Then *of course* you must come,” he said, as if magnanimously inviting Marcia to a party where she had been left off the invitation list.

“Yes,” said Marcia stonily. “I must.”

It was not easy to get to the Great Chamber of Alchemie, which was one of the most successfully concealed Alchemie Chambers in the world. Septimus and Beetle had once thought they had stumbled across the empty iced-up Great Chamber of Alchemie in the Ice Tunnels, but it was the decoy Chamber, installed in ancient times when traveling bands of marauders would target Alchemie Chambers for their gold. Enough gold objects would be left in the easily found decoy Chamber to satisfy the thieves, and the true Great Chamber would remain undiscovered.

After the Great Alchemie Disaster the hidden entrances to the Great Chamber were erased from Castle maps, so that they were eventually forgotten—except by Marcellus. But he was not about to divulge any of them to Marcia. As far as she knew, the only entrance was through a murky, smelly underground stream called the UnderFlow, and that was the way they would be going. The old Alchemie Boat had long ago rotted away, so Marcellus went next door to Rupert Gringe’s boathouse to hire a paddleboat.

Rupert was doing winter maintenance on his fleet of brightly painted paddleboats, which he hired out in the summer for fun trips along the Moat. Rupert was used to his eccentric next-door neighbor, but Marcellus’s request for a paddleboat, just as the Moat was beginning to ice up, floored him.

“You *what?*” he said, running his hand through his short, spiky red hair.

“I wish to hire a boat,” Marcellus repeated.

“What, *now?*” Rupert looked at Marcellus as though he were crazy.

“Yes. Right now, in fact.”

“But there’s ice out there.”

“Ice can be broken,” said Marcellus.

“It will cost you. I’ve got them all laid up now and I’ll have to winterize it again.”

“Very well.” Marcellus handed Rupert a very heavy gold coin.

Rupert looked at it and whistled through his teeth. “Blimey. Don’t have change for a triple crown. Sorry.”

“Keep it,” said Marcellus. “Just give me the boat.”

“Okeydokey. No worries. Right away.”

Rupert Gringe shook his head as he watched the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, the Castle Alchemist and their disputed Apprentice squash uncomfortably into a

bright pink paddleboat and head unsteadily along the Moat, while the ExtraOrdinary Wizard smashed at the ice with a pointed stick. He was glad it wasn't him wedged between those two fusspots, doing all the paddling. He wished his new brother-in-law a silent *good luck* and went back in to his warm boathouse.

The UnderFlow was dark and cold, but it was ice free. The paddleboat only just fit the narrow tunnel and the sound of the paddles turning was magnified a hundred times by the brick walls. Marcia sat in the prow like a large purple dog. She leaned forward, pointing her **FlashLight** so that it illuminated the low-arched tunnel that ran before them. The sound of the paddles rebounded off the walls, filling their heads with noise. Septimus paddled fast, churning up the murky water and sending it splashing up against the slimy brick and dripping into the boat. It was the first time he had been underground since his time in the **Darke Halls**, and he was surprised how scared he felt.

Ten long minutes after Septimus had steered the paddleboat into the UnderFlow, the tunnel widened out and he sensed the faint, acrid smell of smoke. He slowed his paddling and took the boat into a wide, low-roofed cavern—they had reached the UnderFlow Pool. Relieved, Septimus let go of the paddles and sat up straight to get his breath back.

Septimus knew exactly where they were—he had last seen this place five hundred years ago. But then it had had a beautiful lapis-lazuli-domed roof; now all was dismal and dark. He took hold of the paddle handles again and maneuvered the little boat alongside the Quay. Marcellus leaned out and tied it up.

No one spoke. Marcellus felt too emotional. Marcia had been overcome with a sense of mystery—she was entering a part of the Castle about which she knew nothing. That, for an ExtraOrdinary Wizard, was strange in itself. But what was even odder was the sense that this had once seen something so terrible that it had very nearly destroyed the Castle. And now here they were, three people in a ridiculous little pink paddleboat, the first to come back to the scene for nearly five hundred years.

Septimus jumped out of the boat. The Quay was slimy underfoot and he skidded and slipped. He broke his fall with his hands and when he stood up he saw in the light of the **FlashLight** that his palms were black.

“Soot,” said Marcellus grimly.

Suddenly, Septimus realized why everything was black. He looked around, seeing the cavern with new eyes. “Everywhere,” he whispered.

“Yes,” said Marcellus heavily. He had forgotten just how bad it was—there had been no Drummins *here* to clean up. He took out a tinderbox and a sheet of metal gauze, which he folded to make a pyramid shape. From his pocket he produced a small fat candle, which he lit and placed in a candleholder, then

put the pyramid of metal gauze over it.

“What are you doing?” asked Marcia.

“Preventing any explosions.”

“*Explosions?*” Marcia’s voice took on a slight squeak.

“Gases. Flammable. Just in case,” explained Marcellus.

“We can use my **FlashLight**. That won’t explode.”

“Thank you, Marcia, but I want to do this my way. With my light only, if you don’t mind.”

Marcia heard the strain in Marcellus’s voice. She imagined how she would feel going back to the Wizard Tower after some terrible disaster had ruined it—a disaster that *she* had caused. It did not bear thinking about.

“Of course, Marcellus,” she said. “I don’t mind at all.” And she switched off her **FlashLight**.

There were three smoke-blackened arches on Alchemie Quay, two of which were bricked up. Marcellus headed for the open left-hand archway, where he stopped and turned, his face eerily illuminated by his candle—something that always gave Septimus the creeps.

“We will now enter the Labyrinth,” he said, his voice hushed. “Please be aware that it does not run to a standard pattern. There are branches off to other smaller labyrinths and tunnels. Be sure to follow me and keep close. If you lose sight of me, stay where you are and call out. I will come and find you.”

Septimus remembered the Labyrinth well, but then it had been a beautiful, sinuous snake of a tunnel—brilliant with smooth, blue lapis lazuli walls shot through with gold and rare streaks of red and lit by rushlights. Now, like everything else, it was black with soot. Even though Septimus could recall all the tunnels and turnings, it looked so different that he doubted he would be able to find his way now.

Together Marcia and Septimus followed Marcellus through the arch and kept close behind him, the sound of their footsteps dulled by the carpet of soot. Marcellus trod carefully, after his first footsteps had raised a cloud of soot into the air and set everyone coughing and spluttering. The three walked slowly through the black coils of the Labyrinth, as subdued as if they were following a body on its way to its Leaving Boat. Even so, the soot rose into the air and tickled its way into their lungs, making them taste the fire of so long ago.

As the twists of the passageway became ever tighter Septimus knew they must be nearing the center—then suddenly they were there. Shocked, Septimus saw Marcellus staring at the blackened archway that was once the entrance to the Great Chamber of Alchemie. But now the archway led nowhere—it was blocked by a thick slab of heat-damaged metal, curled away at the bottom like a half-opened tin can. Marcellus crouched down to inspect it. “The barricade has blown,” he said.

“It’s done a pretty good job, all the same,” said Marcia.

“Possibly. I need a closer look.” Marcellus disliked the use of **Magyk** in the Great Chamber and the areas nearby—he was convinced it disrupted the fine balance of Alchemical reactions. But now a little bit of **Magyk** seemed nothing compared to the devastation surrounding them. “Perhaps, Marcia, you would care to use your **FlashLight**?”

Marcia switched it on and a guffaw escaped from Septimus.

“What?” asked Marcia irritably.

“You. Marcellus. Me. . . .”

Marcia realized that all three of them were covered with soot from head to toe. “Great,” she muttered.

For once Marcellus didn’t care what his robes looked like. He ran his sooty sleeve over his face, leaving behind a black streak across his eyes like a mask.

Marcia touched Marcellus on the arm. “I’ll do a **Remove**, shall I?” she offered gently. “The barricade is far too heavy for us to shift any other way.”

“Yes. Thank you, Marcia.”

Marcellus and Septimus stepped back and watched Marcia **Throw** a purple flash of **Magyk** across the metal slab. She waited a moment for the glimmering cloud to settle and then beckoned the barricade away from the archway.

The slab of metal began to shift and a sudden niggle of worry attacked Marcellus—there was something he must be careful about. But *what*?

“Septimus,” he said. “Get out of the way. Take cover.”

Septimus heard the warning in Marcellus’s voice and slipped into the entrance of the Labyrinth. He peered out to see what was happening. Marcia was concentrating hard, unaware that Marcellus was now anxiously hopping around.

“Marcia!” said Marcellus. “*Marcia*. Can you do a protection thing?”

“Huh?”

“You need to do some kind of shield thingy.”

Marcia shot Marcellus an angry look. What was he doing? Didn’t he realize he was disturbing her concentration? If he carried on twittering like that he’d be lucky if he didn’t get the barricade dropped on his stupid shoes. “*Thingy*?” she snapped.

“Spell. I don’t know. Whatever you call it.”

“I’m doing *this* now,” Marcia said. “I can’t be doing something else as well. Be quiet and let me concentrate, Marcellus.”

Marcellus gritted his teeth. The slab was shifting and he could see the gap between the stone of the arch and the metal widening: in a moment the barricade would be out. He knew that this was the dangerous part. *But why*?

Suddenly the barricade was floating in midair and Marcia was conducting it across the space in front of the arch like a seasoned builder directing a heavy

weight swinging on the end of a chain. Marcellus breathed out in relief: *nothing had happened*. “It’s all right, Septimus, you can come out now,” he said.

The thick slab of black metal, still smooth and bright on the inside, was slowly shepherded by Marcia across to the opposite wall and lowered to the ground. It left behind a dark space, beyond which lay whatever was left of the Great Chamber of Alchemie.

Marcellus gulped. “I’ll go in first,” he said.

“We’ll go in together,” said Marcia.

Marcellus nodded. Sometimes he liked Marcia. He raised his candle up and saw something in front of him glimmering. There was someone there, deep in the dark, holding a candle—*looking at him*. Who was it? Who was in the Great Chamber of Alchemie, *waiting for him*?

The hairs on the back of Marcellus’s neck stood up as he saw a dark and desperate-looking creature, with eyes staring so wide that the whites glittered in the candlelight. Bravely, Marcellus took a step forward, then another and —“Ouch!” he gasped.

Marcia put out her hand. “Thought so,” she said. “Glass.”

“Glass?” Marcellus ran his hand over the smooth yet wavy surface.

“Yes. A second seal of glass. I’ll get rid of that too.”

Suddenly Marcellus understood. “Stop!” he yelled.

Marcia leaped back.

“Sand,” said Marcellus.

“*Sand?*”

“The fire stop. Sand. Above the Chamber we kept a huge hopper of sand. If it all went out of control we could release the sand and fill the Chamber. To protect it. We had all kinds of fail-safes, you know. We were very careful, despite what people said.”

“But clearly not careful enough,” Marcia said crisply. She was shocked at what she had seen so far.

Marcellus slumped back against the wall. He looked defeated. “The heat has vitrified the sand.”

Septimus was intrigued. He pushed his nose right up against the glass and peered in. “You mean the Chamber is full of *solid glass*? Like those paperweights they sell in the Traders’ Market?”

“Yes,” said Marcellus. “The whole thing is . . .” He searched for something to say and could think of nothing that didn’t involve a rude word. He borrowed one of Septimus’s recent phrases, “. . . a dead duck.”

Marcia looked horrified. “But what about the Two-Faced Ring?”

“Oh, that will be all right,” said Marcellus wearily. He knew when he was beaten. It was time to tell Marcia the truth about the Chamber of **Fyre**. “You see, Marcia. The real **Fyre** is—”

But Marcia was not listening. She was busy shining the **FlashLight** beam onto the glass. “I’m sure there is sand behind this glass,” she said.

Marcellus stopped his confession. “Is there?”

“I’ll check, shall I?” suggested Septimus.

“Be careful,” Marcellus and Marcia said together—to their annoyance.

Septimus took a **HeatStick** from his Apprentice belt and placed it on the glass. The glass melted below the point and Septimus carefully pushed the **HeatStick** farther into the glass, making a hole. Deeper and deeper the **HeatStick** went until it had very nearly disappeared and Septimus began to think that the Chamber was indeed filled with solid glass. Then suddenly, the end of the **HeatStick** hit something solid. Septimus pulled the **HeatStick** out and a trickle of sand began to flow.

“*Ta-da!*” he announced.

Marcellus laughed with relief.

“I trust you have a couple of large wheelbarrows, Marcellus?” Marcia said.

Marcellus grinned. He didn’t care how many wheelbarrows he was going to need—his precious Great Chamber of Alchemie had survived. The fact that it lay buried beneath hundreds of tons of sand was a mere irritation. His Apprentice would fix that.

Marcellus led Marcia and Septimus back through the sooty snake of the Labyrinth to Alchemie Quay. Marcia looked at her Apprentice and shook her head—his clean-this-morning Apprentice robes were completely blackened with soot.

“I give you permission to wear your Alchemie robes this month, Septimus,” she said. “Frankly, after a day down here, I don’t think anyone will be able to tell the difference.”

6

LISTENING



Septimus's month in the Great Chamber of Alchemie was not as interesting as he had hoped. After the initial excitement of removing the sand—which he managed in three days by fixing up a siphoning arrangement that drew the sand out through the Labyrinth, scouring it clean as it went, and sending the sand into the UnderFlow Pool—Septimus spent his time cleaning, unpacking and doing more cleaning. Marcellus was forever disappearing—*checking things, Apprentice*—and Septimus spent a lot of the time on his own. He began to count down the days to his return to the Wizard Tower.

Marcellus's disappearances were, of course, when he was tending the **Fyre**. It was going well but he dared not leave it for too long. The water flow was good—he had been a little anxious about dumping the sand in the UnderFlow Pool, but it was deep enough to take it. His main concern now was venting the Cauldron heat, which was growing daily. Toward the end of Septimus's month, Marcellus took a reluctant decision to open four more vents. He chose their positions carefully and hoped that no one would notice.

On a beautiful, bright dawn two days before the end of his month with Marcellus, Septimus was trudging to work, heading for the entrance to the Great Chamber that Marcellus had recently opened. His journey took him past the Palace and the bizarre collection of snow sculptures that were being created on the lawns in front. He stopped for a moment to look at the new ones and then reluctantly set off. It was going to be another beautiful day, but he would spend it underground in candlelight and it would be dark by the time he returned.

On the other side of the Palace, Jenna was drawing back the curtains from her bedroom window. She saw the sun climbing over the snow-covered hills in the distance, the pinky-green streaks of cloud low in the sky and the sparkling orange glints of light on the shining black surface of the river. It was beautiful—but it was *cold*. Jenna shivered. She was not surprised to see ice frosting the windows; it was now more than four weeks into the Big Freeze and a deep chill pervaded everything. She dressed quickly in her winter robes and, wrapping herself in her fur-lined cloak, was out of her bedroom fast.

The ghost of Sir Hereward, who guarded her bedroom door, woke with a start. A ghostly “Good Morning, Princess” followed Jenna as she strode briskly down the corridor.

“Morning, Sir Hereward,” she called back over her shoulder, and disappeared around the corner.

Sir Hereward shook his head. The Living were always in such a hurry, he thought. The ghost performed an old-fashioned military about-turn and began a slow march down to the Palace doors where, once the Princess had left her room, he now spent his days on guard.

Downstairs, Jenna grabbed a few leftovers from the supper table, pulled her red winter fur-lined cloak tighter around herself, and headed out, winding her way through the assortment of snow sculptures, stopping briefly to admire her favorites. As she drew near the Palace Gate, Jenna saw two large, ungainly figures loitering on either side. She approached cautiously, wondering who they might be. And then she remembered—it was the day of the annual Castle snowman competition. She pushed open the Gate and walked out through two guard snowmen.

“Happy Snowman Day, Princess!” one of the snowmen said.

Jenna jumped in surprise. Then she saw the bob of a red bobble hat followed by the cheeky grin of a small boy peering from behind the bulk of the snowman. Perched on the shoulders of a much taller friend, he was in the process of putting the finishing touches to his snowman.

“Happy Snowman Day,” Jenna replied, smiling in return. “He’s good,” she said, pointing at the snowman.

The boys laughed. “We’re going to win!”

“Good luck!” Jenna walked off into Wizard Way, her fur-lined boots pressing the fresh snow beneath. With her red cloak standing out against the more sober colors of most people’s winter robes, Jenna was easy to spot as she made her way along the freshly cleared path that ran beside the shops. She passed by a motley assortment of snowmen. Larry’s Dead Languages sported a surprisingly upbeat snowman with a large melon-slice grin and Larry’s favorite scarf. Jenna suspected that once Larry saw it, both the scarf and the grin would rapidly vanish. Wizard Sandwiches boasted an eye-aching snowman made from rainbow-colored snow, and outside Sandra’s Palace of Pets was a disconcertingly giant rabbit complete with a supersize carrot. Jenna walked slowly on past a trio of small printing shops, each with an identical little snowman wearing a printer’s apron and reading a book. As she neared the Wizard Tower, she saw a familiar figure heading toward the Great Arch. He was wearing the still—to Jenna—unfamiliar dark blue robes of the Chief Hermetic Scribe and had a long metal cylinder tucked under his arm.

“Hey, Beetle!” she called, picking up speed.

The Chief Hermetic Scribe turned and waved, then waited for Jenna to catch up.

“Hello,” puffed Jenna. “How’s it going?”

Beetle smiled. “Good,” he said. “Really good. And you?”

“Great. Yes, fine, thanks.” Jenna regarded Beetle shyly. He seemed so very different in his official robes. It was hard to believe this was the same Beetle who had been working for the irascible Larry not so very long ago. He seemed taller, older, and his brown eyes regarded her with an expression that was strangely distant. Beetle used to look so happy to see her, thought Jenna, but now that he was Chief Hermetic Scribe he was much more reserved. She wasn’t sure if she liked that. The gold bands on the sleeves of Beetle’s robes glittered as he raised his free arm to shield his eyes against the bright morning sun and then, in a happily familiar gesture, run his hand through his unruly black hair. Jenna smiled.

“Better get going, got to meet Marcia in”—Beetle looked at his timepiece—“five minutes and forty-two seconds precisely.”

Jenna looked horrified.

Beetle broke into a broad smile. “Gotcha!” he said.

“Oh, you *pig*,” said Jenna, laughing—happy to see a glimpse of the old Beetle. “For a horrible moment I thought you’d turned into Jillie Djinn!”

“Nope. Not yet, anyway.”

“Um . . . so how are you? I haven’t seen you for ages. Since . . . gosh . . . Simon’s wedding, I suppose. Are you busy? Well, I guess you must be—”

The old Beetle disappeared and the Chief Hermetic Scribe looked at his timepiece. “I’m sorry, Princess Jenna. I really must go. Stuff to do and all

that.”

Jenna could see that Beetle was longing to be off. She felt as if she was being a nuisance, and that wasn't good. Jenna had an uncomfortable sense that she had once made Beetle feel just like she was feeling now.

“Oh, yes, of course,” she said. “Well. I'll see you around, then. Have a nice day.”

“You too.” With that, the Chief Hermetic Scribe strode off, his long blue robes brushing the snow, leaving a softly flattened wake behind them. Jenna watched Beetle walk into the shadows of the lapis lazuli-lined Great Arch and disappear into his new, unknown world. She took a deep breath, trying to shake off the melancholy that had settled on her, and walked on toward the gap between the last two houses on Wizard Way. Here she made a left-hand turn into a snow-filled alleyway, which led to the Castle Wall. The alley was about a foot deep in snow, which Jenna waded slowly through. She was in no hurry to get to where she was going.

But soon enough Jenna reached a flight of stone steps that led up to the path that ran along the top of the Castle walls, just behind the battlements. Kicking newly fallen snow away so that she could see where the steps were, Jenna climbed up and found herself standing on a wide, flat snow-covered path, which bore traces of footsteps blurred with snow from the previous night's fall. Jenna stopped at the top of the steps and looked around. She loved this part of the Castle. Not many people chose to walk along the walls. It had been forbidden during the rule of the Custodians in the Bad Old Days—as they were now known—and many people still believed that only the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and the Princess were allowed to use the path. Jenna was happy with that. It was one of the few places in the Castle where she could wander without feeling she was public property.

The battlements were low at this point and Jenna could easily see over them. She looked across the iced-up Moat to the tall trees on the opposite bank: the outriders of the Forest. Their branches were laden with snow, thick and stark against the black bark of their trunks. Jenna thought of her four Forest Heap brothers. She was so glad that Sarah had persuaded them to stay in the Castle for the Big Freeze. She shivered. Even with a campfire burning day and night, even with all the smelly furs they wore, they must have been so *cold* in the Forest.

Jenna pulled her cloak closely around her and set off slowly along the path, following the tracks she had made the day before, and the days before that. The path on top of the Castle walls followed the curve of the Moat. The Moat slowly folded in toward her, turning always a little to the right like the python in the Marram Marshes. On her right-hand side the path was bounded by the back walls of typical tall, narrow Castle houses, which regularly gave way to unnerving sheer drops that could rapidly deliver the unwary walker to an

alleyway twenty feet below. At these points she kept close to the battlements and took care not to look down.

Jenna passed softly—and unknowingly—over the ancient Hole in the Wall Tavern, a popular meeting place for ghosts that was hollowed out in the wall below, and approached a bend in the path. She rounded it and suddenly, laid out below, she saw Jannit Maarten’s boatyard, which was now no more than a collection of boat-shaped snowy mounds. Jenna walked on, following her old, snow-covered footsteps until she came to a widening of the wall, open like a plateau, where her footprints ended in a circle of well-trodden snow. She stopped for a moment and glanced around. The open space was deserted, as it always was. And yet, as she walked slowly forward, Jenna could not shake off the feeling that she was pushing through a crowd.

And she was—a crowd of ghostly Queens, Princesses and Princesses-in-Waiting were waiting anxiously for her. With each careful step that Jenna took, the ghosts of her grandmothers, great-grandmothers, aunts and great-aunts fell back to avoid being **Passed Through**. Ghostly violet eyes followed their descendant as she made her way slowly to an icy spot in the middle of the space from which the snow had been scraped away. Jenna stopped, shivered, looked around once more, then took a few steps across to the battlement at the edge of the wall. She leaned over and looked down to check she was in the right place—just in case she had got it wrong. Some six feet below she saw a burnished gold disc set into the wall. Jenna stood back from the battlements and sighed. She was in the right place; of *course* she was. The crowd of royal ghosts parted as she returned to the icy spot, kneeled down and began to unlace her fur-lined winter boots.

High up in one of the houses set back from the path, Jenna added one more to her audience—a small boy. He peered out of an attic window and saw *the Princess*. Again. Soon he was joined by his mother and grandmother. Noses pressed against the glass, they watched the Princess take off her boots and a pair of furry purple socks, then stand barefoot on the cold stones.

“See, I *told* you she did that,” whispered the little boy.

“Oh, dear,” whispered the mother. “I do hope she’s not going to be a crazy one like that Datchet.”

“*Shh*,” scolded the grandmother. “She’ll hear you.”

“Of course she won’t,” retorted the mother.

But down in the crowd of ghosts, the ghost of Queen Datchet III did hear. It is a fact that those who have been a little paranoid in Life develop a wonderful ability in ghosthood to hear their name mentioned many miles away. But Jenna heard nothing—neither the mother in the attic nor the sound she longed to hear—the *ther-umm . . . ther-umm . . . ther-umm* of the Dragon Boat’s slow but steady heartbeat, pulsing through the stone and the soles of her feet as it always had—until the last few days. Jenna willed herself to feel

that unmistakable *thump*. She thought of the Dragon Boat lying beneath the path, immured in her lapis lazuli Dragon House. She remembered the last time she had seen the Dragon Boat. In her mind's eye she could still see the great green dragon head resting on the marble walkway that ran along both sides of the barrel-vaulted Dragon House, and the thick dragon tail coiled like a massive green rope, laid on the marble ledge that ran along the back wall. Jenna remembered how perfect the boat had looked—so beautifully repaired by Jannit Maarten—and yet how limp and lifeless the dragon had been.

And then Jenna thought about how Aunt Zelda had *still* not let her have the **Transubstantiate Triple** bowls so that she could use the **Revive** she had gotten from Broda Pye so long ago. A wave of exasperation washed over her, but Jenna pushed the bad feelings aside, took a deep breath and emptied her mind of everything—everything except what she could feel through the soles of her feet. She stood stone-still, silent, immersed, but once again, she could feel *nothing at all*.

In the attic room the three watchers fell silent. The grandmother knew what the Princess was waiting for. She had not lived above the Dragon House without thinking about the beautiful Dragon that lay beneath and, especially on long, cold winter nights, wondering if the creature was still alive. And that was exactly what Jenna was wondering now.

The ice numbed Jenna's feet but still she waited for a small *ther-umm* of hope. A sudden gust of bitter wind blew a flurry of snow off the battlements; it sprinkled her bluish toes with icy white frosting and Jenna realized that her feet had gone numb. There was no hope of feeling anything now. The wind—or something—brought tears to her eyes. Slowly she kneeled down, pulled on her furry socks and her brown leather boots. She stood up, irresolute for a moment and then, watched by the family far above, and the ghosts of fifty-four Queens, Princesses and Princesses-in-Waiting, she began to retrace her snowy footsteps.

The small boy watched Jenna go. "She looks sad, Gramma," he whispered.

The grandmother watched Jenna walking slowly back along the path, her red cloak a splash of color against the monochrome whites and grays of the snow-covered walls and the dark Moat and wintry trees beyond.

"Yes, she does," the grandmother agreed. "It is not good for the Princess to be so sad."

7

FALSE TRAILS



Marcia watched Terry Tarsal wrap up her new shoes in his special *By Appointment to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard* gold tissue paper.

“Thank you, Terry,” she said. “You’ve done a lovely job.”

Terry glowed with pride. It wasn’t often Marcia handed out praise. “It’s been a real pleasure, Madam Marcia; it’s always nice to do something special. I think the glitter really adds something to them. And I just *adore* the little bit of blue fur peeking out at the top. Inspired.” Terry sighed as he put the neatly wrapped shoes into a smart gold box. “These have been a lifesaver. I’ve had twenty-nine pairs of brown galoshes to waterproof for the Ramblings Roof Gardening Society. Highly depressing.”

“I can imagine,” said Marcia. “Nothing worse than galoshes.”

“Especially brown ones,” said Terry, tying his best bow around the box with the dark blue ribbon he kept for special customers. He handed the package to Marcia, who took it excitedly. “That will be half a crown, please.”

“Goodness!” Marcia looked shocked but she handed over the exact money. It was worth it.

Terry quickly put the money in the cash register before Marcia had the chance to change her mind. “Going somewhere nice this evening?”

Marcia was. Milo Banda had asked her to accompany him to a new show at the Little Theater in the Ramblings, but she wasn’t about to let Terry know. “That’s for me to know and you to wonder, Mr. Tarsal,” she replied. Feeling flustered at the thought of the evening, Marcia hurried off. The door threw itself open and she rushed out.

Splash!

Terry Tarsal went pale. He knew exactly what had happened. It was the wretched kids next door. They'd done it again. They had moved the puddle cover. Terry rushed outside to find his worst nightmare. His most prestigious customer was up to her neck in icy, muddy water right outside his shop. She didn't look too pleased about it.

"Get me . . . *out!*" spluttered Marcia.

Terry was small and thin but he was stronger than he looked. He grabbed hold of Marcia's arms and pulled hard. Marcia landed on Terry with a soft, obliterating *therwump*.

"Oof!" gasped Terry.

Marcia picked herself up and, like a large purple dog, shook as much water as she could off her **Magykal** cloak. Painfully, Terry crawled over to the puddle and extricated the gold shoebox floating forlornly on top. He should have known that a week occupied by twenty-nine pairs of brown galoshes was not going to end well.

Terry got to his feet. "I am so, so sorry, Madam Marcia. It's this blasted puddle. I've tried filling it in. You wouldn't believe the amount of trash I've put down there, but it just stays right there—a great big hole filling up with water. I don't understand. We shouldn't even *have* puddles at this time of year." Terry looked down at the soggy gold mess in his hands. "I'll make these as good as new for you, I promise."

"Thank you," said Marcia, wringing out the furry hem of her cloak. "No chance of having them by this evening, I suppose?"

"I'll work through until I've done them. What time are you going out?"

"Seven thirty," said Marcia without thinking.

Terry smiled. "They'll be with you by then. I'll bring them to you. And once again, I am so sorry."

"Not as sorry as *someone* is going to be," muttered Marcia, as she dripped away along Footpad Passage and bumped into the Footpad communal snowman—which sported an uncomfortable pointy stick.

Beetle climbed the wide white marble steps of the Wizard Tower. At the top he stopped to savor the moment. He turned and looked at the beautiful snowy Courtyard with its freshly cleared path winding from the Great Arch to the foot of the steps. Beyond the high wall of the Courtyard he could just see the snow-covered roof of the Manuscriptorium, with its lazy skein of smoke from the blazing fire in the scribes' new sitting room drifting skyward. Beetle felt indescribably happy—and only very slightly unsettled from having just bumped into Jenna.

Pushing Jenna from his mind, he turned back and looked up at the huge silver doors that soared up above him. The Wizard Tower was particularly striking that morning. It was bathed in a shimmering silvery-blue light, with

about to check on the **Fyre** Cauldron while he was away. Time was ticking by.

“Thank you for coming at such short notice, Beetle,” said Marcia.

“He is not the only one who has come at short notice,” Marcellus observed tetchily.

“Beetle has not brought it upon himself, Marcellus. Unlike you,” Marcia riposted. Keeping her gaze on Marcellus she said, “Beetle, perhaps you would like to show Mr. Pye the *Vent cooling system*.”

By not even a twitch of a muscle did Marcellus betray any familiarity with what Marcia had said. His studied expression—seventy percent annoyance, twenty-five percent bemusement, five percent boredom—remained the same.

Beetle took the gleaming white piece of paper out from his folder and laid it in front of Marcellus, who looked at it with no more than a natural curiosity. “What is this?” he asked politely.

Marcia stabbed her finger onto the title. “Vent cooling system,” she read out very deliberately. “As you *know*, Marcellus.”

Marcellus picked up the sheet of paper and perused it. “How strange. It looks just like a spider’s web.” He looked up at Marcia. “And why do you think I know about this”—he glanced deliberately down at the title—“vent cooling system?”

Marcia fought down her mounting irritation. She had expected Marcellus to cave in when confronted with the diagram, or at least look guilty. Either he was a very good actor or this actually was nothing to do with him—Marcia was not sure which. She stabbed her finger at the scrawled note at the foot of the page.

“Because, Marcellus, you have written on it. *There!*”

Very slowly—playing for time, Marcia suspected—Marcellus fished out his little round spectacles and put them on, carefully fitting the curled earpieces behind his ears. Marcia tapped her foot impatiently.

Marcellus peered at the note. “Julius FYI—Vent Cooling System. M,” he muttered. “FYI . . . strange name.” Beetle began to correct Marcellus, but Marcia held her hand up to stop him. Marcellus looked up at Marcia. “And no doubt you think that the ‘M’ is for Marcellus?”

“Yes,” said Marcia. A waver of uncertainty wandered into her voice.

Marcellus scented victory. He smiled and put the paper back down on the desk. “Well, I do hope you don’t call me out to inspect every little note in the Castle signed with the letter ‘M.’ I shall be spending all my time going up and down Wizard Way. There must be so many notes out there from . . . let me see now . . . Milo, Morwenna, Marissa, Maureen, *Marcus*—”

Marcia blanched at the mention of Marcus. Marcus Overland, ex-Ordinary Wizard, had once been given Marcia’s ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes by the Wizard Tower laundry in error. He had paraded around the Castle in them,

acting very badly indeed. There were still people who were convinced that Marcia had once run screaming down Wizard Way, waving a large pair of bloomers above her head. “That’s enough of that, Marcellus,” Marcia told him. “There is no need to be sarcastic.”

“I was merely pointing out the infinite possibilities of the letter ‘M,’” said Marcellus.

Beetle watched with a mixture of admiration for Marcellus’s cool head and annoyance at how Marcellus was putting Marcia off. It was time for some straight talking. From his folder he took a translucent piece of paper on which he had marked the position of all the puddles, and placed it on top of the Vent diagram.

“We had hoped you might be able to help us, Marcellus,” he said smoothly. “For the last few weeks I have been monitoring a very strange occurrence. Puddles have appeared throughout the Castle.”

Marcellus looked genuinely surprised, and then—Beetle was sure—a brief flash of panic crossed his face. Feeling more confident, Beetle continued, “At the beginning of the Big Freeze we had nine. My scribes have been checking on them daily and despite temperatures well below freezing, they report that no puddle has frozen over. And then two days ago four more were reported. Two appeared in scribes’ back gardens, and two in iced-up alleyways. It is odd, don’t you think?”

“I suppose it is,” said Marcellus. “But I don’t know why you are telling *me*.”

Beetle pointed to the papers lying in front of them. “You will see that on this top tracing paper I have a map of the Castle. On it I have placed a red dot where each puddle is.” Beetle looked up at Marcellus. “There are thirteen in all.”

There would be, thought Marcellus grimly. “Indeed?” he said coolly. “Is thirteen significant?”

“You tell me,” said Beetle.

Marcellus said nothing.

Beetle continued. “Now, if we place the tracing over the Vent diagram, like so . . . we can see that each red dot is on top of the end of a line on the diagram.”

“So it is,” murmured Marcellus. “How very interesting.”

“And I presume each line ending is a Vent.”

Marcellus shrugged. “Whatever a *Vent* is.”

Beetle knew he had to keep cool, but it was not easy. Fighting to keep any vestige of irritation out of his voice, he continued, “I—*we*—believe that the note is indeed from you and we believe that you wrote it to Julius Pike. FYI is, as I am sure you do actually remember, archaic shorthand for ‘For Your Information.’ Marcia and I are convinced that there is a connection between

these puddles and the **Fyre** in the Great Chamber of Alchemie. We would like an explanation as to why the puddles occurred *before* the **Fyre** has even been lit. Before, in fact, the Chamber was opened.”

For a few seconds, Beetle thought he had done it.

Marcellus sighed and said, “Indeed, there is a connection. Perhaps I may demonstrate?”

Beetle nodded.

Marcellus took a pen and proceeded to add a series of thick black crosses to the red dots on Beetle’s Castle plan. He then joined them up so that they formed a wavy line that meandered from the South Gate by the river to the Wizard Tower.

“You will find that *all* these places will have melting snow,” he said, looking at Beetle over the top of his spectacles. “You will also see that by no means all these spots have a—what do you call it—a *Vent* beneath them as shown on the diagram. It is an unfortunate coincidence that the ones you have found just happen to be above one of these Vent things. Whatever they may be.” He shrugged. “Coincidences happen.”

“Coincidences?”

Marcellus took off his spectacles and looked up. “Dragon blood.”

“*What?*”

“Dragon blood. After his fight with the **Darke** dragon, Spit Fyre left a trail of blood from the South Gate to the Wizard Tower. Each red dot, and now each cross, marks a spot of blood. You will find the snow has also melted at every cross I have drawn. I agree there is a link between the opening of the Chamber and the melting snow, but only insofar as that the flight made by Spit Fyre led to us being in the happy position of being able to do this at all.” Marcellus looked at Marcia. “No doubt you know all about the eternal heat of dragon blood?”

Marcia was not sure she did, but she was not going to give Marcellus the satisfaction of admitting it. “Of course I do,” she snapped.

Marcellus knew the interview was at an end. He took off his spectacles and put them back in their red velvet case. “Dragon blood is a wonderful thing, but it does have a tendency to lead to puddles in snow, which is most annoying for those who fall into them. I suppose your shoes were ruined, Marcia?”

“How did you know I—”

Marcellus stood up. He had won and he wanted to get out of Marcia’s study as soon as possible. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have important work to continue. I hope next time we meet it will be to do the job that we all wish to do—**DeNature** the Two-Faced Ring.”

Marcia opened the study door. “Yes, indeed.” She took a deep breath and said, “I apologize for interrupting your work, Marcellus. I’ll see you out.”

Beetle sat down with a sigh. Quietly, he put the Vent diagram and his tracing, now covered with taunting black crosses, back in his folder. He had made his first mistake as Chief Hermetic Scribe. It was not a good feeling.

Marcia returned without Marcellus. Beetle leaped to his feet. “Marcia, I am so sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about, Beetle,” said Marcia. “It’s all for the best. Marcellus knows we have our eye on him now. Please do not let this put you off. You must let me know about anything else suspicious—anything at all.”

Beetle felt very relieved. “Yes. Yes, of course I will. I will check out all the crosses he made.”

“Thank you, Beetle. Now I think we have both earned a strong cup of coffee.”

By the time Marcia escorted Beetle down the stairs he felt a little less embarrassed about the interview with Marcellus. As they spiraled down into the vaulted space of the Great Hall, Beetle saw that something had caught Marcia’s attention: Milo Banda was coming out of the duty Wizard’s cupboard.

Beetle saw Milo catch sight of Marcia and stop dead. Milo dithered. It seemed to Beetle that Milo wanted to skip back into the cupboard but was unsure whether Marcia had seen him. Marcia decided it for him. She jumped from the stairs and set off across the Great Hall at top speed. Beetle kept a tactful distance—something was going on, but he wasn’t sure what.

Milo was floundering. “Marcia, how nice. Goodness. Fancy seeing you here.”

Marcia looked confused. “I generally *am* here. This is where I live. And where I work.”

“Yes, yes. Of course. What I meant was that I didn’t expect to bump into you.”

“No?”

“No. I, um, have some business here. A small project of mine.”

“Oh. You never said. I might have been able to help.”

“No . . . no, I don’t think so.”

“Oh.”

“But of course, er, thank you for the offer. I do hope you understand,” Milo said anxiously. “I didn’t want to disturb you. I know how busy you are. That’s why I come here in the mornings.”

“Mornings?”

“Er, yes. Hildegarde said it was the best time.”

“*Hildegarde?*”

“Yes. But of course if you prefer I can see Hildegarde other times.”

“It matters not a jot to me *when* you choose to see Miss Pigeon,” Marcia

said icily. “However, I will be having words with Miss Pigeon about using work time for social engagements.” Marcia turned on her purple python heel and strode off.

Milo caught up with her at the foot of the stairs. “But it’s not a social—”

Marcia glared at Milo. “I find that I have other commitments this evening. Double speed!” The stairs did Marcia’s bidding and took her whirling upward. A distant scream followed by a *thump* came from somewhere far above as a Wizard was thrown off by the sudden change of speed.

Beetle and Milo watched Marcia’s purple cloak disappear.

“Bother,” Milo said. “Bother, bother, bother.”

“I’ll second that,” said Beetle.

On the way back to the Manuscriptorium, Beetle saw Jenna’s distinctive red cloak going past the Manuscriptorium, and he decided to take a detour to check out the nearest of Marcellus’s crosses. After a fruitless hour he discovered that the three closest to the Wizard Tower were not possible to verify. Two were on top of roofs and one was actually inside a building. He suspected that the others would be the same. Beetle walked slowly back to the Manuscriptorium. He *knew* that Marcellus Pye was up to something. But what was it?

KEEPER'S COTTAGE



Sarah Heap was *fiddling around* in the herb garden potting shed when Jenna let herself into the garden from the side gate. From Jenna's expression Sarah knew what the answer to her question would be, but she asked anyway.

"Hello, love. Any luck?"

"No."

"Well, it's so cold. Look at the frogs."

"*Frogs?* What frogs?" Jenna sounded touchy.

"Exactly—*what* frogs. They are all hiding in walls, asleep. Their hearts hardly beat at all in the winter, you know. And the Dragon Boat, she's cold-blooded too, like a frog."

Jenna was indignant. "She's nothing *like* a frog, Mum."

"Well, obviously she doesn't look like one but—"

"And anyway, I heard her all through the last Big Freeze and the one before. I'm worried that the **Darke Domaine** might have seeped into her somehow." Jenna took out a tiny blue glass bottle. On its small brown label was written: **Tx3 Revive**. "I've had this for so long now and every time I tell Aunt Zelda that we should use it and revive the Dragon Boat properly she makes an excuse. But I am not being put off *any longer*. I am going to see Aunt Zelda. Right now." Jenna strode off.

"Jenna!" Sarah called after her.

Jenna stopped at the walled gate that led into a covered way to the Palace. "What?"

Sarah picked her way along the icy gravel path to where Jenna waited impatiently. Unlike Sarah, Jenna liked to get things done as soon as she had

thought of them. Sarah put her hand on Jenna's arm.

"Aunt Zelda is not quite as . . ." Sarah searched for the right word. "Er, *Aunt Zelda-ish* as she used to be. She is getting very forgetful—you know she forgot to come to the wedding. She doesn't always realize she forgets, but it upsets her when she does. Don't . . . well, don't expect too much."

"But she *has* to do it, Mum. It is her job as Keeper."

Sarah looked at Jenna fondly. "I know. When will you be back, love?"

"As soon as I can," Jenna replied. She gave Sarah a quick kiss and ran off along the covered way toward a small door at the foot of the east turret.

Sarah watched her go. She thought how Jenna had grown up during the past month. She thought how *Queenly* she looked. Sarah smiled at the idea of her little girl being Queen. It will suit her, she thought. She is ready now.

Inside the Palace, Jenna ran up the winding turret stairs. She arrived breathless at the top landing and from a pocket deep in her tunic she took a gold key with a large red stone set into its bow. She stepped forward, pushed it into what appeared to be a blank wall and quickly jumped backward. She waited for a few seconds, then walked forward and disappeared through the wall.

Many miles away, in a stone cottage on an egg-shaped island at the southern edge of the Marram Marshes, Jenna emerged from a tiny cupboard under the stairs.

"Aunt Zelda," she called softly. There was no reply. Jenna looked around the room she knew so well. A fire was burning in the hearth, the floor was neatly swept and the potion bottles that lined the walls sparkled with different colors. The room itself was long and low with a flight of stairs going up the middle, below which was the Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard from which Jenna had just emerged. Aunt Zelda's cottage only had two rooms—one upstairs and one downstairs. Jenna did not count the kitchen, which was tacked onto the back and felt more like Sarah Heap's potting shed than a real room. She walked up the stairs and glanced around the long, low attic room. The beds were made, the room neat and tidy—and completely empty of Aunt Zelda.

Jenna went back downstairs. "Aunt Zelda?" she called once more, but there was still no reply. She must be out with Wolf Boy, thought Jenna, probably cutting cabbages or making sure there was a hole in the ice for the ducks. She decided to wait for them to come back.

Jenna wandered around, enjoying just being in the cottage on her own. Aunt Zelda's cottage was a special place for her. That morning it was alive with light reflected from the snow piled up outside, which, combined with the smell of the woodsmoke and the underlying odor of boiled cabbage, took her

right back to the happy weeks that she had once spent in the cottage during a previous Big Freeze. Jenna loved the quiet orderliness of the cottage, the walls lined with books and hundreds of potion bottles, the low rough-hewn beams hung with all manner of interesting things, some that reminded her of Aunt Zelda: bags of shells, gardening hats, bundles of reeds, cabbage cutters, bunches of herbs, and some that announced the fact that the cottage was now Wolf Boy's home too: a selection of fishing rods, nets and a fine collection of catapults.

Jenna walked over to the fire and stood warming her hands, careful not to disturb the duck asleep on a cushion by the hearth. A sudden gust of wind brought down a shower of frozen snow from the cottage roof; it clattered against the thick green windowpanes and made her jump. Jenna decided she had had enough of being alone in the cottage—she would go and find Aunt Zelda and Wolf Boy.

The icy cold shocked Jenna as she stepped outside. She had forgotten how much colder the Marram Marshes were than the Castle, especially when the east wind blew. Today the east wind was blowing hard, sending flurries of ice particles scooting across the top of the snow and a raw chill into her bones.

She set off along the cleared path, which led down to the plank bridge that crossed the frozen Mott—the large ditch that surrounded Aunt Zelda's cottage. Jenna stopped and, shielding her eyes against the glare of the snow, she looked around for Aunt Zelda or Wolf Boy. There was no sign of them, nothing except the great expanse of white blurring out in front of her. She turned and looked back at the small stone cottage piled high with snow, which reached up to its low eaves and made the cottage look like an igloo. The warm glow from the fire shone through the windows and Jenna was very tempted to go back inside, but she told herself sternly that the sooner she found Aunt Zelda, the sooner she could get back to the Dragon Boat.

Jenna knew that on Draggan Island—the island on which Aunt Zelda's cottage stood—all paths eventually led to a cabbage patch; and a cabbage patch was where she was sure to find Aunt Zelda. Deciding to keep the biting wind behind her, Jenna turned right and began to walk along the path beside the Mott.

Jenna had forgotten just how much she loved being out on the Marshes. She loved the wide windswept sky that seemed to go on forever, the exhilaration of being alive in the middle of so much wildness, but most of all she loved the quietness. In the summer it was punctuated by the *gloops* and *glugs* of unseen Marsh creatures, but in the winter the denizens of the Marsh buried themselves deep in the cold mud. They drifted into a long, slow sleep and the Marshes fell silent. The snows of the Big Freeze brought the thickest, softest, most perfect silence of all and Jenna reveled in it. She walked slowly, carefully placing her boots upon the snow so that they made no sound, and

pulled her cloak up to quiet the soft *swish swish* it made as it brushed across the snow.

So, when a heavy *thud* sounded behind her, Jenna very nearly fell onto the frozen Mott in shock. She spun around and gave a loud shriek. Septimus stood on the path with a just-landed-out-of-nowhere look to him. He was swaying slightly, wreathed in a weird purple glow.

“Sep!” Jenna gasped. “What . . . I mean . . . where did you . . . how did you?”

Septimus was speaking but no sound emerged. Only when the last wisp of **Magyk** evaporated could Jenna hear what Septimus was saying.

“. . . was a close one, Jen. Really sorry, I didn’t expect anyone to be out here—especially you. What are you doing here?”

“What am *I* doing here?” Jenna laughed. “I’m just walking. You know, boring stuff, one foot in front of the other? *I*’m not suddenly appearing out of nowhere with little purple lights flickering all over me.”

“Just my job, Jen.” Septimus grinned.

“Was that one of those **Transport** things?” Jenna asked.

Septimus looked a little smug. “Yep, it was one of those **Transport** things.”

“All the way from the Castle?” Jenna sounded impressed.

“Yep. Pretty good, huh?” Happy to be out in the sunshine at long last—and doing something interesting—Septimus linked his arm through Jenna’s and began walking toward the cottage.

“If you want Aunt Zelda, she’s not there,” said Jenna. “I’ve come out to look for her.”

“Oh. Well, I do want to see Aunt Zelda, of course I do, but really it’s her flask I want,” said Septimus. “Or rather, that Marcellus wants.”

“Flask? What flask?”

Septimus shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen it but Marcellus says she keeps it in a cupboard. One that he built especially for it.”

“Marcellus built a cupboard for Aunt Zelda?” Jenna was amazed. “She never said.”

“No, not for Aunt Zelda; he built it for Broda, his wife. You know, she was Keeper when Marcellus was young. I mean when he was first young—in Queen Etheldredda’s time. Your lovely ancestor, Jen,” he teased.

“I know all about Broda—I *met* her. And if you’re not careful, Septimus Heap, when I am Queen I will be just like Etheldredda and make all Wizard Apprentices come and weed the Palace garden every Saturday.” Jenna laughed.

“She didn’t do that, did she?”

“Yep. It says so in my book.”

“Ah, your *book*.” Septimus smiled. He knew all about Jenna’s book, *The Queen Rules*. Jenna had an annoying habit of quoting passages from it.

They walked along the Mott path, skirting the mound of snow that covered the remains of the ancient Roman temple where the Dragon Boat had once lain. Septimus stopped a moment and looked at the mound, remembering the first time he had seen the beautiful boat. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” he said quietly.

Jenna nodded.

“You still can’t hear her?”

“No. It can’t go on any longer, Sep. We need to do the **Triple** properly this time—with the **Tx3 Revive** I got from Broda. No more excuses. No more ‘when the time is right, dear’ from Aunt Zelda. I’ll need you there, of course.”

“Just say when and I’ll be there. You know that, Jen.”

Jenna smiled. “Thanks, Sep. I do.”

At the far end of the island past the cottage, two figures, dark against the snow, came into view.

Jenna waved. “Hey! Wolf Boy! Aunt Zelda!”

The shapes were unmistakable. The large slow triangle was Aunt Zelda and the thin, loping creature topped with a mane was clearly Wolf Boy, helping the triangle up the steep slope to the cottage.

“Jen,” said Septimus, “does 409—I mean Wolf Boy—does he know?” He still thought of his old friend by his Young Army number: 409. Just as Wolf Boy thought of Septimus by *his* Young Army number: 412.

“Know? About the Dragon Boat?”

“No, Jen—about being a triplet, with Marcus and Matt.”

Jenna slowed down. With all her worries about the Dragon Boat she had forgotten about Wolf Boy’s lost brothers. “Well, no, I don’t see how he *can* know. We were going to tell him at Simon’s wedding, weren’t we? Only Aunt Zelda forgot to come.”

“I thought you might have seen him already,” said Septimus.

Jenna shook her head. “Nope.”

“I really want to tell him myself. Do you mind?”

“Of course I don’t mind, Sep. It’s only right that you tell him.”

“Thanks.” Septimus remembered the time he had discovered who his family was—it had been on this very island almost four years ago. Now, he could hardly imagine being without his family and with no identity—but 409 still was. Septimus had suggested to Wolf Boy that he go to the Young Army Record Office to see what he could find out, but Wolf Boy had refused. He knew he was alone, he’d said, and he didn’t see the point of finding *that* out for sure.

They arrived at the cottage just as Wolf Boy was helping Aunt Zelda inside.

“Well, look who’s here,” said Aunt Zelda, breaking into a big smile. “How lovely to see you both.” She perused Septimus with a puzzled air. “You look different somehow. It’s . . . well, I don’t know why, but you do, dear.”

“Oh, it’s my Alchemie Apprentice robes, Aunt Zelda,” explained Septimus.

“Alchemie Apprentice. Goodness. Is that what you are now?”

“Only for this month, Aunt Zelda. In fact, only until tomorrow.”

Aunt Zelda shook her head. Things changed too fast for her nowadays. “Well, come inside, dears, and we’ll have some tea.”

After what Sarah had said, Jenna was relieved to see that Aunt Zelda seemed to be her normal self as she bustled about. Jenna sat by the fire and listened while Wolf Boy, pleased to have new company after many weeks of solitude with Aunt Zelda, talked nonstop.

Aunt Zelda brought in buttered toast for Jenna and Wolf Boy and a cabbage sandwich for Septimus, then she settled down beside the fire with her own favorite—a bowl of pureed cabbage leaves and marshberry jam. She regarded her visitors with a happy smile.

“It is so wonderful to see you,” she said. “What a lovely surprise. Now, tell me all the news.”

Jenna knew that she should tell Aunt Zelda all about Simon and Lucy’s wedding, but the Dragon Boat had to come first. She took a deep breath. “Aunt Zelda, it’s not good news. I’ve come because I can’t hear the Dragon Boat’s heartbeat anymore.”

Aunt Zelda paused with a spoonful of purple puree halfway to her mouth. Jenna saw a flash of concern in her blue witch’s eyes. “It can be very faint in the winter, you know, dear. And very slow,” she said.

“I know,” said Jenna. “I’m used to that. This is the third winter I’ve listened to her. But I have heard nothing for four days now. *Nothing.*”

Aunt Zelda put the spoon back in the bowl. “Are you quite sure?”

“I am *absolutely* sure.”

Aunt Zelda put the bowl of puree down on the floor. “Oh, dear,” she murmured to herself. “Oh, deary deary dear.”

“Aunt Zelda,” Jenna said. “*I think she’s dying.*”

Aunt Zelda gave a small moan and put her head in her hands.

Jenna pressed on. “We *must* do the real **Revive** now, with the potion I got from Broda. Please, Aunt Zelda, can you get the bowls for the **Triple** and come back with me and Sep now—*please?*”

Aunt Zelda looked distraught. She heaved herself out of her seat, walked slowly over to the Unstable Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard and squeezed inside with some difficulty. Jenna glanced anxiously at Wolf Boy.

“Is Aunt Zelda all right?” she whispered.

Wolf Boy wagged his hand to and fro in a so-so gesture. “She forgets stuff and loses things. It upsets her, you know?”

“But she still keeps the cottage really tidy,” said Septimus, thinking that he had never seen the bookshelves look so organized. “And the potion bottles so sparkly.”

Wolf Boy grinned. "I'm not a bad housekeeper," he said. "And I wield a mean duster."

Aunt Zelda emerged from the cupboard carrying a very battered ancient wooden box on which was written in old script: THE LAST RESORT. She sat down by the fire and handed it to Wolf Boy. "Here, dear. You're good at opening things."

Wolf Boy slipped the catch and went to give the box back to Aunt Zelda, but she was reluctant to take it. "No, dear. You take the bag out for me."

Wolf Boy drew out an old leather pouch.

"Take out the bowls for me, would you, dear?" asked Aunt Zelda.

Wolf Boy took out a bowl and balanced it snugly in the palm of his hand. Jenna and Septimus recognized the small hammered-gold bowl with the blue enamel edging that they had last seen when they and Aunt Zelda had performed the **Transubstantiate Triple** on the gravely injured Dragon Boat.

Jenna felt relieved. Aunt Zelda's reluctance to do the **Triple** had made her wonder whether she had lost the bowls, but all seemed fine.

Wolf Boy plunged his hand back into the pouch and brought out another bowl identical to the first. "Pretty, aren't they?" he said, balancing a bowl in each hand.

"Yes. And there's one more," said Jenna.

Aunt Zelda closed her eyes and began to mutter something under her breath.

Wolf Boy shook his head. "No more," he said. "That's it."

"*No more?*" asked Jenna.

"No. Sorry. Here, take a look." Wolf Boy passed the bag across to Jenna. She put her hand inside and felt nothing more than cold, dusty leather. Hoping that maybe the bowl was hiding in some obscure **Magykal** way, Jenna handed the pouch across to Septimus, who felt inside. He shook his head.

"Sorry, Jen. No bowl."

"Aunt Zelda," Jenna said gently. "You know there should be three bowls in the bag? Do you know where the other one is?"

Aunt Zelda sighed. "The Marsh Python ate it," she said.

TRIPLETS



Night was closing in. Wolf Boy got up from the gloomy group by the fire and lit the lanterns in the deep-set windowsills, while Aunt Zelda began to explain.

“It was a lovely sunny day and I’d left the door open. I was organizing the potion cupboard and I thought I would give the bowls a clean, so I put them on the desk over there”—she waved at an odd-looking desk that had feet like a duck—“and I went to get the **GoldBright** from the top shelf at the back behind the stairs. Well, I couldn’t find it, so then I had to sort through everything. I suppose I took a while looking for it. You see, it was hidden behind the **Frog Fusions**, which was next to the **Marvel Mixture**, which I am sure it never used to be, but the **Marvel Mixture** always shines so much that you can’t see anything unless you almost close your eyes and of course **Frog Fusions** is a really big bottle as we have so many frogs here and it seems a shame to waste them but the trouble is you can’t see anything through that murky green stuff, but I found it at last wedged behind the bottle in a little crevice thingy and when I went back to the desk I tripped right over it.”

“Over what?” asked Septimus, who had got lost on the **Frog Fusions**.

“The Marsh Python. Great ugly green thing, thick as a sewer pipe, snaking in through the door all the way to the desk, with its horrible flat head staring around and its long green tongue flicking in and out.” Aunt Zelda shuddered. “The wretched thing stretched all down the path to the Mott; in fact most of it was still in the Mott. I think it had been after Bert, because later I found her under my bed with her feathers in a terrible state.”

“What did you do?” asked Septimus.

“I gave her some milk and Balm Brew. It always calms her down.”

“You gave the python some *milk*?”

“What?”

“Zelda means she gave Bert some milk and Balm Brew,” said Wolf Boy. He turned to Aunt Zelda. “So what did you do with the python?”

“I swept it out with the **BeGone** broom,” said Aunt Zelda, shuddering at the memory. “Later I found that a bowl was missing and I realized what had happened. That disgusting snake had swallowed it. So I put the two bowls away with a **Return Spell**. It’s only a matter of time—the bowl will come back one day; things that belong together always do.”

“It will be too late by then,” said Jenna flatly.

Aunt Zelda looked desolate. “Jenna dear, I am so, so sorry. I know I should have told you, but I hoped the Dragon Boat would recover her strength in her own way and we would never need to use the **Triple** again.”

“Now I understand why you wouldn’t do the **Revive**,” said Jenna. “It wasn’t about it being better for the Dragon Boat to heal herself at all. It was because you’d lost a bowl. I wish you’d told me the truth.” Jenna was trying not to feel angry, but she could not believe that Aunt Zelda had kept something so important from her. She remembered what Sarah said about witches: *they tell you what they want you to know—not what you want to know*.

Jenna had been stroking Bert, who lay sleeping on the cushion beside her. But being stroked by someone who was upset made Bert feel edgy. Suddenly the duck gave Jenna’s hand a sharp peck. Jenna, to her utter embarrassment, burst into tears.

“Hey, Jen,” said Septimus, “it’s okay.”

“No, it’s *not*,” Jenna sniffed.

“We can fix it, I know we can,” Septimus insisted.

“But *how*?” Jenna asked, blowing her nose on her red silk handkerchief.

Septimus picked up one of the bowls and turned it over in his hands. “When he’s got the **Fyre** going, I bet Marcellus could make another one.”

“I’m afraid he can’t, dear,” said Aunt Zelda. “A new bowl would not belong. It couldn’t communicate with the others. You see, they are all from one original piece of ancient gold.”

“Ah . . . **Cloned** gold.”

“Gnomed gold?” asked Aunt Zelda, whose hearing was not as good as it had been.

“**Cloned**. Each one belongs to the other. Like identical triplets. Oh!” Septimus suddenly realized what he had said. He glanced at Jenna.

The shock at the disappearance of the third bowl had put all thoughts of Wolf Boy’s brothers out of Jenna’s mind. But now she was glad to think of something else for a while. She nudged Septimus. “Go on.”

“Ahem,” said Septimus nervously. Suddenly, it seemed such a big thing to tell Wolf Boy.

The little cottage fell silent. Aunt Zelda stared mournfully at the fire.

“Triplets,” said Jenna, trying to get Septimus to speak.

“Weird. Don’t you think?” said Wolf Boy.

“What’s weird?” Jenna asked.

“Triplets. Twins. People being identical.” Wolf Boy shook his head. “I dunno why, but whenever I see twins or triplets it always gives me a peculiar feeling. Right here.” Wolf Boy pushed his fist against his stomach. “Something about people looking the same, I guess.”

Septimus and Jenna exchanged glances. *Tell him*, Jenna mouthed.

Wolf Boy was a good lip reader. “Tell him what?” he asked suspiciously.

Septimus looked at Wolf Boy. “Um. There might be another reason why you feel like that.” He pushed his fist against his stomach just as Wolf Boy had done.

“Yeah?” said Wolf Boy, picking up a bowl and twirling it to catch the reflections from the firelight.

“Identical triplets,” said Septimus. “I mean . . .”

Wolf Boy put the bowl down and stared at Septimus, puzzled. “What?”

Septimus floundered. “Well, some people actually are triplets but they don’t know they are but even so they still kind of know deep down because even though they can’t remember it they were together once I mean so close together you can’t imagine it and so that’s why they get this weird thing when they hear about triplets and . . .”

“You all right, 412?” Wolf Boy asked.

“Yep. Fine.”

Jenna could bear it no longer. “Sep, just tell him straight.”

Wolf Boy looked worried. “Tell him *what* straight?” he asked.

Septimus took a deep breath. “*You* are an identical triplet. We’ve found your brothers—well, Beetle has. He went to the Young Army Record Office. And there are two more like you: 410 and 411.”

“Jeez.” Wolf Boy slid down to the floor with a bump.

Septimus grinned. “I suppose you’re the lost bowl,” he said.

“Swallowed by the python,” Jenna added.

Aunt Zelda looked up, shocked. “Swallowed by the python? Who?”

“It’s all right, Zelda, no one’s been swallowed by the python,” Wolf Boy said gently. “But it seems . . . wow, it’s so *weird* . . .” He grinned. “It seems I got two brothers. Just like me.”

“Oh, yes, so you have. I forgot.” Aunt Zelda smiled.

“You *knew*?” asked Septimus.

“I remember now. There were two boys at your fourteenth birthday party. They worked in a cave place . . . what was its name?”

“Gothyk Grotto,” Jenna supplied.

“That’s it, dear. I thought at the time, Wolf Boy, that your voices sounded so alike. But it slipped my mind.”

“Two more of *me* . . .” Wolf Boy was muttering.

Septimus could not stop smiling. “Yep, two more of you. Except they’ve got less hair. And they’re not so thin. And they are really pale compared to you.”

“That’s right,” said Aunt Zelda, pleased that she could at least remember this. “At the party—you were sitting opposite them, Wolf Boy dear.”

“*Opposite*?” said Wolf Boy, shocked.

“They’re really nice,” said Jenna.

“Yeah. Yeah . . .” Wolf Boy mumbled.

“You could do a lot worse,” said Septimus. He was an expert in long-lost brothers.

Wolf Boy shook his head. “Yeah. I know. I really liked them. Matt and, er, Marcus, yeah?”

“That’s right.”

Wolf Boy put his head in his hands. “It’s . . . it’s so *horrible*.”

Jenna glanced anxiously at Septimus. “What’s horrible?” she asked, putting her arm around Wolf Boy’s shoulders.

“It’s so horrible that I met my brothers and I had *no idea*. They could have been anyone. I should have recognized them,” he said, sounding upset. “But I didn’t. I *didn’t*.”

“How could you?” said Septimus. “You were only three months old when they took you away.”

“*Took me away*?”

“Your father was a Custodian Guard. He made a joke about the Supreme Custodian and they took his children away. You and your brothers.”

Aunt Zelda reached out and took Wolf Boy’s hand. No one said anything for some minutes.

At last Wolf Boy spoke. “You know, 412, it was bad what they did to us. Really, *really* bad.”

“Yes, it was,” said Septimus. “It was disgusting.”

Jenna picked up the two gold bowls and cradled them in her hand. “Sep,”

she said. "I want to take these to Marcellus. We have to go. Now."

Septimus sighed. He wanted to stay and talk to Wolf Boy. "But, Jen, I told you. Marcellus doesn't have the **Fyre** going yet. It will be weeks before there is any chance of making another one."

Jenna shook her head stubbornly. "I have to try, Sep. *I have to.*"

It was Wolf Boy who settled the argument. "Why don't we check out the **Triple** rules first?" he suggested. "There are lots of books here that you don't have in the Castle—you know, witchy books. We might find a way around needing the third bowl. Witches are good at finding their way around things."

"That's a good point, Jen," said Septimus.

Jenna could only agree with Wolf Boy. Witches clearly were very good at finding their way around things. "Okay," she said. "We'll stay tonight. And look through all the books."

Supper was pig-foot pie garnished with steamed eel heads followed by a large communal bowl of cabbage leaf and marshberry jam puree, into which Aunt Zelda suggested they dip dried wormsticks, although no one did. The usual pushing of food around plates occurred, and even Septimus, who had once loved Aunt Zelda's cooking, found the pig foot on his plate hard to swallow. They helped Aunt Zelda clear the table and wash the plates; then Aunt Zelda went upstairs to bed, leaving them feeling queasy but still very hungry.

Wolf Boy fetched three straw mattresses and laid them out beside the fire along with three pillows and quilts. As the gentle sound of Aunt Zelda's snores drifted down the stairs, Wolf Boy began setting up a tripod over the fire, from which a large hook dangled.

"What's that for?" Jenna asked.

"The cooking pot," said Wolf Boy. "Like we had in the Forest. 'Scuse me a moment." He got up and went into the kitchen, returning with a round black pot, which he carefully hung on the hook. He threw another log on the fire and they watched the flames jump up and curl around the side of the pot. "Rabbit stew," said Wolf Boy. "*Proper* rabbit stew. With good stuff in it like ___"

"Rabbit?" asked Jenna.

"Yep. With potatoes and onions and carrots and herbs."

"No eels?" asked Septimus.

"No eels," said Wolf Boy firmly. "No wormsticks and positively *no* pigs' feet."

As the cooking pot bubbled gently, a delicious smell filled the room and ushered out the lingering taint of eel. Jenna felt ravenous. "Do you always cook your own stuff?" she asked.

"I'd be as thin as one of those brooms up there if I didn't," said Wolf Boy. "Zelda doesn't mind. She goes to bed early, I clean up and then I sit here with

my cooking pot and memorize some potions or something.”

“You don’t get lonely?” asked Jenna.

“Nah. I’m not alone. Zelda’s upstairs, Bert’s here and the marsh is outside. I love it.”

To Jenna’s dismay, the search through Aunt Zelda’s witchy library yielded nothing at all. As the moon rose high above the snow and its silver light filled the cottage, they settled down for the night, pulling the quilts around them to keep off the chill that was creeping in. The cottage grew quiet and they began to drift off to sleep, lulled by the silence of the frozen marsh.

Suddenly Wolf Boy sat up. “Hey!” he said.

“Wassamatter?” Septimus mumbled blearily.

“So what am *I* called?” asked Wolf Boy.

“Huh?” asked Jenna.

“My name? What’s my name?”

“Wolf Boy,” said Jenna, confused.

“No. I mean my *real* name. There’s Matt and Marcus, but what about me?”

“Ah,” said Septimus. He glanced at Jenna.

“Your surname is Marwick,” said Jenna. “That’s a good, ancient Castle name.”

“Marwick . . . yeah, that’s nice, feels right, somehow,” said Wolf Boy. “But what is my first name?”

“Well.” Septimus sounded reluctant.

Wolf Boy was getting impatient. “Oh, spit it out, 412. It can’t be that bad.”

Septimus thought it could. “Mandy,” he said.

“Mandy?” Wolf Boy sounded incredulous. “*Mandy?*”

“Yeah. Sorry, 409.”

Wolf Boy buried himself in his quilt. “Sheesh . . .” Jenna and Septimus heard him muttering. “*Mandy . . .*”

10

THE CLOUD FLASK



“*Morning, Mandy,*” said Septimus, stepping over the recumbent Wolf Boy. A wiry arm shot out and a hand fastened itself around Septimus’s ankle. A growl came from beneath the quilt. “Don’t . . . call . . . me . . . Mandy.”

“Ouch, 409, that *hurts.*”

“Good.” Wolf Boy sat up, his long matted tails of hair fuzzed by sleep.

“So what *do* we call you?” Jenna’s voice came from the far end of the room. The marsh light had woken her early, as it always used to, and she was gazing out of the window watching the snow falling thick and fast across the marsh. “You’ve got three different names now.”

Wolf Boy considered the matter. “Yeah. Well, Marwick’s good. I like Marwick. Or Wolf Boy is fine. Don’t think much of 409 anymore—not after what they did to us. No more numbers, hey, 412?”

“Yeah,” agreed Septimus. “No more numbers.”

“That’s a deal,” said Wolf Boy. “So . . . I think I’ll use Marwick officially, like when I have to sign my Keeping papers and stuff like that. But Wolf Boy’s good for the rest of the time.”

“Until you’re too ancient to be called ‘boy’ anymore,” said Jenna.
“Yeah. Then I’ll be plain old Marwick. Sorted.”

Aunt Zelda got up late. She looked tired and drawn, Jenna thought, as she walked slowly and heavily down the stairs, her grizzled hair unbrushed and her large patchwork dress looking gray around the edges. A pang of pity went through Jenna—suddenly, Aunt Zelda was old. Jenna rushed over and wrapped her arms around her great-aunt.

Aunt Zelda looked a little overcome. “I thought you might have gone. I was afraid . . .” The words seemed to catch in her throat. “I was afraid you might never come to see me again.”

“Of course I’ll come to see you again,” said Jenna. “And don’t worry about the bowl. Marcellus will make another one.”

Aunt Zelda didn’t think such a thing was possible, but she merely sighed and said, “Well, I do hope he can, dear.”

“Okay, Sep?” said Jenna. “Shall we get going now?”

Aunt Zelda twisted a patchwork handkerchief in her knobbly fingers. “Come and tell me when the bowl’s ready, won’t you? Please?”

Jenna gave Aunt Zelda another hug. “We’ll need you to do the **Triple** with us, Aunt Zelda. Come on, Sep. I’ll take you through the Queen’s Way.”

“Yes—oh, bother. Wait a minute, Jen; I’ve got to get the flask. I promised Marcellus.”

“Okay. But hurry up.”

Jenna waited impatiently by the fire while Septimus explained to Aunt Zelda what he wanted. Aunt Zelda looked surprised. She led him over to a door set into the wall at the back of the cottage and, fumbling in her pocket, she drew out a set of small brass keys. Septimus waited impatiently while Aunt Zelda frowned at the keys.

“Would you like me to find the key?” Wolf Boy asked gently.

Gratefully, Aunt Zelda handed him the keys. “Yes, please, dear.”

A moment later Wolf Boy had unlocked the door and opened it to reveal the flask.

“It’s massive!” Septimus gasped.

Wolf Boy shrugged. “Yeah, well, it is quite big, I suppose. But then Cloud Flasks have to be, don’t they?”

“Do they?” Septimus knew nothing about Cloud Flasks and Marcellus had certainly not enlightened him. He had imagined a small glass jar that he could put in his pocket. But the thick glass flask that sat on the cupboard floor was as wide as Aunt Zelda and a good foot taller. Its round bowl filled the cupboard completely and its tall neck rose up above Septimus’s head.

Septimus glanced anxiously over to Jenna, who was pacing up and down by the fire—there was no way he could get something this big back through

the Queen's Way. "Um, Jen . . ." he ventured. "Can you come over here, please?"

Jenna was not pleased. "It won't go through the Way, Sep."

"I know." Septimus sighed. "I'll have to take it back to the Port on a sled and then get the Port barge."

Jenna was aghast. "No, Sep! We have to get to Marcellus today. It's a matter of *life and death*."

"But Jen, like I said, Marcellus hasn't got the **Fyre** going yet. He can't do it until then."

"Sep, we have to ask—we *have to!*"

Wolf Boy stepped in. "Septimus," he said, feeling strange using his friend's real name for the first time, "have you looked outside?"

Septimus glanced across at the window. Snow was falling fast. He went over to the front door and pulled it open. All he could see was a grayish-white blanket of snow falling so thick that the air looked almost solid. "Bother," he said.

"It's a real marsh blizzard," said Wolf Boy, joining him. "You'd be crazy to go out in that. In ten minutes you and that flask would be just a weird-shaped pile of snow."

"How long will it last?" asked Septimus.

Wolf Boy shrugged. "Who knows? But I'd guess all day. We've had a few of these recently and once they start, the snow keeps falling until the cold night air comes in."

Septimus would have happily waited the blizzard out in the comfort of Aunt Zelda's cottage. He would have loved to spend a day by the fire talking to Wolf Boy, catching up with his life and finding out what he was doing. But one look at Jenna told him that that was not an option. "I'll have to come back for it," he said. "Tomorrow, when the blizzard's blown out."

Jenna pushed Septimus into the little cupboard under the stairs, closed the door and lit a small lamp. The light flared up in the dark and Septimus saw the familiar shelves with their orderly bottles of Unstable Potions, and below them he saw in the dark wood a line of drawers, in which he had always supposed the Partikular Poisons were kept. He watched as with a practiced air, Jenna reached down to the bottom drawer and opened it. He sensed something move within the drawer and heard a soft click behind them as the cupboard door locked itself and they were plunged into darkness.

The next thing Septimus knew was Jenna pushing the door open again. He guessed she had forgotten something. She stepped out and he waited for her to go and get whatever it was.

Jenna looked back into the cupboard. "Are you coming, Sep?"

"Huh?"

"We're here."

“Where?”

“Back at the Castle. In the Palace.”

“Already?”

Jenna grinned. “Yep. Good, isn’t it?”

Septimus followed Jenna out of the cupboard and stepped into a small, cozy room. It possessed a little fireplace with a fire burning in the grate, and a comfortable, somewhat worn-looking chair placed beside it. What he did not see was the occupant of the chair: the ghost of a Queen—a young woman, wearing a red silk tunic, with a gold cloak wrapped around her shoulders. Around her long dark hair was a gold circlet—the one that Jenna now wore.

At the opening of the cupboard door, the ghost jumped up. She had been waiting for this moment. Her daughter had rushed past her so fast on her way into the cupboard that she had not had time to react. Now she was ready. The ghost of the Queen got to her feet and stepped in front of Jenna.

Jenna stopped dead—*something was in the way*.

Septimus was just behind Jenna. “What is it?” he whispered.

Jenna remembered something the ghost of Queen Etheldreda had once said to her. “I think that maybe my mother is here,” she whispered. Tentatively she put her hand out in front of her.

The ghost of Queen Cerys stepped back to avoid being **Passed Through**. “Yes, yes, I am here!” she said—but no sound emerged. What the ghost did not realize was that it takes some practice to speak without **Appearing**. And Cerys knew that the Time was not yet Right for her to **Appear** to her daughter.

Jenna turned to Septimus. “Do *you* feel it?” she whispered.

Septimus nodded. The little room felt strangely full of movement, as though currents of air were swirling around.

Jenna took a deep breath and said out loud, “Is anyone there?”

“I am here,” said the ghost of the Queen, silently and somewhat irritably. “Daughter, our mothers tell me the Dragon Boat is dying. You must save her!”

Beside the ghost of Queen Cerys stood the ghost of her own mother, Jenna’s grandmother, the redoubtable Queen Matthilda. The rotund ghost, gray hair awry, crown slightly askew as it always had been in Life, was agitated. “For goodness’ sake, Cerys, say something,” the ghost told her daughter.

“I am *trying* to, Mama.”

“Well, try harder, dear. She’ll be gone in a moment. The young move so fast.”

Queen Cerys concentrated hard. “Daughter. Listen to me!”

Jenna glanced at Septimus. “Was that you?” she asked.

“Was *what* me?”

“A kind of whisper.”

Septimus shook his head. He longed to get out of the oppressive little room; it held bad memories for him. “Let’s go, shall we?” he said.

Jenna nodded.

Queen Matthilda was exasperated. “Cerys, *tell* her!”

“How can I concentrate when you keep *going on at me*?” Cerys demanded crossly, as she watched her daughter and the Alchemie Apprentice edge past her.

“Well, *I* shall tell her,” snapped Queen Matthilda.

“No, you will *not*.”

“I shall. She is *my* granddaughter.”

“And she is *my* daughter.”

“Sadly neglected if you ask me,” Queen Matthilda huffed. “You really should make more of an effort with her. Poor child. You know I would happily stay here in your place so that you could go to her. She needs you, Cerys.”

Jenna took the few steps across to the blank space in the wall where the hidden door to the outside lay. Septimus followed, glancing backward uneasily.

Cerys was fast descending into one of the legendary fights that she used to have with her mother. “Mama, you know *The Queen Rules* perfectly well. We do not **Appear** until the Time Is Right. You *know* that. How can my daughter ever become a true Queen if we keep **Appearing** to her, telling her what to do, preventing her from finding her own true path?”

“Absolute twaddle,” harrumphed Jenna’s grandmother. “I never did agree with that part of the *Rules*. Never.”

“You cannot cherry-pick from the *Rules*, Mama. It is all or nothing. Wait!”

The ghost of Queen Cerys saw her daughter take hold of the Apprentice’s hand and heard her say, “Let’s go, Sep!” Cerys began whirling around the room in frustration. Why couldn’t she speak? *Why?* As her daughter headed toward the wall, a faint, despairing cry found its way into the room: “*Hear me! Only you can save the Dragon Boat!*”

On the other side of the wall Jenna stared at Septimus openmouthed. “That was my mother!”

“Are you sure?”

“Sep, I know her voice. *I know it*. It’s my mother!”

“It was only her ghost, Jen.”

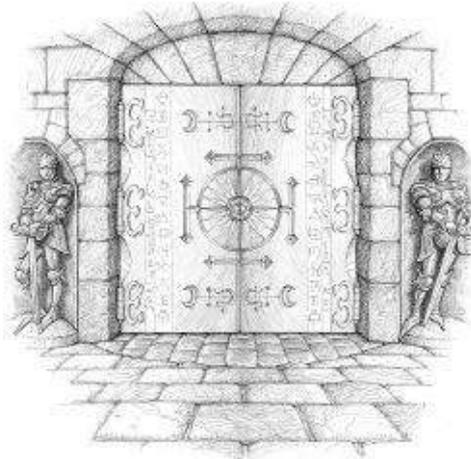
“So why doesn’t she **Appear** to me, Sep? *Why?* She must have seen me often enough. She’s just like my father. They’re both the same. They *both* keep away. It’s *horrible*.”

“Oh, Jen,” said Septimus, at a loss for words.

“And now—now all she does is *tell me to do something that I can’t do!*”

11

DRAGON FYRE



Septimus held a burning rushlight to light the way as he and Jenna walked through the coils of the lapis lazuli Labyrinth. The last time Jenna had been there was five hundred years in the past, and the flickering of the flame lighting up the blue lapis walls brought back terrifying memories of being dragged through it by the murderous ghost of Queen Etheldredda.

At last they reached the arch that led into the Great Chamber of Alchemie. After Septimus's descriptions of all the soot and sand, Jenna was expecting to see a wreck, but what met her was a bright glittering chamber, full of gold—a testament to Septimus's cleaning skills.

Jenna's gaze was at once drawn to the two huge, patterned gold doors set in the wall opposite: the Great Doors of Time that had once been the gateway to the Glass of Time itself. Even though she knew that the Glass had shattered and no one could now pass through them to another Time, they still had a presence that gave her goose bumps. Jenna shivered and looked away to the neat ebony workbenches that lined the walls, clean and polished, with unpacked boxes stacked up neatly.

Jenna loved all the gold gleaming softly in the candlelight—gold catches, handles and hinges, tiny gold drawers below the workbenches, gold brackets that held up the shelves and even the scuffed strips of gold that ran along the bottom of the ebony benches, protecting the precious wood from the boots of Marcellus's ancient and long-gone junior Apprentices. Jenna and Marcellus shared a fascination for gold.

To Jenna's right was the furnace—still unlit—with its funnel of a chimney snaking up through the domed ceiling. In the center of the Chamber was a long table on which a line of candles was burning brightly. But something was missing.

"Where's Marcellus?" asked Jenna.

Septimus shrugged. "I dunno. He's always going off somewhere. He'll be back soon."

Jenna sat down at the long table. "So, where does he go, then?"

"I don't know. He never says."

"Don't you ask?"

Septimus laughed. "I know *you* would, Jen. But it's not polite for an Apprentice to ask things like that. He'd tell me if it was important."

"Sounds weird to me," Jenna said. "I mean, what *else* is there to do down here?"

The sound of footsteps in the Labyrinth stopped their conversation. A few seconds later, Marcellus Pye appeared through the archway. He looked startled.

"Septimus! What are you doing back so *soon*? Oh! And Esmeralda!" Marcellus was spooked. In the candlelight Jenna looked so much like his long-gone sister, Esmeralda, that he had forgotten for a moment what Time he was in. Being in the **Fyre** Chamber still took him back to the old times. Marcellus recovered from his Time Slip and offered Jenna the seat at the head of the table. "Please, Princess Jenna, sit down."

Jenna took her seat and Marcellus sat down a little shakily on the bench at the side of the table, leaving Septimus to take his usual place on the right-hand side.

"Welcome to the Great Chamber, Princess Jenna," Marcellus said rather formally. "I am delighted that you have come to see it so soon. It is an integral part of the Castle in which the Queens have always taken a great interest. Much greater, I believe, than in the Wizard Tower."

Jenna nodded—she could believe that. Remembering what she had come for, she placed the leather bag on the table and took out the two bowls.

Marcellus looked at them with interest. "Ah," he said. "The **Triple**. How nice." He waited for Jenna to put the third bowl on the table.

"There isn't another one," she said. "The python ate it."

Marcellus looked shocked. "You must get it back right away. Kill the wretched snake if you have to."

"It's not that easy," said Jenna. "You see—"

Marcellus got to his feet. "Well, Marcia will just have to go without her silly shoes."

"Shoes?" asked Jenna, confused.

"Her purple pythons. Isn't that the only reason Terry Tarsal keeps that

ghastly snake? Marcia may not believe it, but some things are worth more than shoes and this set of bowls is one of them. Terry Tarsal will just have to kill his precious python.”

Now Jenna understood. She sighed. “It’s not Terry Tarsal’s python, Marcellus. I wish it were.”

“Then whose python is it?”

“It isn’t anybody’s python. It’s the giant Marsh Python.”

Marcellus sat down. “Ah. Unfortunately not quite so easy to catch.”

“No.”

“Well, that’s a great shame. To lose the **Triple** after all this time.”

“I told Jenna that you could **Clone** them,” Septimus said anxiously.

Marcellus laughed. “You have great faith in me, Apprentice. But there is much to do before we can even think of that.” He sighed and stood up as if to end the meeting. “I am so sorry, Princess,” he said. “I cannot **Clone** the gold for you now. We are not yet ready.”

“So that’s it, then,” said Jenna flatly. “She’s going to die.”

Marcellus looked shocked. “Who is going to die?”

“The Dragon Boat.”

“What, the Dragon Boat of Hotep-Ra?”

Jenna nodded, too upset to speak.

“If you will forgive the question, Princess, why do you think she is going to die?” Marcellus asked.

“I haven’t heard her heart beat for a whole five days now. I go every day in the Big Freeze. Aunt Zelda said I should. And I do hear it. Even though no one else can, *I* always do. And now . . . now it’s stopped. And the only thing my mother has ever asked me to do, I *can’t*.”

Marcellus thought that Jenna had the same look that his sister Esmeralda used to have when teetering on the edge of a tantrum. He decided to tread carefully.

“Tell me, Jenna, what is it that Sarah has asked you to do?” he asked gently.

“Not Sarah—not *mum*. My mother. The Queen.”

“The Queen? Her ghost has spoken to you?”

“We *think* we heard something,” Septimus said doubtfully.

Jenna was distractedly tracing her finger around the design of the sun cut into the ancient wood of the table. “Sep, I heard my mother. I *know* it was her.” She looked up at Marcellus. “Her ghost spoke when we were in the Queen’s Room.”

“Ah. Then it *is* your mother,” said Marcellus. “That is where the ghost of the previous Queen always resides.”

“Does she? Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Jenna.

“Well, I assumed you knew,” said Marcellus.

“No. No one tells me anything,” Jenna declared. “Not even my *mother*.”

Marcellus stood up. “Then it seems to me, Princess, that as your nearest relative on the *royal* side, it is time I stepped in. I will tell you all I know from my dear dead sister and my, ahem, less dear but thankfully dead mother.”

Jenna looked surprised. She had never thought of Marcellus as a relative, but it was true; he was in fact a great, great—and then some—uncle. Suddenly she felt a weight lifted from her shoulders. The Dragon Boat was no longer her worry alone. “Thank you,” she said, smiling for the first time that day.

“My pleasure, niece,” said Marcellus. “Now, I suggest we repair to the boatyard and open the Dragon House.”

“But what for? We’ve lost the **Triple** so we can’t revive her,” said Jenna, exasperated. She wondered whether Marcellus had actually listened to what she had been saying.

“There is more than one way to skin a cat,” said Marcellus.

Jenna’s patience ran out. Angrily, she stood up, scraping the old oak chair back across the stone floor. “Stop talking in riddles, Marcellus,” she snapped.

Marcellus put his arm out to stop Jenna from going. “Forgive my obscure speech, Princess,” he said. “What I mean is, there is more than one way to revive a dragon.” He stood up and put his arm around Jenna’s shoulders. “The **Magyk** way is beyond us now, so I shall show you the Physik way.”

Jannit Maarten was sitting in her snow-covered hut in the boatyard, cooking her favorite sausage and bean stew when, to her dismay, she saw the new Castle Alchemist walk by with the Princess, the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice and then—as her tiny snow-dusted window filled with green—*ohnonothatwretcheddragon*. Jannit muttered a sailor’s curse and got to her feet.

During the Big Freeze, Jannit hibernated like a tortoise in her hut. She looked forward to the peace and quiet that the first flakes of snow brought with them. She sent her Apprentices and dockhands home, and waited happily for the day the Moat froze over and not even the Port barge could disturb the serenity of the boatyard. For the rest of the year Jannit worked day and night, eating, sleeping and dreaming boatyard business, but the Big Freeze was her holiday. As she had grown older, Jannit had begun to look forward to it so much that she had recently considered barring the way through the tunnel to ensure she was not disturbed by anyone from the Castle. The sight of three Castle dignitaries walking by her tiny snow-dusted window, accompanied by a notoriously heavy-footed dragon, made her wish she had done just that. There was a sharp rap on her door and Jannit briefly toyed with the idea of pretending she was not there in the hope they would go away. But the thought of them poking unsupervised around her boatyard and, even worse, the heavy-footed dragon trampling on the delicate shells of the upturned boats, got

Jannit opening the hut door with a growled, “*What?*”

The new Castle Alchemist spoke. “Good day, Mistress Maarten, I—”

Jannit bristled. “I am no one’s *mistress*, Alchemist.” Jannit, who disapproved of Alchemie, managed to make “Alchemist” sound like an insult. “Jannit Maarten is my name and Jannit Maarten is what I answer to.”

“Ah. Forgive me. Jannit Maarten. Yes. Indeed. Ahem.”

Jannit, who was nearly a foot shorter than Marcellus, folded her arms belligerently and squinted up at the Alchemist. “What do you want?”

Marcellus looked down at the small, wiry woman swathed in a thick blue-black woolen sailor’s coat that was far too big for her and reached almost to the ground. He could see she meant business. Her iron-gray hair was scraped back into a sailor’s pigtail that seemed to bristle with annoyance, and every deep-set, wind-burned line in her face showed just how displeased she was to see him. Marcellus took a deep breath. He knew that what he had to say was not going to go down well.

“We have come to open the Dragon House,” he said. “I am sorry for any inconvenience it may cause.”

Jannit looked flabbergasted. “You what?”

Jenna decided to step in. “I’m really sorry, Jannit,” she said. “But I think the Dragon Boat is dying. We have to get into the Dragon House. We *have* to try to save her.”

Jannit liked Jenna, who reminded her of how she had been as a girl: a confident, taking-charge kind of person. That, thought Jannit, was how girls should be.

“Well, Princess, I am most sorry to hear that. Of course you must open the Dragon House, though how you propose to do that I have no idea. You do realize there is no opening anymore—just a solid wall?”

Jenna nodded. “Yes. That’s why we have Spit Fyre with us.”

“So I noticed,” said Jannit drily. She looked up at the dragon, and Spit Fyre’s green eyes with their red ring of **Fyre** around the iris met her disapproving stare. Spit Fyre shifted uneasily from one foot to another. He felt as though he had done something wrong, although he wasn’t sure what. He finished chewing the cow bone that Septimus had just fed him and a large glob of dribble headed for Jannit’s sealskin boot.

Jannit moved her boot just in time. “Well, I suppose if you must. Don’t let him tread on anything, will you?” she said. “I don’t want anything broken.”

“We shall naturally take great care,” said Marcellus and gave a small bow. Jannit—who thought bowing was an affectation—harrumphed and turned to go back inside her hut.

“Thank you, Jannit,” said Jenna. “Thank you so much.”

Jannit thawed a little more. “I hope you find your boat is well, despite your fears, Princess Jenna,” she said. She stood at the hut door, watching the group

pick its way across the boatyard as they headed toward the Castle wall within which the Dragon House was secreted. Jannit was just closing the hut door (and looking forward to her sausage and beans) when she saw Spit Fyre about to step on a large pile of snow, under which lay her favorite rowboat.

“Stop!” she yelled, running out of the hut and waving her arms. The group did not hear. Jannit saw that Spit Fyre was about to lower his foot—suddenly she remembered something from her childhood. “Freeze!” she screamed. It worked. Everyone stopped in midstep, including Spit Fyre, whose great foot hovered a few inches above the pile of snow. Jannit raced out into the snow. “Wait right there!” she yelled. “Don’t move an inch.”

Spit Fyre stood with his foot swaying uncertainly in midair, looking increasingly unsteady. Jannit hurtled to a halt beside them. “Don’t step there!” she said.

Spit Fyre looked down at Jannit and wobbled. Any minute now, Septimus thought, he will topple over and squash someone.

“Easy now, Spit Fyre,” said Septimus. “Put your foot down here—next to mine.” He looked at Jannit. “It’s okay there?”

Jannit sounded relieved. “Yes, thank you, Apprentice.”

“Ouch!” Septimus gasped. Spit Fyre’s foot had come to rest on his boot.

Jannit now insisted on piloting the party across the yard. Dragons and boatyards did not mix, she told the visitors sternly. They reached the other side without any breakages and came to the edge of the Cut, which was a short and apparently dead-end run of water that led off the Moat and ended at the high Castle wall. Because the water in the Cut was virtually unaffected by the Moat’s currents it froze early. It was, Jannit informed them, easily thick enough to support the weight of a dragon.

Septimus was not so sure. Spit Fyre was—as his throbbing foot was telling him—extremely heavy. But it was true; the Cut was an ideal spot for the dragon to take off from, safely away from the boatyard clutter. To get to the nearest alternative takeoff area, Septimus would have to walk his dragon back through the boatyard, and he didn’t relish telling Jannit that. The Cut it would have to be.

Septimus climbed up into the dragon’s Pilot Dip. “Okay, Spit Fyre. Forward. One foot at a time and *slowly*.”

Spit Fyre looked at the ice and snorted doubtfully.

“Come on, Spit Fyre,” Septimus urged. “Foot down.”

Spit Fyre stretched out his huge right foot; its green scales glistened against the smooth white snow that covered the Cut. He leaned out from the icy edge, tipped forward a little and suddenly Spit Fyre went sliding onto the Cut. A groan came from deep within the ice and Septimus felt the surface beneath the dragon’s feet shift.

“Up!” he yelled to Spit Fyre. His shout was lost in the *craaaaack* that

spread across the ice like the sound of the ripping of a thousand sheets. Spit Fyre needed no urging to go. He thrust his wings down just enough to raise his weight off the ice at the very moment it fell away beneath his feet. In a spray of ice splinters and snow Septimus and Spit Fyre were airborne.

Jenna, Marcellus and Jannit watched Spit Fyre rise up and head slowly toward the blank wall at the end of the Cut. Jannit, who appreciated how difficult it was to maneuver odd-shaped craft in confined spaces, was impressed. When Spit Fyre was only a few feet away from the wall, he stopped and hovered so that his nose was level with the burnished gold disc set into the Castle wall. The disc was just above a line of dressed stones that arched gracefully through the Castle wall—this was the only clue to the hidden entrance to the Dragon House.

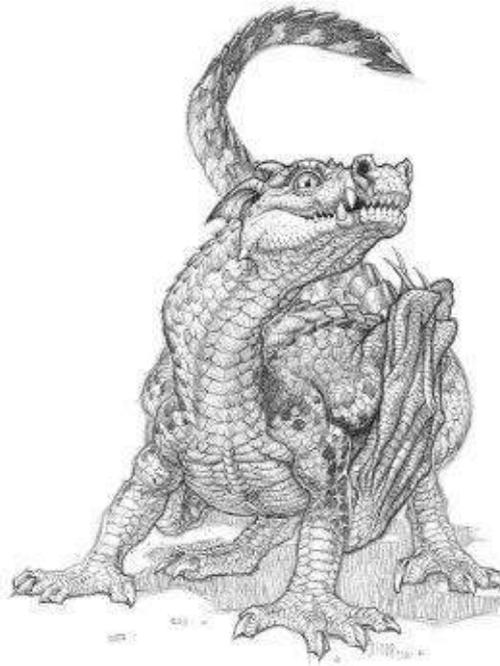
A thrill of excitement ran through Septimus. He and Spit Fyre were going to make **Fyre** for real, not some practice run trying to hit the metal **Fyre** target in the Dragon Field. This was actually going to do something—it was going to open the Dragon House. He steadied Spit Fyre and patted his neck. “**Ignite!**” he yelled.

A deep rumble began inside Spit Fyre’s fire stomach, taking the phosphorus from the bones that Septimus had hastily fed him on his way to the boatyard, and turning it into the gases that would combine to make **Fyre**. The plume of gas swept up through Spit Fyre’s fire gullet and hit the air where it spontaneously **Ignited** with a loud *whuuuuumph*. A thin, blindingly bright jet of **Fyre** streamed from the dragon’s mouth and hit the very center of the gold disc. The disc began to glow and turn from a dull gold to a dusky orange, to bright red, to a blinding white. Then there was a sudden flash of brilliant purple, which caused everyone to flinch and shut their eyes—Spit Fyre included.

When the watchers beside the Cut opened their eyes there was a collective sharp intake of breath. The wall was gone and the Dragon House was revealed: a towering lapis lazuli-domed cavern, covered in golden hieroglyphs. And below, held fast within clear blue ice, lay the Dragon Boat, her head resting on a marble walkway, where it had been laid almost three years earlier.

A sudden shout came from below. Septimus looked down to see Jenna running toward the Dragon House.

“She’s covered in ice!” he heard Jenna yell. “She’s *dead*.”

THE CHAMBER OF THE HEART

Septimus landed Spit Fyre on the broad space above the Dragon House where Jenna had listened for the dragon's heartbeat. It wasn't until Spit Fyre touched the ground that Septimus realized that what he had thought was a cleared patch of snow was in fact black ice. Spit Fyre's feet disappeared from under him. He landed with a *thud* on his well-padded stomach and slid at great speed toward the battlements. A moment later the battlements were gone, sending an avalanche of stones thundering down to the Cut. It was only Spit Fyre's talons digging into the ice—and a superb piece of tail-braking—that stopped Septimus and his dragon from following the stones into the Cut below.

A delighted face in an attic window watched the scene. "Gramma, Gramma, it's Spit Fyre! Gramma, *look!*" yelled the boy.

His grandmother was less thrilled. "That tail could put all the windows out," she said.

Septimus slipped down from the Pilot Dip and patted the dragon's nose. "Well done, Spit Fyre. Go home!"

But Spit Fyre didn't want to go home. He could see that there was another

dragon right beneath his feet and he wanted to meet it. He thumped his tail in disapproval.

The little boy in the attic squealed with excitement. His grandmother threw open the window. “Careful!” she yelled.

“Sorry!” Septimus shouted. He looked at his stubborn dragon and a whisper of the **Synchronicity** between him and Spit Fyre came back—now he understood why Spit Fyre wanted to stay. Septimus put his hand to his ear, which was the sign that told Spit Fyre to listen. Spit Fyre dutifully dropped his head down so that Septimus could talk at dragon-ear height.

“Spit Fyre. The dragon is very ill. She may even be dying. If you stay you must be very quiet. You must not move. No tail thumping, no claw scratching, no snorting, no *anything*. Do you understand?”

Spit Fyre blinked twice in assent. Then he lay down on the ice and mournfully rested his head over the parapet: a dying dragon was a terrible thing. Septimus patted Spit Fyre’s neck and left his dragon to be watched over by a nervous grandmother and her excited grandson.

With Jenna’s cry of “she’s dead” still echoing in his head, Septimus raced down a narrow flight of stone steps that led to the opposite side of the Cut. As he made his way along the foot of the wall toward the Dragon House, a faint movement and a slight cooling of the air told Septimus that he was walking through a throng of ghosts. And from the restrained, somewhat regal atmosphere he guessed they were ancient Queens and Princesses, anxiously watching.

Septimus moved slowly through the ghosts toward the open mouth of the Dragon House. He now saw what Spit Fyre’s **Fyre** had revealed. It was eerily beautiful. The Dragon Boat, stark white against the deep blue lapis of the Dragon House, lay deathly still, encased in a frosting of ice. A shaft of light from the winter sun glanced in and made the ice sparkle with such movement that for a moment Septimus thought that all was well and the Dragon Boat was breathing. But the concerned faces of Marcellus and Jenna—and even Jannit Maarten—on the opposite side of the Cut told him otherwise.

Septimus walked quickly across what was left of the ice, reached the boatyard side of the Cut and followed Marcellus and Jenna into the chill of the Dragon House. The air inside reminded Septimus of the Ice Tunnels—stale, strange and icy cold. He made his way along the icy marble walkway and joined Jenna and Marcellus where they stood, looking down at the Dragon Boat’s head.

Her head rested on a rug laid on the marble walkway. The swanlike curves of her neck, the fine detail of the scales, the intricate contours of the head all showed through the ice frosting, like a finely carved statue. In fact, it seemed to Septimus that the dragon had turned to marble, so cold and stonelike did she look.

Marcellus nodded to Septimus. “I have been explaining to Jenna that a dragon is a reptile with blood that cools but does not freeze, with blood that allows her to become deeply unconscious and yet still return to life. Indeed, some say dragon blood has the property of eternal heat. What I am saying is that it is *good* she is covered in ice.”

This made sense to Septimus, but from Jenna’s expression he could see that Marcellus still had some persuading to do.

“So,” said Marcellus, “shall we go aboard?”

“*Aboard?*” The thought of stepping onto the Dragon Boat made Jenna feel very uncomfortable. It felt disrespectful—like walking over a grave.

“Naturally. It is what we need to do. Or rather, what *you* need to do.”

“Me?”

“It is the Queens who have the touch. And, I believe, a small bottle of **Revive.**”

“Oh!” Jenna took the tiny the blue bottle from her pocket. On its small brown label was written **Tx3 Revive.** “So I can use it, even without the **Triple Bowls?**”

“Of course. There are many ways to use the **Revive.**”

“So, what do I do? Put it on her nose or something?”

“Something,” said Marcellus. Very carefully, he stepped onto the deck of the Dragon Boat and held out his hand for Jenna, who took it and stepped lightly in beside him, followed by Septimus. Almost reverentially, Marcellus moved toward the center of the deck, where there was a pair of tiny doors leading to a locked cabin. No one had ever been able to open the doors. When Jannit had repaired the boat, she had become quite spooked by the fact that there was a part of it she could not get to. And there were times when she thought she could *hear something in there.*

Marcellus kneeled down at the doors, which were mistily visible through the ice. He unwrapped his black velvet scarf and began to gently rub the ice until it was clear of hoar frost, and peered through the glassy surface of the ice to the mysterious azure blue doors below. “Apprentice, I wonder if you have something that would melt this ice?”

Septimus fished a small candle-end out of his pocket. “I’ve got my tinderbox. I can light this.”

Marcellus heaved a sigh. “That will take hours, Apprentice. Do you have, er, anything else?”

Septimus grinned. So much for Marcellus insisting on *no Magyk while you’re my Apprentice.* “You mean something like a *spell?*” he asked.

“A spell will be fine, thank you.”

Septimus kneeled down beside Marcellus and placed his hands on the ice that covered the doors. With his palms threatening to stick fast, he quickly muttered a simple **Melt.** Then he leaned all his weight onto his hands and

pressed hard. He felt the heat of his palms spread out into the ice and soon there were two rapidly growing hand-shaped holes in the ice, water was running down the inside of his sleeves and his hands were through to the smooth wood below. Septimus rocked back on his heels, shook the warmth back into his freezing hands and watched the ice retreat to reveal two shiny, deep blue lacquered doors, each with a simple dragon symbol enclosed in a lozenge shape.

“Stop now,” said Marcellus. “I think it is safer to keep the temperature low until we find out what . . . what we are dealing with.”

“You mean, until we find out if she’s dead,” said Jenna.

“Personally, I do not believe she is dead,” said Marcellus. “Now we must open the doors.”

Septimus shook his head. “They don’t open. In fact, I think they’re false doors. Just one piece of wood.”

“That, Apprentice, is what they are made to look like. But they are not. I have opened them once before.”

“*When* before?” asked Jenna.

“You forget I was the husband of a Keeper,” Marcellus answered. He took off the heavy gold disc that hung around his neck—his Alchemie **Key**—and placed it in a shallow indentation where the doors joined, saying, “My dear Broda once had a similar panic as you, Princess.”

“I am *not* panicking.”

“During a particularly cold Big Freeze she too was sure that . . . *aha*, the doors are opening!”

Jenna and Septimus crouched down beside Marcellus and watched the doors swing open to reveal a deep, red-tinged darkness. Gingerly, Marcellus leaned forward and looked inside; then he sat back on his heels and beckoned to Jenna to come closer. “Can you hear anything now?” he said in a hushed voice.

Jenna leaned forward through the hatchway into the dark. A sense of being deep inside the Dragon Boat made the hairs on the back of her neck rise. She could smell something like warm iron; it was rich and strange and made her feel a little queasy. “Is this where her heart is?” she whispered.

Marcellus nodded. “Wait a few minutes. Her heart beats slowly when it is so cold.”

Like surgeons gathered around a patient on an operating table, they waited for a heartbeat. Marcellus took out his timepiece and looked at the second hand moving round. It made three sweeps of the dial, then four, then five.

“Nothing,” Jenna said miserably. “*Nothing.*”

“No,” said Marcellus heavily. “You are right, Princess. Of course.”

“She’s dead,” said Jenna despairingly. “She’s *dead.*”

“I do not think so. If she were dead I believe she would be frozen all the

way through. But possibly she is getting near to it.” Marcellus looked up at Jenna, a serious expression in his eyes. “As your mother so rightly said, only you can save her.”

“But *how?*”

“It is something the Queens pass down one to another.”

“But *no one*’s passed it down to me.”

Marcellus was soothing. “I know. But I can tell you. That day in the Big Freeze when my Broda could no longer hear a heartbeat, she went to get my sister Esmeralda, who was Queen. I came with Esmeralda because she always panicked in the Queen’s Way. And I watched what Esmeralda did.” Marcellus gave a wry smile. “And what a fuss she made about it.”

“About *what?*” asked Jenna, irritated. Sometimes she thought that Marcellus enjoyed being obscure.

“I will tell you.”

By the time Marcellus was nearly through his explanation Jenna had a good deal of sympathy with Esmeralda. So did Septimus.

Marcellus finished with, “So now, Princess, you too must enter the Chamber of the Heart.”

Jenna looked at the reddish darkness beyond the two little doors and for a moment wished that she had never asked Marcellus for help. Like most Castle Queens and Princesses, Jenna had a squeamish side to her, and right then she felt quite sick. But she must do what she must do. She took a deep breath, ducked through the low opening and crept inside, where she found the wide, flat rib that Marcellus had described and crawled gingerly onto it. Below her, Jenna now knew, lay the Dragon Boat’s heart.

Following Marcellus’s instructions, Jenna tipped a few drops of the brilliant blue **Tx3 Revive** onto her palms and rubbed it in. The fresh smell of peppermint cut through the thick, meaty fug of the Chamber and took away her nausea. She reached down into the darkness, and her hand met something firm to the touch, cool but not ice-cold and not, as Jenna had feared, at all slimy. It felt like touching the side of her horse, Domino, on a chilly night. This was, she knew, the Dragon Boat’s heart. Stretching out both hands, Jenna dropped forward and leaned all her weight onto the heart for a few seconds, then released the pressure. She repeated it twice and then sat back and waited. Nothing happened. Jenna counted to ten slowly and did it again. One . . . two . . . three . . . Once more she waited and once again, nothing happened. Jenna dropped forward for a fifth time and leaned all her weight onto the stilled heart, willing it to respond. *One . . . two . . . three . . . wait, count to ten, then ready to begin again.* Just as she was reaching the end of her count to ten, Jenna became aware of something happening below in the darkness. A flutter, a twitch . . . and then a low, slow *ther-umm* pulsed through the Chamber. Jenna was out of the doors as fast as she could go.

“It worked!” she whispered excitedly. “*It worked*. Her heart just did a beat. She’s alive!”

“A true Queen,” said Marcellus, smiling. “No one else could have done that. I suggest we wait for another beat before we close the doors. Just to make sure.”

They waited. And waited. “Two minutes.” Marcellus’s whisper echoed around the cavern after what had felt like at least ten to Jenna. “Three . . . four . . .”

And then at last—another *ther-umm* resonated through the Dragon House.

“Thank goodness,” whispered Marcellus. “Now, let us quickly close the doors. It is not good to expose such delicate areas to the air.” Marcellus placed his **Key** on the doors to lock them once more. “Perhaps you could ice them over, Apprentice,” he said to Septimus.

“An **Ice Spell** you mean?” asked Septimus, grinning.

“Whatever,” said Marcellus, who, like Marcia, had now caught Septimus’s slang.

Ther-umm came another heartbeat.

Septimus completed his spell and a fresh skin of ice crept across the doors. Marcellus, Jenna and Septimus stepped off the Dragon Boat and walked along the walkway toward the brightness of the snowy boatyard where the small, anxious figure of Jannit Maarten waited. As they stepped down from the marble walkway, a strange sound like the rustling of autumn leaves greeted them—the sound of ghostly applause from the crowd of Queens and Princesses.

Ther-umm.

The ghosts parted to let them through, all passing favorable comments on Jenna’s Queenly abilities. Her grandmother, Queen Matthilda, who had left her daughter sulking in the turret, could resist no longer. She **Appeared** to Jenna. “Well done, my dear,” she said.

Jenna looked shocked. No ghost of a Queen—apart from the ghastly Etheldredda—had ever spoken to her. There was, as she knew from section 133 in *The Queen Rules*, a ban on ghosts speaking to Living Princesses and Queens. It was put there for the very good reason that all Queens were convinced that they knew best and would have no hesitation in telling the current incumbent so. But Queen Matthilda—who had watched over her granddaughter since the day she was born—could keep silent no longer. Her granddaughter needed to know she was doing well and Queen Matthilda intended to tell her. She lightly patted Jenna’s arm and smiled. “You will make a good Queen,” she said.

“Oh!” said Jenna. “Thank you!”

Ther-umm.

A sudden gasp from Jannit broke the moment. “My hot pot!” she yelled and

took off running across the yard, leaping over the upturned boats, heading for her hut. A cloud of black smoke was billowing from the stovepipe in the roof and suddenly everyone could smell burning.

Septimus went to help.

To the background of sailor's curses and the sound of a metal pot hissing in the snow, Marcellus and Jenna looked at the Dragon Boat, lying white and majestic in the blue of the Dragon House.

Ther-umm.

"I don't want to wall her in again," Jenna said. "I want to be able to come and talk to her. To watch over her, just like Aunt Zelda would do if she were here."

"I understand, Princess," said Marcellus, "but perhaps you should seek advice from the Keeper first."

Jenna was not sure. "Aunt Zelda forgets stuff now," she said. "I don't know if she knows what's best anymore."

Marcellus was still annoyed with Marcia, but he knew he must give as good advice to Jenna as possible. "Then ask Marcia," he said. "She will know."

Septimus took a very reluctant Spit Fyre back to his Dragon Field and arranged to meet Jenna by the Great Arch. Jannit retreated to her hut, locked the door and embarked upon cooking sausage-and-bean hot pot take two.

It was later that evening that Jannit, to her utter dismay, found she had two dragons in the boatyard. Spit Fyre had returned and was sitting, perfectly quietly, at the entrance to the Dragon House. Jannit was not pleased, but there was something about the two dragons together that touched her. It was almost, she thought, as if they were mother and son.

13

WELCOME BACK



Alther Mella, ex-ExtraOrdinary Wizard, ghost and mentor was up in the Pyramid Library with Marcia. Alther's presence broke the convention that ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghosts did not return to the Wizard Tower, but after her old tutor's shocking death, Marcia had missed Alther so much that when he was released from his year and a day in the place where he had entered ghosthood, Marcia had asked Alther to come back to the Wizard Tower and to use it just as he had when he was Living. She had never regretted it.

The tall, purple-clad ghost with his white hair tied back in a ponytail was hovering over a large book with tissue-thin pages, wafting them over one by one. He was helping Marcia search for something—*anything*—that would explain the puddles. It was a thankless task. They had found nothing. But Marcia could not shake off the feeling that deep below the Castle *something was going on*. It was even giving her nightmares: fires burning out of control and monsters coming out of the deep regularly invaded her sleep.

Marcia knew that everything relating to What Lies Beneath the Castle was stored either in the Manuscriptorium Vaults or in the Pyramid Library. Beetle had done a complete search of that section in the Vaults and found nothing

more than his Vent diagram—so whatever information there was had to be in the Pyramid Library.

What puzzled Marcia was that although she and Alther had found nothing positive, they had found some strange absences. In many of the shelf indexes there were unexplained gaps, even complete empty pages. The Alchemie section was almost nonexistent apart from some very basic student primers, and the notes relating the Ice Tunnels went back no further than when they were **Frozen** after the Great Alchemie Disaster, which was very odd, Alther said, because they were as old as the Castle itself. It seemed to both Marcia and Alther that a large chunk of Castle history had been systematically removed. And Marcia was beginning to suspect that the lack of information about the **Fyre** and the Vents was linked. They must be, she thought, part of the same system and were therefore removed at the same time. *But why?*

“The funny thing is, Marcia,” Alther said as he wafted through the pages of yet another index, “you wouldn’t know things were missing unless you were looking for them.”

“Exactly,” Marcia agreed. “And if you didn’t know about them to start with, you wouldn’t be looking for them, would you?”

“If you ask me,” said Alther, “someone has spent a long time up here, systematically removing anything relating to Alchemie and ancient structures beneath the Castle. It must have been an ExtraOrdinary Wizard—no one else would have had the access. I wonder who it was?”

“More to the point, I wonder *why*,” said Marcia. She thumped a pile of pamphlets down and a cloud of dust **Passed Through** Alther. The ghost spluttered. “Careful, Marcia. I’m allergic to dust.”

Marcia laughed. “You can’t be, Alther. You’re a ghost.”

Alther looked a little offended. It was not polite to remind a ghost of their ghosthood. “Well, I *am*,” he said huffily. “Ever since that ghastly Drago Mills place.”

“It’s not totally ghastly,” said Marcia. “I got a very nice rug from the sale. Oh, hello!”

The little door to the Library had swung open and Septimus and Jenna came in.

“How lovely to see you both!” said Marcia. She looked at her Apprentice, who she had not seen for some weeks. “Oh, Septimus, you look so *pale*.”

Septimus fielded a barrage of questions about whether he was eating properly and did he ever get outside in the daylight, and then went to talk to Alther, leaving Jenna to ask Marcia’s advice about the Dragon Boat.

Ten minutes later, Septimus, Jenna and Marcia were out in the corridor, waiting for the stairs to change direction. They were on slow mode due to the arrival of the elderly parents of one of the Wizards, and Marcia was polite

enough to wait until they had got off. Septimus watched the silver treads rise sedately upward; the shafts of sunlight coming in through the azure-blue glass of the stairwell window threw lazy, glimmering patterns onto the solid silver treads. He loved this time of day in the Wizard Tower; there was something **Magyk** about the evening sun when it came in low through the windows. Septimus took a deep breath and breathed in the scent of **Magyk**—sweet with a hint of sandalwood.

“Have you seen him acting suspiciously?” Marcia said suddenly.

“Huh?” said Septimus, heady with the **Magyk**.

“Marcellus. Have you noticed anything . . . strange?”

It was a difficult question for Septimus to answer: many things that Marcellus did could be thought of as strange—especially by Marcia. But Septimus did not like to tell tales. “No,” he said.

The stairs changed direction and Marcia hopped on. “I’ll look forward to seeing you back here tomorrow evening, Septimus.” She looked at her Apprentice critically as he stepped back to let Jenna get on before him. “It’s not good for you, being buried like a mole under the ground.”

Marcia was beginning to disappear from view. Jenna jumped on after her and made her way down a few steps until she was near enough to talk. “It really is all right, then?” she asked Marcia. “The Dragon House staying open?”

“Fresh air and some sunshine—just what the Dragon Boat needs,” Marcia said. “And Septimus too.”

The stairs were now approaching the fifteenth floor. Dandra Draa, the new Sick Bay Wizard—headhunted by Marcia for her skills in **DisEnchantment**—had just finished an emergency callout to a Wizard who had been convinced he had **Enchanted** himself by reading an ancient text. Dandra had diagnosed Papyrophobia and was now on her way up to see Marcia. She was waiting patiently for the stairs to change direction when she saw the distinctive purple pointy pythons appearing above her.

“Good afternoon, Madam Marcia,” said the Sick Bay Wizard. She waited politely for Marcia to rotate past.

“Jump on, Dandra,” said Marcia. “I’m sure you’ve got better things to do than wait there.”

Dandra Draa was new to the Wizard Tower and was unsure of protocol. She had recently arrived from the Dry, Hot Countries in the South where she had lived in a beautiful, star-encrusted, circular tent beside a deep pool on the edge of a desert. Life there had been so much simpler. It had certainly not involved stairs of any description—or ExtraOrdinary Wizards with weird shoes. Dandra hesitated. Surely it was not right to stand *above* the ExtraOrdinary Wizard? But it was impossible to step on below as those stairs had already passed. And *oh, no*, here came the Princess, slowly revolving

down. Dandra did a confused half bow, half curtsy. What was she to do now? Could she jump on in front of the Princess? Oh, it was all too much.

“Get on, Dandra, do,” said Marcia impatiently.

Dandra took a deep breath and jumped nervously onto the empty stair between Marcia and Jenna. It was an embarrassing squash and Dandra hardly dared breathe. She decided to deliver her message, whatever the protocol.

“Madam Marcia. What we hope for happen. Syrah Syara wake.”

Marcia took a moment to digest Dandra’s way of speaking. But Septimus understood at once.

“Syrah’s awake?” he asked. “You mean she is **DisEnchanted?**”

Dandra looked up to see the big brown boots of the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice. “Yes,” she said. “Syrah is **DisEnchanted.**”

“Dandra, that is marvelous news,” said Marcia. “I shall go and see her at once.”

“So shall I,” said Septimus.

Marcia stepped off the stairs, closely followed by Dandra Draa, who performed an awkward jump and to her embarrassment landed on Marcia’s cloak hem.

“See you tomorrow, Sep,” Jenna said, as she carried on down.

“See you, Jen,” Septimus called, as he jumped onto the seventh floor.

Jenna saw Marcia put her arm around Septimus’s shoulders and lead him down the dimly lit corridor that led to the Sick Bay. She was glad to see Septimus back with Marcia in the Wizard Tower; it suited him better and, she had to admit, it felt safer. Jenna pushed away a niggles of anxiety at the thought that he still had one more day to go in the Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik—Septimus would soon be back, she told herself.

Jenna jumped off the stairs in the Great Hall and wandered across to the tall silver doors, watching the flickering images on the walls—which showed important and often dramatic moments in the history of the Tower—fade in and out of focus. One that she had not seen before came into view: Septimus and Spit Fyre attacking the **Darke** Dragon. She smiled and wondered if Septimus had seen it yet.

Jenna had an idea. She scribbled a Welcome Back party invitation for Septimus and knocked on the door of the duty Wizard’s cupboard. Hildegard Pigeon peered around the door.

“Oh!” she said, looking surprised and glancing back into the cupboard. “*Princess Jenna,*” Hildegard said, oddly loudly. She peered out. “How can I help you?”

A muffled cough came from inside the cupboard. Jenna thought it sounded familiar, although she couldn’t place it. “Can you give this to Septimus, please?” she asked.

Hildegard’s hand shot out of the narrow gap between the door and the

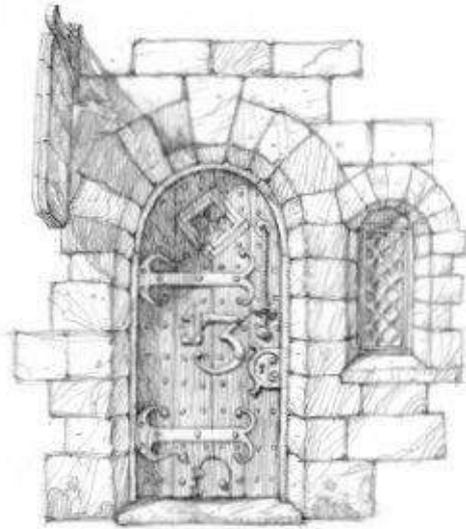
doorjamb and hurriedly took the invitation.

“Um, thank you,” said Jenna. “Sorry to interrupt whatever it is you’re doing.”

“Doing?” Hildegarde squeaked. “I’m not *doing* anything!” The door to the duty Wizard cupboard slammed shut.

Jenna shook her head—now that Hildegarde was almost a proper Wizard she was as weird as the rest of them, she thought. Pleased to be leaving the **Magykal** mist that always hung around the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower, Jenna whispered the password and waited while the huge silver doors to the Wizard Tower swung open and the floor bade her GOOD-BYE, PRINCESS. HAVE A NICE DAY.

Moments later she was running down the white marble steps in the brilliant, breathtakingly cold winter sunshine, heading back to the Dragon Boat—which was, amazingly, *alive*.

DISENCHANTMENT

*In the **DisEnchanting** Chamber, Syrah Syara lay in her cocoon, suspended from the ceiling by the wispy strands of Forrest Bands. She looked just as she had done when Septimus had said good-bye to her before he left to be with Marcellus: her face was bone-thin, her hair pulled back into two tight little plaits and her skin was tinged blue by the light in the Chamber. Nothing had changed except for one important thing: Syrah had her eyes open.*

Syrah looked up at the three faces staring down at her. Her gaze traveled blankly from Marcia, to Dandra Draa and on to Septimus.

“Syrah,” said Septimus. “It’s me, Septimus. Syrah, you’re safe. You’re in the Wizard Tower.”

Syrah frowned and struggled to speak.

“Is enough now,” Dandra said. “I watch Syrah tonight and if all go well, we move her. Is good. Out, please.” In her own domain, Dandra Draa had confidence. She shoed Marcia and Septimus out like a couple of annoying bluebottles. They emerged into the Sick Bay, smiling.

“Wonderful,” said Marcia. “Dandra has done all I hoped she would. I’ll see you tomorrow evening, Septimus, six o’clock sharp, please, in time for Dandra and Hildegard’s Wizard Warming Supper.” She strode across the Sick Bay, giving a cheery wave to Rose, the Sick Bay Apprentice, and was gone. Septimus sighed. He wished he did not have to go back to Marcellus. He so much wanted to be there when Syrah came out of the **DisEnchanting**

Chamber.

Loath to leave, Septimus stopped to say hello to Rose. Rose—tall and skinny with brown hair so long that she could sit on it—looked very efficient. Her hair was tied back into the regulation Sick Bay plait and she wore a white tabard over her green Apprentice robes.

“Still here?” Septimus asked. He knew that Rose, who was on the new Apprentice rotation scheme, had been hoping to go on to the **Charm** Desk.

“Still here,” agreed Rose. She glanced around. “Worse luck,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry.” Septimus stopped. That didn’t sound right. “I mean, I didn’t mean I’m sorry to see you. I meant—”

Rose smiled. “That’s okay. I know what you meant. I say stupid stuff like that all the time. Oh! See, I did it right then.”

“Quits then,” Septimus said, grinning. “Anyway, maybe it’s not so bad still being here. Maybe you’ll end up upstairs.”

“Upstairs?”

“Yes. With Marcia. She’s put the Pyramid Library onto the scheme.”

“Wow!” Rose looked amazed. The **Charm** Desk paled into insignificance compared with the Pyramid Library. “Oh, gosh, I must go and get some sheets,” she said. “We’ve got a scribe coming up. Broken leg.”

Rose rushed off and headed for the cupboard between beds twelve and one. The beds in the Sick Bay were ranged around the room like numbers on a clockface. There were only two occupants, both elderly Wizards and both asleep. Septimus watched a large pile of sheets stagger over to bed three.

“Need any help?” he offered the stack of sheets.

“Oh, yes, *please*,” it said.

Septimus helped Rose make the bed in the approved Young Army fashion. Rose surveyed the result. “You’re good,” she said, surprised.

Septimus very nearly gave Rose a Young Army salute but stopped just in time. “Thank you,” he said. “I’d better go. I’ll be back tomorrow evening.”

Rose smiled. “Syrah will be out then.”

“Yes, isn’t that great?”

“Yes. Miss Draa has been amazing.” Rose watched Septimus breeze out and tried not to wish that he was coming back to see her rather than Syrah.

Down in the Great Hall, Septimus bumped into Beetle. “Hey, Beet!” He smiled. “What are you doing here?”

“Hello, Sep. Just seen poor old Barnaby Ewe onto the stretcher lift. Broke his leg. He fell into one of those puddles—there’s a really deep one in a dark corner of Little Creep Cut. Be careful if you go down there. People cover them up, then some joker gets an idea it would be fun to move the covers.”

Septimus fell in with Beetle as he walked across to the doors. “Marcia was going on about puddles too,” he said. “She thinks it has something to do with

Marcellus.”

“It has,” said Beetle. “I am convinced of it. He’s doing something he’s not telling us about.”

“Really?”

The double doors swung open and a rush of fresh, cold air met them. Twilight was falling as Beetle and Septimus headed down the wide steps and the great doors closed silently behind them. They walked across the Wizard Tower Courtyard, their boots crackling through the frosted snow, the ice crystals sparkling in the light from the rushlights that lined the wall.

“I suppose you haven’t noticed Marcellus doing anything unusual?” asked Beetle. “Like disappearing and not saying where he’s been?”

Septimus did not reply.

“Sorry,” said Beetle. “I know I shouldn’t ask. Confidentiality between Master and Apprentice and all that.”

“It’s okay. I’m not his Apprentice, and I’m not going to be either. I was thinking about what you said. Well, Marcellus comes and goes, you know? Nothing unusual, really. He’s just busy, I guess.”

Beetle sensed a “but.” He was right.

“But . . . well, yesterday Marcellus sent me off to Aunt Zelda’s to get a flask. He didn’t tell me it was so huge that I’d have to bring it back across the Marshes. He must have known it would take days. And he didn’t seem pleased that I was back so soon. It made no sense—until I thought that maybe he didn’t want me around for some reason. You know?”

“Well, well. Fancy that,” said Beetle.

At the Great Arch both Beetle and Septimus stopped and turned around to look up at the Wizard Tower. It was one of those crystal-clear nights when the lights of the Tower were dazzling; they glittered and sparkled in the frosty air, brilliant against the Tower’s silver sheen, turning the gently falling snowflakes a soft purple and blue.

“Wow,” breathed Beetle. “Sometimes I forget how beautiful this place is.”

“Yeah,” said Septimus. After a month underground, he too had forgotten. He felt a pang of homesickness for the Wizard Tower and had a real desire to turn around and go back . . . home. He sighed. He had one more day with Marcellus. That was all. It would soon be over.

Septimus and Beetle walked through the inky shadows of the Great Arch and emerged into Wizard Way. They looked down the snowy Way, quietly busy with people closing up their shops for the night, and at the far end they saw the unmistakable red flash of Jenna’s cloak as she disappeared through the Palace Gate. Septimus was in a reflective mood.

“You never did say anything to Jenna, did you?” he said.

Beetle looked at his friend, surprised. “About what?”

“Beetle, you *know* what. About *liking* her.”

Beetle shot Septimus a look as if to say, *How did you know?* “Well. No,” he said. “She didn’t want me to. I could tell.”

“Could you? How?” Septimus really wanted to know.

“I just *could*. And then . . . well, I suddenly knew for sure that she didn’t care. Not in that way. But it’s fine now. I’ve got better things to do.”

“So that’s okay, then?” Septimus sounded doubtful.

Beetle smiled. He realized what he had said really was true. “Actually, Sep, it *is* okay. What I love is being Chief Scribe. Most days I wake up and I still can’t believe that’s what I am. Most days I don’t even *think* about Jenna.”

“Really?”

“Well . . . maybe that’s not totally true. But it’s okay. And anyway, she’s very young.”

“She’s not *that* young—she’s nearly fourteen and a half now.”

“Yeah . . . well. Even so.”

“Same age as me.” Septimus grinned.

“You’re six months older, remember—after your time with Marcellus?”

“Oh, yeah.” That was not something Septimus liked to remember much—being stranded in another Time. The more he thought about it the less he wanted to go back to Marcellus’s house in Snake Slipway, which—especially at night—reminded him of that Time. He took a deep breath of the Wizard Way air from *his* Time and wandered along with Beetle toward the Manuscriptorium.

At the door, Beetle said with a grin, “Want to come in and have a **FizzFroot**? I’ve got buckets of ’em upstairs now.”

Septimus shook his head. “I should really be getting back to Marcellus. I have to tell him that Marcia won’t let me do another month with him.”

“Oh, come on, Sep. Just one little **FizzFroot**. You haven’t seen my new place yet.”

Septimus needed no excuse to change his mind. “Okay, Beetle. Just one.”

The new Chief Hermetic Scribe took the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice through the Manuscriptorium with a proudly proprietorial air. The large room with the tall desks was empty. Unlike the previous Chief Hermetic Scribe, Beetle did not believe in keeping scribes at work after dark had fallen. It was brightly lit with fresh candles placed in the ancient candleholders set into the wall and the room no longer had the air of suppressed boredom and gloom that had pervaded it in Jillie Djinn’s time. Beetle and Septimus headed toward the short flight of steps that led up to a battered blue door.

The rooms of a Chief Hermetic Scribe were modest in comparison with the rooms of an ExtraOrdinary Wizard, but Beetle loved them. There was one long, low-ceilinged room with a multitude of beams that spread almost the entire length of the Manuscriptorium. The room had a line of three low dormer windows on either side. One side looked out across the rooftops to the

Moat and the dark Forest beyond, and the other looked out on Wizard Way. Off the main room was a small, beamed bedroom, a bathroom and a tiny kitchen where Beetle kept his stash of **FizzBom** cubes to make up the **FizzFroot**.

“Wow,” said Septimus, admiring the minute kitchen dominated by the large bucket of refurbished **FizzBom** cubes on the shelf. “You can do just what you want. Without Marcia banging on your door telling you not to.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Beetle with a grin. “Chocolate Banana, Apricot Ginger or a weird blue one—no idea what it is.”

“Weird blue one, please.”

“Thought you’d say that. Cheers, Sep.”

“Cheers, Beetle. Happy new home.”

It was much later when Septimus finally left the Manuscriptorium and headed back to Marcellus’s house in Snake Slipway. As he approached the tall, thin house, with its windows ablaze with lighted candles, Septimus felt very guilty for being so late. He looked up to the little attic window where his bedroom was and saw the lighted candle in the window, which Marcellus always placed there at night. He thought of the welcoming fire in the grate, the sloping eaves, his desk and his bookshelf full of Physik books, and he felt a stab of sadness. He realized he had loved being there too. He thought about the great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik where the **Fyre** was ready to be lit—which he was going to miss. He sighed. There were two places in the Castle where he belonged, but he had to choose one. And he had chosen. But it didn’t mean he liked the other any less. And it didn’t make it any easier to tell Marcellus.

Septimus let himself into the house with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Marcellus was waiting. “You look frozen,” he said as he ushered Septimus into the small front room. “Your lips are quite blue.” He made Septimus sit beside the fire and drink some of his special hot ginger. While Marcellus was putting another log on the fire, Septimus took the opportunity to rub the **FizzFroot** blue off his lips.

“That’s better,” said Marcellus, settling into his old armchair opposite Septimus. “You’ve got some color back now.”

Septimus took a deep breath. “I have to leave tomorrow,” he said.

“Ah,” said Marcellus.

“I’m sorry,” said Septimus.

Marcellus gave a rueful smile. “I am not surprised, Apprentice. I had a little, ah, contretemps with Marcia recently and to tell the truth, I was not expecting anything else.” He raised his glass to his old Apprentice. “Here’s to you, Septimus. And my thanks to you for all your work. I know this last month has not been quite what you had hoped for, but I have so enjoyed

having you to help me.” Marcellus paused. “I did hope you might decide to . . . what is the phrase . . . jump ship. Become my permanent Apprentice.”

“I did think about it,” said Septimus. “A lot.”

“But you decided not?”

“Yes.”

Marcellus nodded. “I understand. One has to make choices. You will be difficult to replace, Apprentice. However, I do have someone in mind.”

Septimus looked surprised. It had not occurred to him that Marcellus would replace him with someone else. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

Late that evening, when Septimus had gone up to his room to pack his bag, the new residents of the house opposite Marcellus Pye got an unexpected visit from their neighbor.

Lucy Gringe, resplendent in a beribboned dressing gown she had just finished making, opened the door. “Oh!” she said. And then, remembering her manners, “Hello, Mr. Pye. Do come in.”

“Thank you.” Marcellus stepped inside. “Goodness,” he said. It was chaos.

“Excuse the mess. Wedding presents,” said Lucy cheerfully. “It’s nice to see you. Would you like some herb tea? Come through.”

“Oh, well, actually I wondered if Simon was—” But Lucy had already set off. Marcellus followed her along the dark, narrow corridor, catching his long pointy shoes on various objects strewn across the bare floorboards.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry, Mr. Pye. You okay?”

“Oof. Yes. Thank you, Lucy.”

They negotiated the obstacle course and reached the tiny kitchen, which consisted of a fire with a large pot hanging over it and a deep stone sink set on tree-trunk legs, in which sat the remains of supper. The kitchen was a jumble, covered with pots and pans that had nowhere to hang, half-open boxes and stacks of plates. Lucy saw Marcellus’s gaze travel around the room. “We’ll get it sorted,” she said cheerfully. “I’ll call Si; he’ll be really glad to see you.”

“Ah,” said Marcellus, still lost for words.

Lucy opened the back door and yelled into a tiny yard enclosed by a high brick wall, “Si . . . Si! Mr. Pye!”

Simon, who had been trying to unblock a drain, emerged from the shadows, wiping his hands on his tunic.

“Si, Marcellus is here to see you,” said Lucy.

Simon smiled. “Good evening, Marcellus. Good to see you. Would you like some tea?”

Marcellus, a fastidious man, had decided it might be safer not to risk the tea. “Your good lady wife . . .”

Lucy, still not used to being called Simon’s wife, giggled.

“. . . kindly offered me some, but I mustn't stay long. I have a proposition to put to you, Simon.”

Lucy and Simon looked at each other.

Simon cleared a pile of plates off a rickety chair. “Please, do sit down, Marcellus.”

Marcellus saw the sticky ring left on the chair and shook his head. “No, no. I really must get back. This won't take a moment.”

Five minutes later Simon and Lucy watched Marcellus Pye cross the snowy slipway back to his house, the moonlight glinting off the gold fastenings on the back of his shoes.

Simon was lost for words. In his hand was a precious copy of the Alchemist's oeuvre, the *I, Marcellus*, with instructions to read it thoroughly and meet Marcellus at six o'clock the following evening.

“Well,” said Lucy. “Who'd have thought it?”

THE LAST DAY

Septimus awoke early in his little bedroom at the top of the house on Snake Slipway. Outside the snow was falling fast and the room was dull with the gray winter morning light. He lit his bedside candle and leaned back against the pillow, reluctant to get out of bed. That was one thing he would not miss. The Wizard Tower was always a perfect temperature. Marcellus's house was, like all old Castle houses during the Big Freeze, bitterly cold.

An hour later Septimus was with Marcellus in an old lock-up at the end of Gold Button Drop—a dead-end alleyway just off the end of Alchemie Way. The lock-up was a cover for a secret entrance to Alchemie Quay, which Marcellus had recently reopened. After locking the little iron door behind them, Marcellus pulled open the circular manhole cover in the center of the earthen floor. A glow of red light shone upward, lighting the rough stones of the lock-up's conical roof. Carefully, Marcellus unhooked a small **Fyre** Globe from its peg just below the manhole cover, clipped it onto his belt, and began the descent down the iron rungs set into the brick chimney. Septimus swung himself in after Marcellus and pulled the trapdoor shut with a clang.

There followed a long descent down a brick-lined shaft, eerily lit with the

red light from the Globe. Eventually Marcellus and Septimus reached a wide, brick-lined tunnel and set off along it. Some minutes later, they emerged into the first curve of the Labyrinth, but instead of turning left, as they normally did for the Great Chamber, Marcellus turned right and led Septimus out onto Alchemie Quay.

“It is your last day, Apprentice,” Marcellus said.

“It is,” agreed Septimus, wondering what Marcellus had in mind. He hoped it was going to be more interesting than cleaning sand out from cupboards with a toothbrush.

“Septimus,” said Marcellus. “I wish to apologize for sending you off on a wild-goose chase to collect the Cloud Flask. I needed time to think.”

“Oh?” said Septimus.

“Indeed. And your absence made me realize how much I valued you. I have made an error in not telling you everything that I am doing here.”

“Ah,” said Septimus, not entirely surprised.

Marcellus took a deep breath, aware that he was taking an irrevocable step. “I want to show you the **Fyre**,” he said.

Septimus did not understand. “But you haven’t lit it yet.”

“Apprentice, the furnace that you see in the Great Chamber is a decoy. The true **Fyre** has already begun.”

Suddenly things began to make sense. “*Where?*”

“Come. I will explain.” Marcellus led Septimus over to the edge of the Quay, where the pink paddleboat bobbed quietly, tethered to its ring. Marcellus kept it just in case—an Alchemist always had an emergency escape route. The UnderFlow Pool lay dark at their feet and the familiar feeling of vertigo that always got to Septimus when he stood on the edge of the UnderFlow Pool made him feel dizzy.

“See the currents in the water?” asked Marcellus.

Septimus nodded.

“A hundred feet down from here is a sluice gate. Some weeks ago I opened it. Now water is flowing through it, pouring down a channel bored through the rock to a reservoir far below. This is the water that is making the **Fyre**.”

“But water doesn’t make **Fyre**,” said Septimus.

“Alchemical **Fyre** is different,” said Marcellus. “It is a beautiful, living thing. And life needs water. Before you leave me, Septimus, I want you to see it. So that when you return to the Wizard Tower, you will understand that whatever they may tell you about the **Fyre**, it is not true.”

Septimus was puzzled. “But no one has ever told me anything about the **Fyre**,” he said.

“They do not speak of it,” said Marcellus. “But if they ever do, I would like you to understand that it is not the terrible thing they say it is.”

“Right.”

“But . . . there is one little thing.”

“Yes?” said Septimus warily.

“Promise me that you will tell no one what you see today.” Marcellus glanced around as though he expected to find Marcia lurking in a corner. “Not even Marcia.”

“I can’t promise that,” Septimus said regretfully. “Not now that I am going back to Marcia. Anyway, Marcia asked you to start the **Fyre**, didn’t she, so she knows already.”

“Marcia thinks the **Fyre** we are lighting is in the Great Chamber of Alchemie. She does not know that the true **Fyre** is in the place that all ExtraOrdinary Wizards fear and have promised to keep **Sealed** forevermore—the Chamber of **Fyre**. If she knew that she would close it down, just as Julius Pike once did.”

“I don’t think Marcia would close it down, because she doesn’t know anything about it.”

“Of course she knows about it,” said Marcellus. “She is the ExtraOrdinary Wizard.”

“But before I was coming here I asked her about the **Fyre** and she said she didn’t know a thing. *Nothing.*”

“There are many things Apprentices are not told,” said Marcellus.

Septimus was not convinced. He knew when Marcia was deliberately not telling him things—she had a certain “don’t go there” warning look in her eyes. But when they had discussed the **Fyre**, Marcia’s expression had been one of bemusement. He remembered her saying, “*There is something about this Fyre stuff that we just don’t know anymore. I wish I knew what it was . . .*”

“Apprentice, let me explain,” said Marcellus. “After the Great Alchemie Disaster, the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Julius Pike—who was once my dear friend—told me that he would make sure that all future ExtraOrdinary Wizards would never allow the **Fyre** Chamber to be **UnSealed**. Never again would the **Fyre** Cauldron be used. The only reason Marcia has agreed to the **Fyre** is because she thinks it is the one in the Great Chamber of Alchemie. And I know that, like any other ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Marcia would never let the Chamber of **Fyre** be opened. All I ask you is to keep it secret for”—Marcellus did some quick calculations—“another month? After that I will reveal it to Marcia, I promise.”

“But why in a month—why not tell Marcia *now*?”

“It will not be ready until then. Alchemical **Fyre** is delicate in its early stages of Life and takes time to reach maturity. But once the **Fyre** is ready and Marcia sees that it has been burning safely for some time, then I have a chance to prove to her that all is not as she has been told. Do you understand?”

“I suppose so. . . .” Septimus understood, but it did not make keeping the secret feel any better.

Marcellus was uneasy; it felt decidedly risky having Septimus go back to Marcia at such a delicate time. “That, Apprentice, is why I am so sorry you are leaving me now. Before it all begins. Perhaps, when you see the **Fyre**, you will reconsider your decision to leave.”

“It’s not really my decision,” said Septimus.

“Indeed, no. While you are Marcia’s Apprentice it is not your decision. It is hers. But if you were to decide to become the Castle’s first Alchemie Apprentice then that would be different.” Marcellus left the offer hanging in the air.

“Sometimes,” said Septimus, staring at his reflection in the dark waters of the UnderFlow, “I wish there were two of me. I wish I could be in the Wizard Tower and here at the same time.”

Marcellus smiled. “Even the greatest **Magyk** cannot make that happen,” he said.

“Not for longer than seven seconds,” said Septimus.

Marcellus looked impressed that it could happen at all.

Septimus thought for a while. “Okay,” he said.

There were three arches leading off from the Alchemie Quay, each one lit by a **Fyre** Globe. Marcellus headed for the right-hand archway. Inside the archway, he turned to Septimus apologetically.

“I know you do not like building work, Apprentice, but I assure you this is the last you will have to do.” Marcellus opened the old carpetbag in which every day he brought their lunch, and to Septimus’s surprise, from underneath the neatly wrapped sandwiches he took out a hammer and heavy chisel, which he handed to Septimus.

“Thanks,” said Septimus ruefully.

Marcellus indicated a shallow arch within the bricks, just above head height. “Remove the bricks below the arch, please, Apprentice. They should come out quite easily.”

Septimus sighed and got to work. He was pleased to find that the bricks did indeed come away easily.

“Alchemist’s mortar—never sets,” said Marcellus. “It began as a mistake when we had to do a lot of building ourselves. Looks solid, but is as soft as butter. Very useful at times.”

Septimus took away the rest of the bricks below the arch. Behind them was a black shiny surface reflected in the flames of the **Fyre** Globe.

Marcellus smiled. “I understand you have seen something like this before.”

Septimus looked suspicious. “It’s not some kind of Time Glass, is it?” he asked.

Marcellus looked guilty. “Oh, dear. I am so sorry about the way we met,

Apprentice. It was, I see now, very wrong. You do know I would never do that again, do you not?" Marcellus picked up the chisel, counted down from the top brick on the right-hand side of the doorway. He levered out the seventh brick and placed his hand on the smooth black substance behind it. A faint green light began to glow beneath it.

Septimus stared at it, astonished.

"You recognize it, Apprentice?" Marcellus smiled.

"Is . . . is this a moving chamber?"

"Indeed it is."

"Like the one on the Isles of Syren?"

"Pretty much. Unfortunately I cannot remember the finer details of its operation. I used to know it, but like many memories, it has faded. I was hoping you might remember. I would like to get it working again. So much more pleasant than the long climb down."

"To the Chamber of **Fyre**?"

"To the Chamber of **Fyre**. So, Apprentice. Shall we go?"

Gingerly Septimus stretched out his hand and placed his palm on the opening plate—the worn part of the smooth, cool surface behind the brick. The green light sprang up below once again; it grew bright and then began to fade.

"Oh," said Septimus. "That shouldn't happen." He took his hand away and rubbed it on his tunic; then he put it back and leaned his whole weight against the surface. This time the green light immediately glowed bright and suddenly, silently, a concealed oval door slid open revealing a tiny, blue-lit chamber.

"Oh, well done!" said Marcellus, excited. "Shall we step inside?"

Septimus followed Marcellus through the door into a virtually spherical space. Its walls were a smooth, shiny black material with no obvious features. It was, as far as Septimus could tell, identical to the one he had known on the Isles of Syren.

"Perhaps you would like to close the door, Apprentice?"

Septimus was not sure that he would. "Marcellus, when did you last use this?" he asked.

Marcellus looked surprised. "Oh, goodness. Well, it's all a bit of a blur, really. There was a lot going on at the time. Esmeralda was with me; I remember that."

"So, about four hundred and seventy-five years ago?"

"About that, I suppose."

For someone who had dabbled in moving from one Time to another, Marcellus was always annoyingly vague about time, Septimus thought. "I'm asking because Syrah said that it needed to be used every day to keep it, er, alive."

“Alive!” Marcellus laughed. “Superstitious nonsense. It is a piece of machinery.”

“I know,” said Septimus, “but that was how she explained it. And it makes sense to me. She said its life drained away unless it was . . . what was the word she used? Recharged.”

Marcellus was skeptical. “Septimus, you must remember that Syrah was **Possessed**. She was just saying words like a . . . Oh, what are those birds with many colors?”

“Parrots. Syrah was *not* like a parrot,” said Septimus, annoyed.

“No, of course not. Not the real Syrah,” Marcellus said soothingly. “However, I can assure you that this chamber is *not* alive.”

Septimus felt that it would be wrong to back out now. There was a worn spot beside the door, and he placed his palm onto it. A red light glowed beneath, lighting up his hand, and the door closed silently. A small orange arrow pointing downward now appeared on the other side of the chamber. Septimus went over to it and reluctantly raised his hand to press it. “Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Marcellus. “Of course I am.”

Taking a deep breath, Septimus placed his hand on the orange arrow and pressed. The floor of the chamber gave a sickening lurch and his stomach did the same. The chamber was falling fast and Septimus had forgotten just how terrifying it was. When he had been in the one on the Isles of Syren, he had been with Syrah, and she had known what she was doing. Now he was with Marcellus, who looked just as scared as he was. Septimus watched the orange arrow plummeting down the wall, like a bird hit by a stone.

It is going too fast, he thought. *It is going too fast.*

Suddenly the descent stopped with a bone-jarring *thud* that set their teeth rattling in their skulls. Marcellus staggered back and grabbed hold of Septimus. This brought them both slithering to the floor, which—being shiny and slightly tilted—sent them cannoning across the chamber, where they fetched up in a pile against the wall.

“Aaaaah,” Marcellus groaned.

Septimus extricated himself from Marcellus’s shoes. He stood up shakily and shook his head, trying to clear the buzzing inside.

“Do you think it’s landed all right?” Marcellus whispered from the floor.

Septimus didn’t think it had, but there was only one way to find out—open the door. He saw a telltale worn patch on the opposite side of the chamber from where they had come in; he walked gingerly across the sloping floor and placed his hand on the wall. Septimus waited for the green light to appear that would signal the opening of the door. A glimmer of green rose briefly beneath his hand, then faded away. Septimus rubbed his hand on his tunic to remove any dust and pushed it back on the patch, leaning all his weight on it.

Nothing happened. No green light. No opening door. Nothing.

A sharp intake of breath came from Marcellus. “Try again, Apprentice,” he urged.

Septimus tried again. Nothing happened.

“Maybe there?” said Marcellus, pointing to another spot.

Septimus tried there. Nothing. He told himself to keep calm.

“Perhaps that might be the place,” said Marcellus, indicating a slightly less shiny spot that was not, Septimus thought, anywhere near where the door should be.

Nothing.

“Apprentice,” said Marcellus, “we should ascend.”

Septimus thought they should too. He put his hand on the orange arrow, which was still pointing downward, and moved his hand in an upward direction, which should have flipped the arrow around to point up. The arrow stayed just as it was. Septimus tried again but still the arrow did not move. And neither did the chamber.

“You’re not doing it right,” Marcellus said.

“You do it, then,” Septimus replied, irritated.

Marcellus—whose hand, Septimus noticed, was trembling—had no luck with the arrow either. It stayed where it was, pointing resolutely to the floor.

“Sheesh,” muttered Marcellus.

“Perhaps it needs to go down a bit more first,” Septimus suggested, running his hand down from the orange arrow. But whether the chamber needed to or not, it would not budge.

It was then that the blue light illuminating the inside of the chamber began to fade. The last glimpse it showed Septimus was the flash of panic that shot across Marcellus’s face. And then it was dark—no orange arrow, no green light, nothing but a total blackness.

Septimus waited for the glow from his Dragon Ring to kick in. It was strange, he thought, because he didn’t usually have to wait at all. His left hand found his right index finger and he checked that the ring was still there. It was. So why wasn’t it glowing like it always did? *Why?* Septimus felt a flicker of panic in his stomach and fought it down. The total darkness took him straight back to a terrifying night that he had spent, age seven, in a Young Army wolverine pit.

“My ring,” he said into the darkness. “My Dragon Ring. It’s not doing anything.”

“No,” came Marcellus’s voice, dismal in the dark.

Septimus felt as though he could not bear being trapped inside the blackness a moment longer. He had to do something.

“I’m going to do a **Transport**.”

He heard the Alchemist sigh and mistook the reason.

“Marcellus, I’ll come back; you know I will. But I have to get some help. Marcia will know what to do.”

Another sigh.

“Marcia will have to know now, Marcellus. We’ve got no choice. I’ll **Transport** right back here. I won’t leave you, I promise.”

There was silence.

“You do believe me, don’t you?”

At last Marcellus spoke. “Yes, I do believe you, Apprentice. I believe you because I trust you absolutely. But even if I didn’t trust you I would still believe you—because unfortunately I *know* you won’t leave me. Not with a **Transport**.”

“What do you mean?” Something about the way Marcellus had spoken made Septimus feel very scared.

There was a long silence and then Marcellus spoke. “Apprentice, **Magyk** will not work in this chamber.”

“No. That’s not true!”

“So . . . does your Dragon Ring shine?”

“That isn’t the same.”

“It, too, is **Magyk**, Apprentice.”

Septimus ran his fingers across the Dragon Ring. It sat cold and unresponsive on his finger, just like any other ring. The little buzz of **Magyk** that he always felt from it was no longer there. A feeling of doom swept over Septimus. He knew Marcellus spoke the truth—**Magyk** did not work inside the chamber.

They were trapped.

16

MISSING



That evening at five past six, Lucy—who was trying to hang up an interesting experiment in knitted curtains—watched from the window as Simon Heap waited on Marcellus’s doorstep. She saw Simon knock for a third time, step back and look up at the windows, shake his head and cross the road back to their house.

“He’s not there,” Simon said forlornly, as he wandered into their tiny front room. Lucy was inspecting her curtains with approval—she particularly liked the holes where she had dropped the occasional stitch. “Don’t worry, Si,” she said. “He’ll be back soon.”

Simon took the *I, Marcellus* out of his pocket and looked at it. “I thought it was too good to be true,” he said gloomily.

“Don’t be silly, Si. If Marcellus didn’t want you to be his Apprentice, he wouldn’t have given you his precious book, would he? We’ll sit and wait for him to come back.”

Simon made a pot of herb tea and set it down on the table next to a small, battered box that bore the label SLEUTH. He opened the box, took out his old

and worn **Tracker Ball** and began gently throwing it from one hand to the other as he always did when he felt unsettled. Lucy poured the tea and together they sat at the window, watching for the return of the Alchemist.

Night began to fall and candles were placed in the windows of the houses on either side of Marcellus's, but his remained dark. Suddenly Lucy saw a cloaked figure stride quickly down the slipway and walk up to his front door.

"There he is!" she said. Simon threw Sleuth into its box and was heading out of the room when Lucy said, "Oh. It's Marcia."

The sound of the angry rapping of Marcellus's doorknocker carried across the snowy slipway. They watched Marcia wait and then step back and peruse the dark windows, just as Simon had. Then they saw the ExtraOrdinary Wizard spin around and head across the slipway toward their door. Simon rushed into the hall, leaping over a rolled-up rug, a potted plant and a box of books. He opened the door just as Marcia was about to knock.

"Oh!" she said, surprised.

"Sorry," said Simon. "It falls off its hinges if you knock hard."

Marcia did not waste words. "Have you seen Marcellus?" she asked.

"No, I haven't."

"It's too bad, Simon. It's Septimus's last day and I'm expecting him back for a Wizard Warming Supper. We have two new Ordinaries to welcome."

"Right." People becoming Wizards were still a sore spot for Simon.

"I'd be very grateful if as soon as they come back you would kindly tell Septimus to get straight over to the Wizard Tower?"

"Yes, of course."

"Thank you, Simon." With that Marcia turned and strode away up Snake Slipway. Simon closed the door.

"What was that about?" asked Lucy.

"I'm being a messenger for my little brother, that's all," said Simon glumly. "And it looks like that's all I'm ever going to be."

"Oh, don't be silly, Si. Just because Marcellus is late home it doesn't mean he's changed his mind about making you his Alchemie Apprentice, does it? We'll watch for him to come back and as soon as he does you can go and see him."

"All these new Wizards, Lu. It's not fair."

"You don't want to be a boring old Wizard," said Lucy. "Alchemie is much more exciting."

"I guess so."

"Besides," Lucy said with a smile, "you look really good in black."

But Marcellus did not come back. Simon watched all evening from the front-room window and, much to Lucy's annoyance, would not let her draw her new curtains. Lucy wanted to see the effect of the moonlight through the

holes, but Simon was adamant—he had to watch for Marcellus. By the time midnight was drawing on, Simon was worried.

“I’m going to the Wizard Tower, Lu,” he said. “Something’s not right.”

Simon had not even reached the end of Snake Slipway when he saw the unmistakable figure of Marcia striding toward him.

“Simon! Oh, good, I see you are on your way to tell me. Thank goodness they’re back. Whatever was Marcellus thinking of? It really is too bad. Septimus must be exhausted and—”

Simon interrupted as soon as he could. “No, Marcia—they’re not back.”

Marcia stopped. She looked shocked. “*Not* back?”

“No.”

“Simon, are you *sure*?”

“Yes. I’ve been watching all evening. The house is still in darkness. That’s what I was coming to tell you.”

Even in the moonlight, Simon could see that Marcia had gone pale. “Something’s happened,” she muttered. “Something in that awful underground pit has gone wrong.” She shook her head. “I should never have agreed to this. *Never*.”

Sixty seconds later Simon was standing alone on the Snake Slipway ice, feeling very odd. He had just witnessed Marcia’s **Transport** to the Great Chamber of Alchemie and he’d forgotten how exciting **Magyk** could be. With the feeling of **Magyk** still buzzing in his head, Simon walked slowly back to the only house with a lighted downstairs window and went inside. Lucy met him anxiously.

“What’s going on, Si?” she asked.

Simon shook his head. “I dunno, Lu. But it doesn’t look good.”

Marcia’s fizzing purple **Magyk** was the first light the Great Chamber of Alchemie had seen all day. She waited for the last vestiges of the **Transport** to wear off, then she pulled a **FlashLight** from her pocket and swung its beam around to check if anyone was there—perhaps they were lying overcome by noxious fumes or victim of a bizarre Alchemical accident. Marcia wasn’t quite sure what an Alchemical accident would look like but she figured she would know one if she saw one. However, it was soon clear that nothing untoward had occurred and that the place was deserted. She headed out of the Chamber and into the Labyrinth, walking quickly, the tippy-tapping of her python shoes echoing through its deep blue coils.

Although Marcia knew that there were tunnels running off the Labyrinth she had never actually been along them and she decided to explore what she knew first. Marcia knew all about the planning of Labyrinths—it had been a hobby of hers when she was a girl—so finding the way to Alchemie Quay was no problem. She emerged through the left-hand tunnel and stood a

moment surveying the deserted Quay. Marcia was beginning to think that maybe Marcellus and Septimus had done something completely stupid like running away, when she saw a flash of color and movement against the stone of the Quay—the gently bobbing pink paddleboat.

Marcia rushed over and looked down at the paddleboat—its chubby, childish shape and its vibrant pink sitting incongruously on the deep, dark waters of the UnderFlow Pool.

“So they *are* here,” she muttered to herself. The worm of worry that had been niggling Marcia since Septimus’s nonarrival at the Wizard Warming Supper turned into a fat snake of fear. Something was wrong. She *knew* it. She peered into the inscrutable black waters below her and a horrible conviction came over her. Septimus was somewhere below—somewhere *deep*. Marcia gave a gasp and sat down on the steps, trembling.

They had fallen in and drowned. It explained everything.

No doubt it was Marcellus in those ridiculous shoes who had lost his footing and dear, darling, brave Septimus had dived in to save Marcellus—who had surely grabbed on to him with those long bony fingers and pulled him down with him. Marcia stifled a sob and sat staring into the water for some minutes.

When she’d calmed down a little, Marcia—who was a naturally optimistic person—began to wonder if there might be another explanation. She got to her feet and paced the Quay, trying to empty her mind of panic. There were, she told herself, other possibilities: they could be trapped somewhere, or even lost in one of the old tunnels off the labyrinth. The most sensible thing was to go back to the Wizard Tower and do a **Search** from the **Search** and Rescue Center. Marcia walked quietly along the edge of the Quay, her purple pythons no longer tippy-tapping in their usual exuberant way. She was loath to leave, which was odd, she thought, as the Alchemie Quay gave her the creeps. And then Marcia realized why she didn’t want to go; it was because she **Felt** that Septimus was still here. And that meant that he was still alive. Close by.

The art of **Feeling** that someone you love is near (and it only works if you really do love them) is easy to learn with a good teacher, and Marcia had been taught by one of the best—Alther Mella. But it was what he had called a Fugitive Art, which meant that the more you thought about it, the less certain you were. So as soon as Marcia realized she **Felt** that Septimus was close by, she no longer **Felt** it. And then she began to wonder if she ever had.

“Don’t be silly, Marcia,” she muttered. “You **Felt** it. You know you did.”

Marcia decided to check out the other two arches even though she knew that they were both bricked up. She shone her **FlashLight** across the central arch and gave it a tentative shove, remembering something she had once read about Alchemists’ Mortar. It was solid and—*eurgh*—still greasily sooty. Marcia wiped her hand on her handkerchief and moved on to the right-hand

arch, shining her **FlashLight** into the darkness.

To her shock, Marcia saw that there was a gaping hole in the brickwork below the archway. She felt a huge feeling of relief—so *this* was where they were. Marcellus had opened up an old tunnel and presumably they had got lost. She hurried into the opening and suddenly the ground disappeared below her right pointy python. Marcia toppled forward. A cold gust of air came up to meet her as she teetered, arms flailing, on the brink. She grabbed hold of the wall beside her but it gave way, sending bricks hurtling down into the dark. Some seconds later she heard the clang as they hit something far below.

Panic shot through Marcia. She knew that she was balanced on the edge of a precipice.

17

FALLING



A sudden boom woke Septimus from an uncomfortable doze. He jumped up.

Marcellus groaned. “What was what?”

“Something landed on the roof!”

“You were dreaming, Apprentice,” said Marcellus.

“No. No, I’m sure I heard—”

Booooooomboomboomboooooom!

Suddenly the chamber reverberated to a hail of objects slamming onto its roof, ending with a huge *whuump* of something heavy and soft, which sent shudders through to their feet. Marcellus and Septimus felt the chamber tilt, and then the brief but sickening sensation of free fall.

What Marcellus and Septimus did not know was the moving chamber had become lodged just above the top of the exit door where, over the centuries, a fat helictite had formed so that it obstructed its path. The falling objects had provided enough force for the chamber to snap the helictite and continue on its way. Fast.

Luckily it was only a ten-foot drop.

There was a bone-jarring *crump*. Marcellus and Septimus picked

themselves up from the floor. They looked at each other in the darkness but saw nothing but the total absence of light that had oppressed them for almost fifteen hours.

“It’s not tilting anymore,” said Septimus. “That must be a good sign.”

“Let us hope so,” muttered Marcellus.

“I’m going to try again and see if the door will open,” said Septimus.

“It won’t,” Marcellus said flatly. “There’s no orange arrow. That means no power.”

“We may as well try,” said Septimus. “Unless there’s anything else exciting you had in mind?”

“There is no need to get tetchy, Apprentice.”

“I am *not* tetchy.”

“No. Of course not. Well, you take one side and I’ll take the other.”

They had already done this countless times before the chamber fell for the second time—desperately pressing their palms over the cold, smooth surface of the chamber with absolutely no response—but now they began again. Septimus took one side of the chamber and Marcellus the other. Suddenly the darkness took on a faint orange hue. Marcellus gasped.

“The arrow—it flickered! Quick, quick, Apprentice. The door’s on your side. We may have a chance. Press it now! Now!”

The problem was that without being able to see the telltale worn patch—the dim orange glow did not give out much light—Septimus could not know whether his hand was in the right place or not. Marcellus joined him and frantically they pushed their palms onto the glasslike surface in increasingly wildly improbable places, desperately seeking the spot that might—just might if they were lucky—open the door. And all the time the orange arrow flickered, reminding Septimus of the distress lights on the Wizard Tower.

“It’s going! It’s fading!” Marcellus sounded desperate as his hands slapped frantically against the wall.

Septimus knew they were never going to find the right spot by panicking. “Stop,” he said. “I want to find it a different way.”

“I told you, Apprentice, **Magyk** does not work in here.”

“But my mind still works,” said Septimus. “Marcellus, please. Stop and be quiet a moment. Let me . . . let me **Find** it.”

The orange arrow was fading away and Marcellus knew they were getting nowhere. He let his hands drop to his sides. “Very well, Apprentice. Over to you.”

Septimus closed his eyes. It made no difference as to what he could see, but it sent him back inside his head—deep into another place. He held out his right hand and remembered how he had once opened a similar door far below the Isles of Syren. He remembered how the smooth, cold material of the chamber had felt beneath his hand; he imagined that he was there now, in its

bright blue light, and he allowed his hand to guide itself where it wanted to go. Then he pressed his palm down hard, throwing all his weight behind it. He heard a soft swish and Marcellus's gasp.

"It's open! Apprentice, you've done it. *You've done it!*" Terrified that the door would suddenly close, Marcellus pulled Septimus out of the chamber. As soon as they were safely across the threshold, Marcellus sat down very fast and put his head between his knees.

Septimus collapsed, giddy with relief, on a wobbly metal platform that felt dizzyingly high up. But for once he didn't care how high he was—he was free. He was not going to finish his life trapped in a box hundreds of feet below the ground. Slowly, he began to take in his surroundings. He could feel a vast arena all around him; it was hot, and suffused with a deep red glow that shone up from below. His overwhelming impression was of a heavy sense of stillness where a quiet and purposeful process was slowly unfolding.

Septimus walked carefully along what felt like a very rickety platform to a line of **Fyre** Globes placed below a guardrail, and gingerly looked over. His head swam. Far, far below, a huge red circle stared up at him, as bright and intense as a sun. Across the top of the red ran tiny, vibrant flames of blue, licking and jumping up into the air. Septimus felt overawed. So *this* was the real **Fyre**. He looked away and saw a perfect green afterimage in front of his eyes. It was then Septimus realized that he was standing on a perforated metal platform as flimsy as a sieve. The bones in his legs felt as if they had turned to water and he retreated back to Marcellus.

"Wow," he said. "That is so . . . beautiful."

"It is," agreed Marcellus.

"And **Magyk**. So alive and delicate . . ." Septimus was lost for words.

Marcellus smiled. "You understand," he said. "I thought you would, even though most Wizards don't understand the **Magyk** of **Fyre**."

Septimus was overwhelmed. "I wish you had shown me before."

Marcellus was silent for a while. "I should have done. So I cannot tempt you to change your mind and become my Apprentice. Forever?"

Septimus so much wanted to say yes. And yet, the thought of what he would have to give up was too much. "I . . . I really want to."

"Wonderful!"

"But . . ."

"Ah, a 'but.'" Marcellus smiled ruefully. "I thought there might be."

"But I can't. I have promised Marcia."

"Oh, well," Marcellus said sadly.

"But . . ."

"Yes?"

"Will you let me come back here sometimes?" Septimus asked.

"Of course, Apprentice. I want no more secrets—not after next month,

anyway. Both you and Marcia will be here when I **DeNature** the Two-Faced Ring.” Marcellus began to get to his feet, then he swayed and sat back down. He looked very pale.

“Are you all right?” Septimus asked, sitting down beside him.

“I will be in a minute. I just need . . . a little fresh air.”

“Not much of that down here.”

“No . . . but more than in that . . . coffin.”

Septimus shuddered. That had been his thought too. “I wonder what fell on it?”

“Bricks. Sounded like bricks,” said Marcellus.

“But why? Something must have made them fall.”

“Probably Marcia looking for you. It’s late.” Marcellus looked at his timepiece. “One hour past midnight.”

Septimus looked at Marcellus aghast. “Yes. Of *course* she would look for me. I was due back for the Wizard Warming Supper.”

“Don’t look so concerned, Apprentice. It’s good that she came, surely? Without her we’d still be stuck.”

Septimus now matched Marcellus’s pallor. “Oh, Marcellus. Supposing . . . supposing what you said is really true. *Literally* true.”

“Huh?”

“That without Marcia we would still be stuck.” Septimus put his head in his hands, trying to get the sound of the last thing that fell onto the chamber’s roof out of his head: heavy, yet soft.

Marcellus’s thoughts were on a different track. “Of course I would prefer that Marcia did not know about the moving chamber, Apprentice, but given the circumstances I—”

“Marcellus—the last thing that fell onto the roof . . . it wasn’t a brick, was it?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Well, it *wasn’t* a brick. It was heavy. But . . . kind of soft.”

“Soft?”

“Yes. Soft. And up there at the top, you couldn’t see the drop, could you? You wouldn’t be expecting it, would you? It would just be dark. You’d probably think it was a tunnel. In fact, you’d probably think that was where we had gone . . . got lost maybe. So you’d step in and there would be *nothing there*. You’d grab hold of the bricks, they’d fall away in your hand and then . . . and then . . .”

Marcellus suddenly got it. “Oh, great Alchemie! No!”

Septimus felt sick. He had hoped Marcellus would have an explanation. “So you think so too?”

“I can’t think of anything else,” said Marcellus, clutching his head with a groan.

They sat in silence. “We have to get back to the Alchemie Quay,” said Septimus after a while. “We have to see what’s happened.”

“If something *has* happened, then we won’t see anything,” said Marcellus. “It’s a long climb, Apprentice. I suggest we get going. Follow me.” He went to get up, but Septimus stopped him.

“Marcellus, I am going to do a **Transport** to the Alchemie Quay. I have to know what’s happened—*now*.”

“A **Transport**. Yes, of course. I will follow you by more normal methods.”

Marcellus watched Septimus begin his **Transport**. He saw his Apprentice close his eyes, and watched a strange shimmering purplish light begin to run across him. Marcellus shivered. This was serious **Magyk**. The thought of moving a human being from one place to another—blood and bone through brick and stone—made Marcellus feel very odd. He was in the presence of something he did not understand. It was right, he thought, that Septimus returned to Marcia as her Apprentice; there was more **Magyk** to him than he had ever realized. At the thought of Marcia, Marcellus remembered the soft yet heavy *thud* of something falling and a stab of dread shot through him.

If Marcia was there to return to.

TRANSPORTS

Septimus arrived in the middle of Alchemie Quay. As the blanketed feeling of the **Transport** wore off he was relieved to find he had judged it perfectly. **Transports** into confined spaces were difficult and dangerous; Septimus was not officially allowed to do them. But—unlike much **Magyk**, which required a clear head—a **Transport** was made more accurate by distress. And right then Septimus had *that* by the bucketful.

He stood still, allowing the last vestiges of **Magyk** to drift away. Septimus did not want to move. He wanted to stay right where he was and never, ever have to walk over to the right-hand arch and peer down into the depths. But he knew he must do it. He *had* to know what had happened.

Feeling as if he were wearing lead boots, Septimus walked slowly across the Quay to the right-hand archway. A terrifying feeling of vertigo came over him as he approached the black hole in the middle of the bricks—unlike Marcia, thought Septimus, he knew about the huge drop that lurked behind them.

Septimus inspected the jagged hole in the bricks. There was a large bite out of the bricks at about shoulder height, exactly at the place where he would have expected Marcia to grab hold of them. Very, very carefully, Septimus

leaned forward.

“Marcia . . .” he called down into the darkness, tentatively. The sound fell into the blackness and died. “Marcia!” Septimus called more loudly. And then, “Marcia, Marcia, can you hear me?”

There was no response, just a heady sense of the emptiness below his feet. Septimus stepped back from the drop and leaned against the wall to steady himself. Of course there was no reply, he told himself; how could there be? Maybe, he thought, Marcia hasn’t been here at all. Maybe the mortar had suddenly given way and the bricks had fallen on their own. Maybe . . .

It was then that Septimus saw something he really did not want to see: a small jade button lying on the ground beside the **Fyre** Globe. He bent down to pick it up and cradled it in his hand. He knew what it was—a button from Marcia’s shoes. She had been complaining that Terry Tarsal had not sewn them on properly. A wave of despair washed over him. Recklessly, Septimus leaned into the darkness of the shaft.

“Marcia!” he yelled. “Mar . . . seeee . . . aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” As the sound died away, Septimus stumbled out from the archway and heard a very faint something that made him think his mind was playing cruel tricks.

“Septimus . . .”

He stopped. A shiver ran down his spine. It was Marcia’s voice. *It was her ghost calling to him.* Septimus stared at the gaping hole in the brickwork, half expecting to see Marcia’s ghost float out of it.

“Septimus . . .” There it was again. *Behind him.*

Septimus spun around. Nothing. The Quay was empty. Slowly, silently, he walked out of the arch, listening hard.

Tippy-tap, tippy-tap, tippy-tap-tap . . .

The lapis lazuli of the Labyrinth lit up, glowing a brilliant blue with its streaks of gold glistening. A figure in purple hurried out—and screamed.

“Septimus! Oh, Septimus!” Marcia hurled herself toward Septimus and enveloped him in her cloak. “You’re alive. I thought . . . I thought you were dead. I thought you’d fallen . . .”

“Me too,” said Septimus, holding on to Marcia. “*Me too.*”

Marcellus awoke, aching all over. He lay in his bed staring at the winter sunlight that shone through the window and he felt an odd feeling of happiness. He was not sure why. And then he remembered. *The carpetbag*—his soft carpetbag heavy with a crowbar and a lump hammer. It was the carpetbag that had fallen onto the roof of the moving chamber. Marcellus sank back into his pillow with a sigh of happiness. He remembered his long, slow, dismal climb through the tiny shafts that led up to Alchemie Quay. He remembered how as he had gotten nearer he had been convinced that Marcia had fallen to her death; and then he had been overcome with worry that

Septimus, too, might have fallen while looking for her. By the time he had emerged onto the Quay, Marcellus was very nearly in a state of collapse. And at the sight of Marcia sitting on the edge of the Quay with her arm around Septimus, he had felt happier than he had could ever remember—which was odd, considering how annoying Marcia was. But it had been wonderful when Marcia had grabbed his hands and told him in response to all his questions that yes, it *was* her. Yes, she *was* real.

“Well, well, well,” muttered Marcellus, smiling to himself. He reached out for his timepiece on his bedside table and squinted at it. Nine o’clock. He had three more hours in bed before he was due to see his new Apprentice. The old Alchemist closed his eyes and soon the sound of snoring filled the room.

In the house on the other side of Snake Slipway, Lucy was excited. She had just found a note that had been pushed under the front door. She rushed into the kitchen. “Si, Si! Look, it’s from Marcellus.”

At the kitchen table, over a pot of coffee, Simon read out the note to Lucy.

“Dear Simon, my sincere apologies for breaking our appointment last night. I regret to say that I was detained by circumstances beyond my control and could not get a message to you. However, all is now resolved. Would it be convenient for you to renew our appointment for midday today?”

“Yaay!” yelled Lucy, jumping up and punching the air. “Didn’t I tell you? Didn’t I say it would be all right?”

Simon grinned. “Yes, Lu, you did. You said it quite a lot, I seem to remember.”

At the Wizard Tower, Septimus slept on.

Up in the Pyramid Library, Marcia was very happy indeed. She had her Apprentice back and now things could get back to normal. Marcia was preparing the next stage in Septimus’s **DeCyphering** course—the practical. For all Apprentices, this meant having a go at the hieroglyphs inscribed into the flat silver top of the golden Pyramid that crowned the Wizard Tower. It was generally agreed that they were indecipherable—or as Marcia preferred to call them, gobbledygook. But it was a tradition and she supposed they should stick with it.

In front of Marcia was the old rubbing that a long-ago ExtraOrdinary Wizard had made of the hieroglyphs. It wasn’t, thought Marcia, very clear. No wonder no one had figured out what they meant. She remembered ruefully a comment she had made to Septimus about “going back to original sources” and she had a nasty feeling that was what he might do. He would take himself to the very top of the Pyramid and sit there, working it out. Or, at the very least, go up there to do his own rubbing. A shiver went right through Marcia—she had had enough nightmares about Septimus falling to last her a

lifetime. Marcia came to a decision. She scribbled a note for Septimus in case he woke before she returned, then she was off—tippy-tapping down the stone stairs, pinning the note on Septimus’s door, then back up to the Library to pick up an envelope she’d forgotten, down the steps again, rapidly past the ghost of Jillie Djinn and out of her rooms.

In the Great Hall, Marcia rapped on the door of the duty Wizard’s cupboard. Hildegard answered.

“Ah, Miss Pigeon,” said Marcia frostily. “I thought you might have company this morning.”

“No, Madam Marcia. It is very quiet this morning.”

“Mr. Banda otherwise engaged, is he?”

“I think so, Madam Marcia. Did you want to leave a message in case he drops by?”

“No,” said Marcia. “I don’t.”

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

Marcia handed Hildegard an envelope. “My choice for the rotation scheme Apprentice for the Pyramid Library. Send it up to the Sick Bay, will you?”

“Of course, Madam Marcia. Right away.”

“I’ll be back in about an hour.”

“Very well, Madam Marcia.”

Hildegard called for the duty Message Apprentice and gave him the envelope; then she went into the duty Wizard’s cupboard and sat down with a sigh. She knew she had done something to offend Marcia but she had no idea what. She sat down and finished a note.

Dear Milo,

Thank you for your message. I will meet you at the old bakehouse at two o’clock this afternoon.

Hildegard

Marcia ignored Hildegard on the way back. She hurried by, put the stairs on *fast* and zoomed straight up to the twentieth floor. She found Septimus in the kitchen, making porridge.

“Aha, Septimus!” she said cheerily.

“Morning,” said Septimus, blearily scraping the porridge into his bowl.

“Coffee?” asked Marcia brightly.

“Oh! Yes, please.” Septimus looked surprised. Generally it was his job to make the coffee.

Marcia snapped her fingers at the coffeepot, which was loitering in the shadows with the sugar bowl. “For two!” she told it. The coffeepot scooped in a couple of spoons of coffee, added three teaspoons of sugar, stood under the

tap, which obligingly turned on, then scuttled over to the stove and settled onto a ring. “Light!” Marcia told the stove.

Septimus smiled. When *he* made coffee, he had to do it himself. The coffeepot was a one-Wizard pot and took absolutely no notice of him.

Marcia waited until Septimus had finished his porridge—which was drenched in syrup—and two tiny cups of hot, sweet coffee were sitting on the table; then she took a dark blue velvet drawstring pouch from her pocket, which Septimus recognized as a standard Manuscriptorium **Charm** bag. Marcia pushed the bag across the table to Septimus. “For you,” she said.

“Oh. Thank you . . .” Septimus was touched. Marcia didn’t often give presents.

He wiped his hands on his tunic, then loosened the drawstring and tipped the **Charm** out onto his palm.

“Wow! Oh, wow!”

Septimus could not believe it. Lying in the middle of his slightly sticky palm was the **Flyte Charm**. He had forgotten how delicate and beautiful it was—a simple gold arrow covered with intricate swirling patterns. But what Septimus loved most about it were the two delicate little silver wings that sat on top of its somewhat misshapen flights—fluttering gently as if to greet him after its long sojourn inside a dark urn in the Vaults of the Manuscriptorium. These were the wings that Marcia had given him when she had first asked him to be her Apprentice, and it was these that Septimus had missed so much after Marcia had confiscated the **Flyte Charm**.

“There are conditions to its use,” said Marcia. “You are only to use it when on Apprentice duties *in the Wizard Tower*. At all other times it is to be kept on the **Charm** shelf in the Library. Understood?”

“Yes, yes, totally understood.” Septimus didn’t care about any conditions. *He had the Flyte Charm back.*

“There’s another thing,” said Marcia. “Last night.”

Septimus gulped, convinced that Marcia was about to ask some very awkward questions. “Yes?” he said.

“It was awful.”

“Yes.”

“And it made me realize that you have been working far too hard. It has been a lovely Big Freeze and you have missed so much . . .” Marcia searched for the right word, a word she did not often use. “Fun.”

“Fun?” Septimus sounded surprised.

“*Fun*, Septimus,” said Marcia adopting the word with enthusiasm. “You need to go out and have *fun*. You have spent a month underground, and now I want you to take a month aboveground to do what you want.”

Septimus looked puzzled. “Like what?”

“That is entirely up to you. It is *your* vacation—”

“*Vacation?*”

“Yes. Vacation.”

Septimus was at a loss. “But what am I going to do?”

Marcia had it worked out. “What you are going to do, Septimus, is *fun*.”

Septimus smiled. “All right,” he said. “I can do fun. If you insist.”

“You look better already,” said Marcia. “Off you go. And forget all about that ghastly underground stuff.”

“I’ll try.” Septimus wished he could forget, but the unblinking red eye of **Fyre** was imprinted on his brain—whenever he closed his eyes he saw it. He longed to go back and see it again. He longed to know what it was, crouching below the Castle like a living creature. And most of all, he longed to tell Marcia all about it.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

Septimus was on his way to have fun. He stood waiting by the spiral stairs, because unlike Marcia he was not allowed to change their direction, and before long he saw the green Apprentice robes of their passenger. “Rose!” he said.

Rose stepped off, her green eyes shining with excitement. “Hello, Septimus.” She stopped and looked around. “Wow, it’s amazing up here. So bright. And kind of . . . sparkly.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

“I can’t believe I’m going to be up in the Pyramid Library. With you and Marcia.”

“Ah. It’s just Marcia for the next few weeks.”

Rose’s face fell. “*Just* Marcia? On her own?”

“I have to be on vacation. Marcia told me that I have to go and have, um, fun.”

“Marcia said you had to go and have *fun*?” Rose looked astonished.

“Yep. That’s what she said.”

“Crumbs.”

“Yes, I know.”

Until Rose had arrived, Septimus had felt quite excited at the prospect of his vacation. Now it just felt like another job he had to do. And then he remembered something. He fished Jenna’s Welcome Back Party invitation out of his pocket, took a pencil from his writing pocket and added Rose’s name to it. He handed the invitation to Rose.

“Would you like to come?” he asked.

“Oh. Wow. *Yes, please.*”

“Tell Marcia I asked for you to have a late pass,” said Septimus.

“Oh. Right. Yes, I will.” Rose stood clutching the invitation.

“I’ll pick you up later?”

“Yes. Crumbs.” Flustered, Rose rushed off along the corridor toward the big purple door.

Marcia was right, Septimus *had* missed a lot of fun.

While he had spent his month belowground, Septimus had missed a sunny Big Freeze—what people in the Castle called a Bright One. Most Big Freezes were dull and overcast with biting winds and freezing fog, but every now and then along came one with clear blue skies and brilliant winter sunshine. This Bright One was particularly welcome: it felt to the Castle inhabitants as though it was chasing away the very last shadows of the **Darke Domaine**.

Everyone had been determined to make the most of it. Nicko had arranged a series of Moat skating races (much to Jannit Maarten’s annoyance). Jenna had organized a snow-sculpture park on the Palace lawns and the Chief Hermetic Scribe had held a series of Manuscriptorium sled races down Wizard Way and allowed the scribes to leave two hours before sunset every day to enable them to enjoy the snow. Hot food carts selling chestnuts, sizzling sausages and warm toffee bananas had been set up along Wizard Way and proved highly popular. More controversial was the igloo village populated by young teens that had sprung up on Alchemie Way, which, according to the disapproving older people who lived nearby, was the source of much loud music and bad behavior. The long ice-slide that zigzagged down the Municipal rubbish dump, ending outside Sally Mullin’s Tea and Ale House, was probably the most popular—and dangerous—innovation. Sally took advantage of this by setting up an outside hot-barley-cake stand and, after the first few days when the slide had become treacherously fast, a first-aid tent.

After the **Darke Domaine**, Sarah and Silas Heap had moved out of the Palace back to their old room in the Ramblings, leaving Jenna in sole possession of her Palace for the very first time. When the four Forest Heap boys came to the Castle for Simon and Lucy’s wedding, Sarah had insisted they, too, stay in

their old home in the Ramblings. But after only one night, she had had to admit defeat: even half her family no longer fit into one room, so Jenna invited Sarah, Silas and the Forest Heaps into the Palace for the duration of the Big Freeze.

The Palace began to fill up. Simon and Lucy visited almost every day and the Forest Heaps—Sam, Jo-Jo, Edd and Erik Heap—roamed the corridors in much the same way as they had roamed the Forest paths, loping along and blending into the shadows.

For Sarah, it was a magical time. At long last she had all her children back in the Castle. She stopped worrying that something awful was going to happen to one—or all—of them and began to unwind. Silas was pleased to see the change in Sarah; her permanent air of concern had lifted and she had even stopped carrying *that daft duck-in-a-bag* around everywhere. Silas, too, became less distracted, he enjoyed getting to know his Forest sons once more; he even broached the subject of them considering Wizard Apprenticeships, although only Sam showed any interest. Silas didn't mind; he was just pleased to have his boys back.

Jenna, too, was pleased to have her brothers back, but she was less happy about Sarah. Jenna thought of the Palace as her territory now and she did not like the way Sarah had taken charge as soon as she had returned. The way Jenna saw it, Sarah had moved out and was now back as her guest. Sarah, however, did not see it that way.

It was the little things that annoyed Jenna.

For instance, Jo-Jo Heap had developed a fascination with Gothyk Grotto, the shop at the end of Little Creep Cut, and soon some members of the staff became regular visitors to the Palace. Sarah Heap did not object to two of them: Matt and Marcus Marwick, Wolf Boy's brothers, were "nice young men," she said. What she did object to was "that sulky young witch, Marissa."

"But Mum," Jo-Jo protested, "Marissa's left both Covens."

"*Both?*" Sarah was horrified. "You mean she's a Port Coven witch as well?"

"No, Mum. I *told* you. She not with either of them anymore," Jo-Jo insisted.

"Once a witch, always a witch," Sarah declared. "And no witch is going to set foot in *my* house."

Jenna pointed out that the Palace was her house now and *she* would decide who was welcome in the Palace, not Sarah. Ever since Marissa had helped her escape from the Port Witch Coven, Jenna had come to like her. To prove a point she had invited Marissa over that very evening. Jo-Jo was delighted. Sarah was not.

Another day Jenna found Sarah in one of the disused kitchens, loading Lucy up with a pile of saucepans. "We don't need all this stuff," Sarah told

Jenna when she had come to see what all the noise was. Jenna felt annoyed. Even though she was perfectly happy for Lucy and Simon to have things from the Palace, she did think Sarah should have asked her first.

While Sarah managed to irritate Jenna in a hundred little ways, Milo Banda was having the same effect on Sarah. “He’s hovering round the Palace like a bad smell,” Sarah complained to Silas one afternoon, after bumping into Milo in the shadows of the Long Walk for the fifth time that day, carrying something covered with a cloth. “And he’s always got some kind of junk with him. And when I ask him what it is he just smiles and goes *shhh*. What’s *that* about, Silas?”

“Don’t ask me,” said Silas. “The man’s a total fruitcake.”

Sarah sighed. “I know I shouldn’t complain. He *is* Jenna’s father—oh, Silas, don’t look so crotchety—and this is his home. But usually he’s here one day and gone the next.”

“The sooner he’s gone the better, if you ask me,” said Silas. “He unsettles Jenna.”

Silas was right; Milo’s presence did unsettle Jenna. Some mornings later, just as Septimus was getting his **Flyte Charm** returned to him, Jenna was leaning over the balustrade of the gallery that ran along the top of the Palace entrance hall. She was gazing at the patterns cast by the snow-bright sunlight glancing in through the windows when she saw Milo stride across the hall, his shiny black leather boots *click-clicking* on the stone floor, his red-and-gold cloak billowing out behind him as he rushed out of the Palace on yet more “business.”

Suddenly Jenna had the oddest sensation. She felt as if she had been transported to the life she would have had if her mother, Queen Cerys, had not been gunned down by an assassin’s bullet. It was so real that it made Jenna feel quite strange.

In the what-might-have-been world, Jenna (except she wasn’t called Jenna. She had a longer, more ancient name) was the oldest daughter—the Crown Princess. She had two younger sisters and a brother, all of whom had dark hair, violet eyes and found **Magyk** weird, just like her. Her two sisters looked a lot like her and her little brother looked like a young Marcellus. The what-might-have-been Palace was a busy place, the center of Castle life with coming and goings, and somewhere close by—in the Throne Room, probably—she knew that her mother was getting on with the business of the day. In fact, her mother was waiting for her to go to her, to spend the morning helping with Castle business and learning how to be a Queen. All was as it should be and at that moment it seemed to Jenna that her whole life up until now was no more than a long and complicated dream out of which she had just stepped.

Jenna was so caught up by the sensation of what-might-have-been that

when Milo—sensing she was there—looked up at her and smiled, she blew him a kiss. She saw Milo stop dead as though someone had hit him; then she saw his face break into a smile of happy amazement. Milo blew her a kiss in return, and was out of the door and gone.

“*Binkie-binkie-boo . . . binkie-binkie-boo . . .*”

The spell was broken. Maizie Smalls, the Palace and Castle TorchLighter, was wandering down the corridor. “Excuse me, Princess Jenna, have you seen Binkie?” asked Maizie.

“Binkie?” Jenna tried to pull herself back to reality.

“My cat.”

Jenna was puzzled. “I thought Binkie had gone. In fact I thought all the Castle cats had gone. Jo-Jo said they were living in the Forest with the Wendrons.”

Maizie tutted; she did not approve of the Wendron Witches. “My Binkie wouldn’t do that,” she said. “Anyway, he came home a few days ago.” A frown flitted over Maizie’s face. Binkie had not been exactly friendly since he had returned; she had the scratch marks to prove it. “But he’s disappeared and I’m worried he might have gotten shut in a cupboard or something. So, if you do hear anything I’d be very grateful if you would check it out.”

“Yes, of course I will.” Jenna was not Binkie’s biggest fan, but she knew how much Maizie loved her cat. She watched Maizie wander off along the corridor making *binkie-binkie-boo* noises.

Jenna’s moment of what-might-have-been was not easily shaken off. For the rest of that day she was left with a feeling of sadness for what she had lost. And she began to understand that Milo, too, had lost his own what-might-have-been.

Evening arrived and the Palace grew quiet. Jenna’s what-might-have-been thoughts began to fade as she got things ready for Septimus’s Welcome Back Party. The party was, despite Sarah’s objections, going to be in her room, and Sir Hereward was under strict instructions not to let any parents in, on any pretext whatsoever.

At eight o’clock a bemused Sir Hereward watched a succession of Young Ones, as the ghost called them, troupe past him. A wide assortment of Heaps came first: four Forest Heaps, Nicko, Simon and Lucy, then Septimus with Rose. Rupert Gringe came next with his girlfriend, Maggie, and after them the Manuscriptorium contingent arrived: Beetle, Foxy, Moira Mole, Romilly Badger and Partridge, who were followed by Marcus and Matt from Gothyk Grotto. Jenna and Marissa arrived a few minutes later pushing an old Palace trolley (once used for transporting documents down the long corridors) in which sat a huge flagon of what Jenna called “punch” and a box of pewter mugs from one of the old kitchens. It was greeted with a cheer as they pushed

it through the doors.

On his way to the party, Foxy had ordered an extra-large bucket of sausage sandwiches from Wizard Sandwiches for delivery to the Palace. Foxy perused the trolley with a practiced eye—he could spot the lack of a sausage sandwich a mile off. “No sausage bucket?” he asked.

“I’ll go down and check,” said Jenna. “It might be in the hall, waiting.”

“You don’t want them to get cold,” said Foxy anxiously.

As Jenna was descending the sweeping stairs to the Palace entrance hall a loud knocking started up on the old oak entrance doors and did not stop. Jenna picked up speed. “Coming!” she yelled. She threw open the doors and found not the Wizard Sandwiches delivery boy, but two bedraggled elderly men, clearly identical twins, who looked oddly familiar even though Jenna was sure she had never seen them before. They took it in turns to speak.

“You took your time, Miss.”

“It’s freezing out here.”

“Can we come in?”

The twins made as if to step inside but Jenna stopped them. “Who are you?” she asked.

They both chuckled annoyingly. “We’re a surprise. Now be a good girl and run along and tell Silas Heap there’s someone to see him.”

Jenna didn’t like being spoken to like that. “I won’t do anything of the sort.”

“Can’t get the servants nowadays, Ern,” said one, nudging the other.

“You are not speaking to a servant,” said Jenna frostily. “You can wait outside. I will go and find Silas Heap.”

The twins turned to each other. “Hey, Eddie. I reckon she might be . . .” But Jenna never heard who they thought she might be. She slammed the door on them and set off, highly irritated, to find Silas Heap.

Silas was no more pleased than Jenna at the intrusion. He had been relaxing by the fire with Sarah in her old sitting room. Despite Jenna’s fears, neither Sarah nor Silas had any intention of going anywhere near her party—they were savoring the prospect of a quiet evening together. Very reluctantly, Silas left the fireside and set off with Jenna along the icy cold Long Walk.

Jenna threw open the Palace doors to reveal the two scruffy men, each munching their way through a sausage sandwich.

“Goodness!” gasped Silas.

“What nerve!” said Jenna. She snatched up the rapidly cooling sausage bucket from the doorstep.

“Lovely.”

“Ta.”

“Not eaten all day.”

“Been a bit of a hike.”

“How are you, Silas?”

“Have we missed the wedding?”

“Can we come in?”

“Perishing out here.”

Silas looked flabbergasted. He stood back and let the two scruffy tramps in. Jenna was not particularly surprised; Silas had some weird friends.

“I’m off upstairs, Dad,” she said, setting off across the hall.

Silas collected himself. “Jenna! Wait a minute.”

One of the twins elbowed the other. “See. It is her. Told you.”

“Dad, I need to go,” said Jenna, already on the staircase. “The sandwiches are getting cold.”

“Well, come and say a quick hello before you rush off. This is Ernold and Edmund. Your uncles.”

“My *uncles*?”

“Yes. My brothers. You know, the two that didn’t make it to our Simon’s wedding? Gosh, I haven’t seen them since before . . . well, since before all the *stuff* happened.”

It was on the tip of Jenna’s tongue to tell Silas that the two rude old men were not actually her uncles and were nothing to do with her, but she knew how much that would hurt Silas. She bit back the words and hurried down the stairs—the sooner she said hello, the sooner she could get the sausage sandwiches up to where they belonged.

Jenna held out her hand, keeping her distance from Ernold and Edmund. They looked, she thought, like the sort of uncles who would lunge at you for a sloppy, sausage-sandwich-scented kiss. The very thought made Jenna feel sick. But Ernold and Edmund behaved themselves. They meekly shook Jenna’s outstretched hand and mumbled:

“Sorry we . . .”

“Didn’t recognize you.”

Jenna slipped into gracious Princess mode. “Please don’t worry about it. I didn’t recognize you either. I hope you will excuse me; I have to go. I have some people waiting for me,” Jenna said, making it sound as though she were returning to a board meeting. She picked up the bucket of sausage sandwiches and, carrying it as though it were a precious heirloom, she gracefully ascended the stairs. As soon as she was out of sight, Jenna broke into a run. Thirty seconds later she hurtled into her room yelling, “Sausage bucket!”

WITCHERY



“You certainly know how to throw a good party, Jen,” Septimus said many hours later, as they led the revelers out along the shadowy upstairs corridor.

“Thanks, Sep!” Jenna was buzzing with excitement; it had been a wonderful evening. As the guests made their way out along the candlelit corridor, an assortment of Palace ghosts—old servants, ancient officials and a few of the more sociable Queens and Princesses—looked on approvingly. The Palace was beginning to return to its old, lively self.

The party giggled its way down the sweeping stairs, out of the Palace and into the snow, where the icy night air hit them. With their breath hanging in the freezing air, they walked slowly across the broad plank bridge that led over the iced-up Palace moat, gazing at the strangely beautiful forms of the snow sculptures sparkling in the light of a full moon; the sight gave rise to a chorus of “wow” and “hey” and “spookieeeeeee” as everyone stopped and gazed. Some of the boys began a snowball fight and Jenna got out of the way. She found herself standing next to Beetle, who was laughing about something

with Marissa.

Jenna tried to think of something interesting to say but couldn't. Beetle tried to as well, with the same result. Marissa, however, had no such problem. "Hey, Beetle; are you walking back to the Manuscriptorium?"

"Yep," said Beetle.

"I've got a room at Bott's Cloaks now. Just opposite. Walk with you?"

Beetle sounded surprised. "Oh. Yes. Of course. How's poor Mrs. Bott doing?"

Marissa shrugged. "Dunno. She doesn't say much."

Beetle turned to Jenna, the gold braid on his Admiral's jacket glistening in the moonlight. "Jenna. Thank you for a lovely party," he said, rather formally.

Jenna smiled. "Oh, thank you so much for coming, Beetle. It was very nice to see you," she said and immediately wished she hadn't. She had sounded so *Princessy*, she thought. No, worse than that, she had sounded *prissy*.

"Yeah, it was really great," said Marissa, giggling and linking her arm through Beetle's. "Byeeee." With that Marissa tugged Beetle off into the sculpture garden and Jenna watched them disappear behind a giant frog. Maybe, thought Jenna, she didn't like Marissa quite as much as she thought she had.

Jo-Jo, Matt and Marcus stopped their snowball fight. "Where's she gone?" they demanded.

"Where's who gone?" asked Jenna.

"You know who, Jens," said Jo-Jo. "*Marissa.*"

"What's it to you?" demanded Marcus, eyeballing Jo-Jo.

"None of your business," Jo-Jo retorted.

"Hey, Forest boy, don't get clever with me—"

"Stop it!" said Jenna, stepping between Jo-Jo and Marcus. "She's gone off with Beetle if you must know."

"*Beetle?*" three voices chorused incredulously. "Jeez." They sloped off disconsolately and resumed their snowball fight, but with a lot more edge.

A succession of good-byes followed until Jenna was left alone with Septimus and Rose.

"Hey, Jen, you okay?" asked Septimus.

"Fine, thanks."

"It was great, wasn't it?"

"Yep," said Jenna. "I mean, yes, really great."

"Time we went, Jen," said Septimus. "Got to get Rose back before her pass expires."

Jenna had an idea. "If you hurry you can catch up with Beetle."

Septimus grinned. "Maybe he doesn't *want* catching up with, Jen."

"Don't be silly, Sep," said Jenna snappily.

"Ah. Well, g'night, Jen," said Septimus. "And thanks. Great party."

“Thank you,” said Rose. “It was really lovely.”

Septimus gave Jenna a hug; then he and Rose wandered off, weaving their way through the sculptures. After following a well-trodden path past the giant frog, a large chicken, a rowboat, a huge crown, three fat bears, a large, rude Water Gnome and something that bore a remarkable resemblance to Marcia Overstrand with a pile of saucepans on her head—much to their amusement—they reached the Palace Gate. In the distance Septimus saw Beetle and Marissa walking arm in arm up Wizard Way. After a few moments’ thought, he took Rose’s arm and followed slowly, in no more hurry than Beetle was.

Jenna felt decidedly unsettled. She looked up at the Palace, which was blazing with light from the candles in the windows, and sighed. It looked beautifully welcoming, but she didn’t want to go to bed. Not just yet. She slipped into the entrance hall and took her thickest fur cloak from the coat cupboard under the stairs. Beside it hung her Witch cloak, which she grabbed and angrily scrunched up into a ball: *that* was going in the trash. She’d had enough of witches.

Witch cloak stuffed under her arm, Jenna took the path that led round the back of the Palace to the new kitchens where the trash was. As she bundled the cloak into the bonfire bin something brushed against her dress. Jenna looked down. “Binkie!”

Maizie Smalls’s cat stared balefully up at Jenna. Jenna felt a little spooked—Binkie was not the kind of cat you wanted to meet alone at night. If it had been any other lost cat she would have picked it up and taken it into the warmth of the Palace, but there was no way she was going to touch Binkie. Jenna watched the cat stalk off toward the thicket of trees that bordered the Palace gardens. A feeling of unease made Jenna reach into the bonfire bin and take her Witch cloak out again. She threw it over her red fur cloak and set off toward the river—somehow, she didn’t know why, she felt protected by her Witch cloak.

There was a disused jetty just past Spit Fyre’s dragon field where Jenna liked to sit and think, and right now that was where she wanted to be. As she cut across the Palace lawns, Jenna glanced over to the thicket of trees that bordered the Palace grounds. She shivered, and felt glad of her Witch cloak surrounding her like a shifting shadow.

Deep in the darkness of the thicket, Binkie, chief of the Forest Cats and new familiar to Morwenna Mould, the Wendron Witch Mother, was purring loudly. Morwenna stroked the cat and crooned, “Well done, my little spy. Well done.” She eased her bulk off a fallen log and moved silently out of the trees. Morwenna was determined that this time, the Princess would not get away, unlike a few years back, in the Forest.

All Witch Covens crave a true Princess—it gives them great power among

other Covens—and Morwenna knew that this was her last chance. Soon enough Jenna would no longer be a Princess and then the Wendron Witches would have to wait for Jenna’s daughter. The Witch Mother smiled grimly. The Wendrons would get in fast next time—**CradleSnatching** was so much easier. If only she hadn’t once made a promise to that lovely young Wizard, Silas Heap, they would have **CradleSnatched** this one fourteen years ago. How different things would have been.

Morwenna followed Binkie down toward the river. Tail held high, Binkie tiptoed over the ice-crusting snow while Morwenna sank down so deep that the snow fell into the tops of her boots. As they drew closer to their quarry, Morwenna was shocked to see that the potential Wendron Witch Princess was *wearing a Port Witch Coven cloak*. She had heard a rumor that Jenna had kidnapped the Coven’s youngest witch and stolen a cloak—and it looked like it might be true. Morwenna smiled. This Princess was going to be worth having.

As Jenna walked below the trees that led to the Dragon Field, her cloak was doing what Witch cloaks do best—blending in with the shadows—and Morwenna could no longer see her. Horrified at losing sight of the Wendrons’ Princess, Morwenna made a decision. She would have to do some **FootFollowing**.

FootFollowing is an ancient witch skill. It involves following a quarry by stepping into their exact footprint. Once a witch has **FootFollowed** three consecutive footsteps she knows that her prey can never escape, wherever they go: through the densest forest, up the tallest mountain, under the deepest river. Always, the witch will be **Following** in their footsteps. Like most witch **Magyk**, it has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that the witch is sure to find her victim. The disadvantage is that she has no choice but to do so. She must **FootFollow** in every footprint until she reaches her target. It can at times be dangerous: for example, if the **FootFollowed** happens to fall off a cliff, the **FootFollower** will have no choice but to do the same. Morwenna was aware it was not something to be undertaken lightly, but Jenna’s Witch cloak had worried her—there was more to this Princess than she had realized. She must take no chances.

Finding three consecutive footprints was not as easy as Morwenna had expected, because the Witch cloak was doing its job well. As Jenna moved through the snow it had brushed across her footprints, blending them together—as Witch cloaks are meant to do. But Jenna had then stopped to open a gate, and Morwenna got lucky—three perfect Princess footprints planted in the snow. The witch whispered the **FootFollow** and set off. This, she thought, was going to be a pushover.

It probably would have been a pushover if Morwenna had not been encroaching on dragon territory. While Spit Fyre was perfectly happy to allow

Jenna to walk through his Dragon Field—Witch cloak and all—he felt very differently about a real witch.

When one is **FootFollowing** it is not possible to look up from the footprints. Morwenna's brilliant blue witchy eyes were fixed firmly on the ground, so she got quite a shock when she suddenly saw planted in front of her two huge green dragon feet with very large claws indeed. (No one cut Spit Fyre's toenails anymore. Even Billy Pot, the dragon keeper, had given up—they blunted his hacksaw.)

Morwenna said a very rude Forest curse and slowed down—but she could not stop. Her feet were **FootFollowing** and she was heading straight for the underbelly of a nasty-looking dragon. This was not what she had planned. It was not what Binkie had planned either—tail puffed out like a bottlebrush, the cat shot off into the night.

Spit Fyre snorted threateningly. A tendril of dragon dribble landed on Morwenna's winter fur cloak and scorched a trail of holes. A nasty smell of burning wolverine hit Morwenna's nostrils, but she had no choice but to keep on going. With some difficulty, she squeezed beneath Spit Fyre's tummy and headed for his frighteningly spiky back legs. Morwenna began to feel scared—those spikes were sword sharp. *She would be cut to pieces.*

After his recent fight with the **Darke** Dragon, Spit Fyre had grown his adult leg spurs. He was very proud of them, but although they were extremely sharp they were also soft and new, and Spit Fyre did not want a witch anywhere near them. And so, to Morwenna's surprise and great relief, the dragon carefully lifted his feet and stepped aside. Morwenna was out of the Dragon Field as fast as she could go—but not before a well-aimed stream of dragon spit had hit her squarely on the back. Spit Fyre watched the witch go in disgust, then he took off for the boatyard, where he had taken to spending every night keeping the Dragon Boat company.

Morwenna moved fast and silent along the dark footpath that ran along the riverbank. The moonlight showed nothing more than shifting shadows as she went, her Forest Witch cloak merging with both the snow and the river beyond. She was now walking along a well-trodden path and was pleased she had chosen to **FootFollow**—the Princess could be anywhere. As Morwenna came to a bend she was surprised to find that her feet took her away from the path and through a gap in the hedge. She pushed through the snowy leaves and stepped silently onto the old jetty. The witch smiled. How very convenient, she thought. Earlier that evening, she had tied up her coracle to the mooring post at the end of that very jetty.

Jenna was sitting, leaning against the mooring post, watching the breaking reflections of the moon in the mirror-black river and wondering why she felt so upset about Marissa asking Beetle to walk home with her. Jenna remembered that when Marissa had said that she was renting a room above

Bott's Cloaks, she had been pleased for her—until later when she had realized that Bott's Cloaks was opposite the Manuscriptorium. And then, unaccountably, she had felt distinctly *not* pleased. She had even caught herself thinking how nice it would be to have the freedom to rent a room opposite the Manuscriptorium, rather than having to live so far away, in the Palace. This had thrown her into confusion. She loved the Palace—how could she possibly compare it with a tiny room above smelly old Bott's preloved cloaks? Why would she want to live *there*?

While Jenna was pondering the merits of the Palace versus Bott's Cloaks, the jetty gave a sudden lurch. She turned around and a flash of fear went through her. She saw the large bulk of Morwenna Mould creeping forward, carefully placing her feet into the snow in a rather peculiar way. Jenna knew at once she had to get away—there was no doubt in her mind that being crept up on by a witch when it is way past midnight and you are alone, perched over an icy river, was not good.

Very slowly, so as not to disturb Morwenna—who seemed to be in some kind of trance—Jenna got to her feet. If she had been anywhere else, she would have run for it, but unfortunately the only escape involved actually going *toward* Morwenna, who pretty much took up the width of the landing stage. Jenna hesitated. She was sure that Morwenna hadn't seen her—the Witch Mother was staring intently at the old planks as though she had lost something. But she was moving ever closer in an oddly deliberate way that frightened Jenna. Jenna decided that her best chance was to take Morwenna by surprise. She would wrap her Witch cloak around her like a shield and run straight at her. With any luck she could push past Morwenna before the Witch Mother had time to do anything.

Jenna took a deep breath and ran. As she got to within arm's length, Morwenna looked up. "Princess!" she gasped.

Jenna stopped. She eyed up the available space on either side of the witch—there were maybe six inches of landing stage, certainly no more. And below was the icy river.

Morwenna took a step forward and Jenna took a step back. "Morwenna," she said, playing for time. "How . . . nice to see you."

Morwenna did not reply. She was trying to remember the Rules of **FootFollowing**. Could she grab her prey now or did she have to **Follow all** the footsteps? Would she have to go to the end of the jetty first and then come back? She wished she could remember.

"Yes," said Morwenna, distracted, "very nice." And then, "*Bother,*" as her feet began to take her past Jenna. She was going to have to **Follow** every single step. What a stupid spell, she thought. "Excuse me a moment, Princess Jenna. Um, don't go away."

Politely, Jenna stepped aside to let Morwenna by and smelled the earthy

scent of leaf mold and decomposing fungus as the witch squeezed past her. Jenna was confused. She had been convinced that Morwenna was stalking her and yet clearly that was not the case. Lulled into a false sense of security, Jenna headed for the path back to the Palace.

Behind her Morwenna had put on a surprising turn of speed. The witch raced to the end of the landing stage, wheeled around and headed right back. The next thing Jenna knew was the smell of leaf mold behind her as Morwenna placed her dainty witch foot into Jenna's last footstep. As Jenna wheeled around in surprise, the heavy hands of the Witch Mother descended on her shoulders and her talonlike grip dug into the top of her arms.

"Got you!" Morwenna crowed triumphantly. "At *last*."

WHAT IS TO BE

“*Get off me!*” yelled Jenna, twisting and turning, trying to get free.

“You can’t get away; I have put a **Grasp** on you,” hissed Morwenna.

Jenna could not believe it—she had been so *stupid*. She should have run away while she could. Morwenna propelled her back along the jetty and Jenna was convinced that the witch intended to drown her. They reached the mooring post and Morwenna—keeping her **Grasp** on Jenna—leaned down and pulled a small coracle out from underneath.

“Get in!” she puffed.

There was no way Jenna intended to get into something that looked like a large teacup floating on the river—especially with a witch. “No!” she said and gave Morwenna a shove backward. But the witch’s **Grasp** held firm and Jenna found herself teetering on the very edge of the rickety planks. She grabbed hold of the mooring post with both hands. If Morwenna wanted to take her, she would have to take the post too.

Suddenly a movement on the riverbank, dark against the snow, caught Jenna’s eye. Two figures were moving fast toward the landing stage. With a sinking feeling Jenna guessed it was witch reinforcements—witches always traveled in threes. An old rhyme came into her head:

*One Witch to **Find** you,
Two Witches to pay,*

*Three to remind you
You won't get away.*

And she'd bet anything that one of them was Marissa. But suddenly a very un-Marissa voice boomed out. "*Stop right there!*"

Never had Jenna been so happy to hear that voice. "Milo!" she yelled. "Help, *help!*"

The rickety planks shook as Milo pounded toward them. Morwenna gave Jenna a massive shove, but Jenna was ready. Using the momentum—and the fact that Morwenna could not let go—Jenna swung around the mooring post in a full circle, taking the witch with her. She had heard that witches and water did not mix well. Her only hope was that the shock of the water would make Morwenna break her **Grasp**. As Morwenna began to topple, Jenna prepared herself for the fall into the icy water.

Milo's heavy hand suddenly landed on Morwenna's shoulder, pulling her back from the edge. "Eerf ym dlihc!" he yelled.

Morwenna gave a cry of fury and Jenna felt the witch's **Grasp** fall from her arm. She jumped back and both she and Milo gave Morwenna a hefty push. The witch landed neatly in her coracle, feet sticking out, arms flailing like a beetle stranded on its back. The coracle began to do what coracles do best: go round in circles. Around and around it went, spinning off into the middle of the river. Milo and Jenna watched the witch twirl through the moon's reflection; then the current took the coracle and pulled it rapidly along, bouncing through the choppy waters in the middle of the river, taking the Witch Mother back to the Forest.

"What was it you said that made her let go?" asked Jenna.

Milo had made a decision that morning after Jenna had blown him her kiss. At last, Jenna was allowing him to be her father, and he would start acting like one. Probably for the first time ever, he answered a question directly. "I said, 'Free my child.' In **Reverse**."

Jenna had not expected that. "Oh . . ."

It was not easy, but Milo made himself continue. "When . . . yes, when Cerys, your mother, was first expecting you she got very worried about **CradleSnatching**. It is something that the Wendron Witches used to do, snatch baby girls from their cradles to bring them up as witches—and they particularly liked to take Princesses. A Princess is a great prize for a Coven, so they say."

Jenna nodded. She knew all about that.

"By the time Cerys was Queen, the Wendrons had stopped taking Castle babies, but your mama was afraid that they might still be tempted by a baby Princess. So she told me a powerful **Reverse**." Milo smiled at the memory. "Well, actually, she sat me down and made me learn it over and over again."

Once again Jenna was overwhelmed with the what-might-have-been feeling. “And you remembered. After all this time.”

Keeping to his resolve to be straight with Jenna, Milo had something to admit. “Well, I almost did. Actually, I’m sure I *would* have done. But luckily your mother reminded me. It’s something you want to get right the first time. There’s not always a second chance with a witch.”

Jenna knew she’d been lucky: she had escaped from the Port Witch Coven once and from the Wendrons twice now. “Third time *unlucky*,” was another well-known witchy saying. But something Milo had said did not make sense to Jenna. And as he seemed to be actually answering her questions for once, she asked,

“What do you mean, *my mother reminded you?*”

Milo looked at Jenna with an odd expression in his eyes. She seemed so young to him, *too young*. But what did he know? The Queen was always right. “Jenna, your mother, or rather the ghost of your mother, is here.”

“*Here?*”

“There.” Milo gently guided Jenna around so that she was looking toward the Palace.

“Oh!” Jenna gasped.

Standing on the riverbank at the far end of the landing stage was the ghostly figure of a young woman wearing the long red robes of a Queen.

Milo asked softly. “Shall we go and meet her?”

Jenna was lost for words. She nodded.

Milo put his arm around Jenna’s shoulders and together they walked toward the ghost. As they drew nearer Jenna saw that her mother was just as she appeared in her dreams. She was surprisingly young, her long dark hair was caught up in a golden circlet, and her large, violet eyes did not leave her daughter for a moment.

With every step Jenna took, she felt as though she were walking out of one life and into another. The ghost of Queen Cerys stretched out a translucent hand and in response Jenna held her hand out to meet it, careful to allow the ghost to make the first touch, if she wished. Cerys did wish. She placed her hand on Jenna’s and Jenna felt something fleeting, like a warm breeze on a winter’s day.

“Daughter . . . dearest. My . . . *Jenna*.” It was hard for Cerys to say Jenna’s name, because it was not the one she had chosen for her. Milo and Cerys had decided that Jenna would be named after her two grandmothers, but the Naming Day had never happened.

Jenna stood silently. She did not know what to call her mother. “Mother” felt too formal, “Mum” was Sarah Heap and “Cerys” felt too much like a friend.

The ghostly Cerys guessed what Jenna was thinking. “Perhaps you would

like to call me Mama?” the ghost asked.

Jenna was not sure. Mama sounded kind of babyish. “I . . . I don’t know.”

Cerys withdrew her hand and looked downcast. “Of course. You already have a *Mama*. For more than fourteen years you have lived your life with another family. A family that I would never, *ever* have . . .” The ghost’s voice became faint with emotion. Marcia’s selection of Sarah and Silas Heap as adoptive parents had horrified Cerys when she had first found out from the ghost of her own mother—who had wholeheartedly approved. “They will love her as their own,” Queen Matthilda had told her grieving daughter. “And that is the most important thing for a child.” But Cerys did not agree, and the choice of the Heaps still rankled.

Milo could see that Cerys was working herself up into what he used to call one of her “states.” “What’s done is done,” he said quietly. “The Heaps are a good family. And it is *your* time now, Cerys.”

Jenna watched her parents together with a feeling of disbelief. Ever since she had been given *The Queen Rules* on her fourteenth birthday, she had known that one day soon she would meet the ghost of her mother, but she had never expected to see her mother and her father together as a couple. It was a shock. There was none of the easy, happy banter that she was used to between Sarah and Silas. Jenna at first supposed it was because one of them was a ghost, but they seemed to slip into their roles with such ease that she began to suspect that they had always been like this—her mother edgy, and her father conciliatory.

Milo’s soothing words had their intended effect and Cerys calmed down. The ghost held out her hand to Jenna, saying, “Come, daughter, we have a Journey to make.”

Jenna was not surprised—a Journey was mentioned in the Arcane section of *The Queen Rules*, although no details were given. She wondered where the Journey would take them. She placed her hand into the shadow of her mother’s and allowed the ghost to lead her along the riverbank toward the Palace. Milo watched his daughter and the ghost of his wife walk away together, then set off after them at a discreet distance. He sighed, overcome as Jenna had been earlier, by the sense of what-might-have-been.

Sarah and Silas were dozing by the fire in Sarah’s sitting room. Ernold and Edmund Heap had long gone to bed but Sarah knew that Jenna was still out, *and I can’t go to bed until I know she is safely home, Silas. You go on up without me.*

But Silas had stayed with Sarah. He wasn’t going to leave her alone in that sitting room ever again. So when the door creaked open and Silas looked up to see Jenna peering round, he nudged Sarah.

Sarah opened her eyes and smiled at Jenna. “Nice time?” she asked.

Jenna did not return her smile. She came into the sitting room and—using the tone that announces something no parent wants to hear—she said, “Mum. Dad.”

Sarah and Silas were on their feet in an instant. “*Ohmygoodnesswhatisit?*”

In reply Jenna stepped to one side and pushed the door behind her wide open.

“Oh!” gasped Silas.

“Your . . . Your *Majesty*,” said Sarah. “Oh . . . *my*.”

“Sarah Heap. Silas Heap.” The ghost of Queen Cerys smiled uncertainly.

“Oh, Your Majesty. Please come in.”

The ghost drifted into what had once been her (immaculately tidy) sitting room and stared at the chaos in horror. Sarah saw the Queen’s gaze settle on the remains of that night’s supper, which was piled on the floor beside the fire, and she quickly threw a towel over it. A red stain from some pickled beetroot (Silas loathed pickled beetroot) spread up through the towel as though someone had shot it. And that made Sarah even more embarrassed. She glanced at Queen Cerys, trying unsuccessfully not to look at the great dark bloodstain over the ghost’s heart.

“Um . . . Mum, Dad,” Jenna said again, not knowing where to start.

“Yes, love?” Sarah said anxiously.

“My mother. The Queen. She has something she would like to say to you and Dad.”

“Oh, dear . . .” This was a moment that Sarah had been dreading—the moment the past came back to haunt them.

“It’s nothing bad, Mum,” Jenna said hurriedly. “Really.”

Sarah was not convinced.

Queen Cerys looked upset—she could not believe what Sarah Heap had done to her beautiful sitting room. Was this how her daughter had lived too? She was silent for a moment as she tried to compose herself. Sarah and Silas waited nervously.

“My husband and I . . .” the ghost began, and then turned and beckoned someone in from the corridor. “Come *in*,” she said, a little impatiently, Sarah thought. Milo squeezed in through the door and tried to hold it open with the fluffy pink rabbit doorstep, with little success. With some difficulty, he found a place to stand, wedged between two stacks of dog-eared romance novels, which were liberally splattered with duck poo. The ghost started again. “My husband and I wish to thank you both, Sarah and Silas Heap, for looking after our daughter.”

Sarah glanced at Silas. She didn’t like Jenna being described as someone else’s daughter. Silas raised his eyebrows in response. Neither did he.

The ghost continued. “We are both deeply grateful for the love and care you have given her. And we are well aware of the hardships that have befallen

you as a result of your guardianship . . .”

Sarah flashed a look of dismay at Silas. They were not Jenna’s guardians—they were her *parents*.

“. . . of our daughter. We trust those difficulties are at an end and that you will now be able to resume your simple, yet happy life.” Silas let out a spluttering sound. Sarah looked like a goldfish that had been thrown out of its bowl.

Silas spoke for them both. “Your Majesty, Jenna has brought us nothing but good. And we have always considered Jenna to be our daughter. We always *will* consider Jenna to be our daughter. Nothing is at an end.”

“Things end, Silas Heap,” said Cerys. “Things begin. It is the way of the Castle. The way of the world.”

Sarah was becoming increasingly agitated. “*What do you mean?*” she burst out.

“I mean that today things begin.”

“What *things?*” demanded Silas.

“That is not for you to know, Silas Heap.”

Silas thought differently. “If it affects our daughter, it most certainly *is* for us to know.”

The Heaps were not quite what Cerys had expected. She had assumed that they would curtsy and bow respectfully, gratefully hand over her daughter, and she would see no more of them. Cerys felt quite rattled: when she had been Queen no one would have dreamed of speaking to her like that—especially Sarah and Silas Heap. Stranded at the doorway by the sheer amount of junk she would have to **Pass Through** in order to go any farther into the room, Queen Cerys raised her voice and spoke very slowly.

“It is time for our daughter to go on her Journey,” she said.

“What journey?” Sarah demanded. “Where?” Memories of a similar visit by Marcia Overstrand to take Jenna away from their room in the Ramblings some four years in the past had come flooding back. “You can’t just come here and take Jenna away. I won’t allow it; I *won’t*.”

“It is not for you to allow or disallow, Sarah Heap,” Queen Cerys informed her.

Milo watched in dismay; he had become very fond of the Heaps and did not like to see them upset. He had forgotten quite how bossy Cerys was. Time had thrown a rosy hue over his life with her—now he remembered why he had gone away on so many voyages. Milo was back to his role of fifteen years ago: smoothing the waters. He threaded his way across the room to the upset Heaps.

“Silas, Sarah,” he said. “Please don’t worry. All Princesses go on a Journey with the ghost of their mothers before they become Queen. They go back to where their family came from, I believe.”

This did not make Sarah feel any better. “Where on earth is *that*?” she asked. “And how does Jenna get there? How long will she be away?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Milo. He shrugged just like Jenna, thought Sarah. “It’s Queen stuff,” he said with a rueful smile. “They do a lot of that, you’ll find.”

Jenna pushed past a stack of washing and hugged Sarah. “Mum, it’s okay. Milo’s right; it *is* Queen stuff. And that’s what I have to do. You *know* I do.”

“I know, love.” Sarah noisily blew her nose into a large handkerchief and woke Ethel. Since the **Darke Domaine** the duck was easily frightened, particularly in Sarah’s sitting room. Ethel now launched into full-scale panic. A frantic quacking filled the room and the duck rose up, flapping her little bony wings. She careered across the tiny room, bouncing from Milo’s head to washing pile to flowerpot stack, and shot out of the door, **Passing Through** the astonished ghost of Queen Cerys.

The ghost of the Queen had never been **Passed Through** before. It is a shocking experience for any ghost the first time it happens, particularly when the **Passer-Through** is a hysterical duck. Queen Cerys fell out of the room with a groan and Milo rushed after her.

Jenna had a few moments with Sarah and Silas. “Mum. Dad. You mustn’t worry. I will be fine. I know she—I mean, my mother, the Queen—seems a bit . . .”

“Rude,” Silas supplied.

“Yes,” Jenna admitted. “But she hasn’t spoken to anyone for ages and I think things aren’t quite what she expected.” Jenna took a deep breath. She felt excited at what she was going to say. “And I think I am going to be Queen soon.”

Sarah nodded. “I think so too, love.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I can tell. There is something different about you. I do understand that *The Time Is Right*.”

Hearing this from Sarah made Jenna feel relieved and happy. “You don’t mind?”

“Of course we don’t. We knew it would happen one day. Didn’t we, Silas?”

Silas sighed. “Yes, we did.”

Milo appeared anxiously at the door. “All right?” he asked. “Ready?”

“Yes.” Jenna nodded. “Bye, Mum. Bye, Dad. I’ll be back soon.” She hugged them both hard, then Sarah and Silas watched Jenna pick her way across the room.

Queen Cerys’s pale hand stretched out toward Jenna. Jenna turned, blew Sarah and Silas a kiss and then she was gone.

Tactfully, Milo slipped out, leaving Sarah and Silas together. There was a long silence in the sitting room.

After a while, Silas said gruffly, "I'd better go and find that blasted duck."

RELATIONS

Now that it was known that the Princess was gone on her Journey, a strange collection of objects and people began arriving at the Palace.

Never a day went by when Sarah Heap was not called to the entrance hall—always hoping it would be Jenna—only to find someone holding some kind of pot, box or bizarre object. At the sight of Sarah the person would make a formal bow and say: “Comptroller, I bring you this Wonder for the Coronation. We, the family (*insert family name here*) are honored to be the Keepers of the Coronation (*insert description of object here, e.g. trumpet, fire shovel, broom, eggcup, shoehorn, stuffed ferret*) and as is our bounded duty since Time Began, we now present this to thee, O Comptroller, for its sacred duty. Safe Journey.” The donor would then bow three times, walk backward across the Moat bridge, taking care not to fall prey to the snapping turtles—and once out of role, he or she would either give Sarah a cheery wave and shout “Good luck!” or scuttle off in embarrassment.

Sir Hereward, on guard in the shadows, faithfully awaiting Jenna’s return, had seen it all before. He watched the arrival of each object with approval, pleased to see the old traditions continuing. He was less pleased to see the

precious objects carelessly thrown into an ever-increasing pile beside the doors.

Sarah had become almost used to the visitations. She had given up telling people she was not the Comptroller—whatever that was—she had even stopped telling people she was not going on a journey, thank you, when she realized it referred to Jenna’s Journey, but she wished they would stop. As soon as she had begun to do something she would hear the tinkling of the bell in the entrance hall. If she ignored it the duty doorman would come and find her—because no Keeper would leave without personally handing the object over to “the Comptroller.”

Sarah could not help but be anxious about Jenna, but she did her best not to show it. She wanted her four Forest boys to enjoy their time “back home,” as she called it. Sarah nursed hopes that they might decide to stay, so she tried to hide her fears. But Nicko understood how his mother felt. He knew how much she had fretted when he had been lost in another Time and he wanted to make things up to her.

A few nights after Jenna had gone, Sarah was sitting at her window watching darkness fall. It was a bad time of day for Sarah—yet another night was drawing in and she could not help but wonder where Jenna was and what she was doing. As Sarah gazed out toward the river, she saw lights flickering by the Palace landing stage. Excited, she sprang to her feet. Jenna was back already! She ran out of the room only to cannon straight into Nicko.

“Oof! Hello, Mum. Good timing,” said Nicko with a big smile.

“She’s back,” said Sarah. “What a relief.”

“Who’s back?”

“Jenna!”

“Oh, that’s brilliant. Sam’s got plenty of fish.”

“*Fish?*” Sarah was flummoxed.

“It’s a surprise, Mum. We’re having a Forest supper. For you.”

“Forest supper?”

“Down on the riverbank. See?” Nicko pointed to the lights outside.

“Oh.” Sarah gazed out at the lights. Now that she looked closely she could see the burly figures of her four Forest sons tending a fire and yes, standing beside the river, holding lanterns, were Simon and Septimus talking to Silas, Edmund and Erhold.

“Mum, are you all right?” asked Nicko.

Sarah shook off her disappointment. She knew that only a few months ago if someone had told her that she would have all her boys with her, safe and happy, she would have been ecstatic. Count your blessings, Sarah Heap, she told herself sternly. And *smile*.

“I’m fine, Nicko love. Thank you. Now, where’s this wonderful supper?”

While the Forest Heaps cooked fish for Sarah and Silas, down on Snake Slipway another supper was in progress. Marcellus, Simon and Lucy were sitting in the long, narrow dining room that ran from the front to the back of the house, at an equally long, narrow table lit with so many candles that Lucy found it hard to see anything in the glare.

“I have some bad news,” Marcellus announced.

Simon looked at Lucy anxiously. He still expected things to go wrong, and he braced himself, thinking that Marcellus was going to say that he no longer wanted him to be his Apprentice.

“The Alchemie Chimney has fallen down,” said Marcellus.

“It’s the frost,” Lucy said. “The mortar won’t set.”

“So they say,” said Marcellus gloomily.

“You need to put heaters inside the scaffolding tarpaulin,” said Lucy.

Marcellus looked suddenly attentive—why hadn’t the builder thought of that? “And you should make them build it like CattRokk lighthouse,” Lucy added.

“Oh?”

“Yes. CattRokk has huge granite blocks as foundations, then bricks. They get smaller as they go up. You need the lower part of the chimney to be a good wide base for the upper part.”

Marcellus was impressed. So much so that by the end of the evening, Lucy was in charge of building the Alchemie Chimney. Later, as they walked across the road back to their little house, Simon said proudly, “There’s no way the new chimney will fall down, Lu. Not with you in charge. It wouldn’t dare.”

While Sarah fretted about her Forest sons leaving, the one group of Heaps who Sarah would have been very happy to wave good-bye to showed no signs of wanting to go. In fact, to Sarah’s dismay Ernold and Edmund Heap showed every sign of wanting to stay—permanently. They found themselves a suite of rooms at the far end of the Palace and set up camp, as Sarah put it. “The trouble is, Silas,” Sarah said one afternoon, “we can’t say we don’t have the room, can we?”

“We won’t when we move back home,” said Silas. “They’ll have to go then.”

The morning after the supper by the river, Silas was due at the Wizard Tower on **Seal Watch**. Sarah begged him to take Ernold and Edmund with him. “They are driving me nuts, Silas—they follow me everywhere and they *don’t stop talking*. All I want is a quiet morning in the herb garden without having to listen to a comedy double act.” Silas dutifully took his brothers along to the Wizard Tower. He signed them in as visiting Wizards—which they both claimed to be—and left them to explore the open areas of the

Tower. Half an hour later, when he had finished his **Watch**, Silas found himself in trouble.

Head fuzzy from staring at **Magyk**, Silas emerged to find an angry Marcia Overstrand waiting for him with Edmund and Ernold standing sheepishly at her side.

“Are these yours?” Marcia demanded, as though Silas had left a pair of smelly socks on the floor.

“Er, yes. I signed them in,” Silas had to admit.

“As visiting *Wizards*?” Marcia sounded incredulous.

“As indeed we are, Madam,” Edmund piped up.

“Totally, utterly and entirely at your service, ExtraOrdinary Madam,” Ernold supplied.

“I am *not* an ExtraOrdinary Madam,” said Marcia severely. “I am an ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Silas, before signing people in as visiting Wizards I would expect you to at least check that they are bona fide Wizards. As these two persons”—with some effort, Marcia fought off the urge to refer to the visitors as idiots—“clearly are *not*.”

“Oh, but we are,” chorused the twins.

“We trained with the Conjurers of the Calm Green Seas . . .”

“. . . in the Wayward Islands of the West.”

“Absolute rubbish!” said Marcia.

“No, we did.”

“Really, we did. Honest.”

“You misunderstand me,” said Marcia. “I meant that Conjuring is rubbish. It is mere trickery and bears no relation to **Magyk**. I do not doubt you know a few tricks—the singing pink caterpillar infestation in the fourth-floor communal houseplant is testimony to *that*—but that does not make you Wizards. Take them home, Silas. At once.”

The thought of what Sarah would say if he returned with Edmund and Ernold after only an hour made Silas brave. “Marcia, my brothers are not here for long—”

“Oh, but we *are*,” said Edmund.

“No, you’re not,” retorted Silas. He turned to Marcia. “My brothers would dearly like to learn about **Magyk**. Education is one of the purposes of the Wizard Tower, isn’t it? They are willing to take their turn in all tasks and they humbly apologize for the caterpillars—” Silas kicked Ernold on the shin. “*Don’t* you?”

“Ouch!” said Ernold. “Yes. Absolutely. Edmund didn’t mean to do it.”

“But I *didn’t* do it!” protested Edmund.

“You *did*.”

Marcia looked at the squabbling brothers. “How old are you?” she inquired. Silas answered for them. “Forty-six, believe it or not. Marcia, please let

them stay. I think it would be really good for them. I will never let them out of my sight, I promise.”

Marcia considered the matter. Recently Silas had been frequenting the Wizard Tower on a regular basis. He had told Marcia that so very nearly losing the Tower to the **Darke Domaine** had made him realize how much he valued the place. Marcia knew that Silas had taken more than his fair share of the unpopular **Seal Watch** and there was a chronic shortage of Wizards available to do it. She supposed that even a couple of Conjurers might be trained to **Watch**. Marcia relented.

“Very well, Silas. I will ask Hildegarde to issue each of them with a Visitor Pass. It will restrict them to communal Wizard facilities only. You can train them as **Watchers** and they can take their turn, providing they pass the elementary **Watch** test.”

“Oh, Marcia, *thank you*,” said Silas. It was more than he had hoped for.

“My condition is that you must, as you promised, accompany them at *all* times. Is that understood?”

Silas smiled. “Yes, it certainly is. Thank you so much.”

THE ALCHEMIE CHIMNEY

Septimus's vacation flew by and soon his month was nearly over. The Big Thaw set in. Sarah Heap had been dreading it—now there was nothing to keep her Forest boys in the Castle. But determined not to think about it, Sarah busied herself by trying to organize all the “Coronation Clutter,” as she called the multitude of offerings that were still arriving. Sarah was particularly pleased when she saw her old friend Sally Mullin coming up the drive—Sally always took her mind off things. Sarah hurried to the entrance hall, past the huge pile of “Clutter” watched over by a rather disapproving Sir Hereward. Barney Pot was on weekend door duty, sitting on a tall chair, happily swinging his legs and reading his new comic from the Picture Book Shop.

“Don’t worry, Barney,” Sarah told him. “I’ll get the doors.” She pulled them open and a gust of wind blew in. Sarah and Barney shivered. It was a dismal, raw day. “Come in, Sally, it’s so nice to see you, I’ve been—”

“Comptroller,” Sally began hurriedly in an oddly strangled voice. “I bring you this Wonder for the Coronation. We, the family Mullin, are honored to be the Keepers of the Coronation Biscuit Tin and as is our bounded duty since Time Began, we now present this to thee, Oh, Comptroller, for its sacred duty.

Safe Journey.” Sally handed over a very battered golden tin, which sported a beautifully engraved crown on its lid.

Sarah took the tin. “Oh!” she said, nearly dropping it. It was *heavy*. Clearly it was made from solid gold.

Studiously avoiding Sarah’s amused gaze, Sally bowed three times and then walked backward across the plank bridge. As soon as she reached the other side, her suppressed giggles erupted and both she and Sarah collapsed in laughter.

“Oh, Sally,” gasped Sarah, “I had no *idea*. Come in and have a cup of herb tea.”

Sally scurried gratefully back over the bridge. “Ta. It’s perishing out here. Blasted biscuit tin weighed a ton, too.”

The slamming of the Palace front doors woke Septimus, who was sleeping in a large room at the front of the Palace. Blearily, he sat up in the creaky old bed—yet another dream of the red eye of **Fyre** still vivid in his mind—and remembered that it was the last day of his vacation.

Septimus had enjoyed his time off far more than he had expected. He had spent the first few days at the Wizard Tower pottering about the Library with Rose and dutifully visiting Syrah—who still did not recognize him—in the Sick Bay, until Marcia had shooed him off and told him to *take a break, Septimus*. So he had come to stay at the Palace, much to Sarah’s delight. Soon he was hanging out with his brothers around their campfire on the riverbank, helping Silas to file his **Magyk** pamphlets, and spending time with Sarah in the herb garden. He had stayed over with Beetle and gone out with a bunch of scribes to the Little Theater in the Ramblings and had even ventured back to the Pyramid Library to visit Rose a few times. It was the very first time in his life that Septimus had been free to do what he pleased day after day, and he was sorry to think it was very nearly over.

Septimus got out of bed and padded across the threadbare rugs to the window. He drew back the moth-eaten curtains and looked out of the window onto a dismal scene. Overnight it had rained, turning everything soggy and miserable, and now a watery mist hung in the air. Along Wizard Way piles of dirty snow and gritty, gray ice were heaped up; the only color was the Wizard Tower at the far end, which shone with its indigo morning **Magyk** lights flickering gently through the misty gloom.

The Wizard Tower now had a strange twin: the Alchemie Chimney at the end of Alchemie Way. It sat in the middle of a large circular space, which people had begun calling by its old name, Alchemie Circus. The chimney was covered with a blue tarpaulin, which glistened with water and shone with its own, more basic lights—the lanterns that Lucy Gringe had had set up inside it to enable building work to continue all night. There were always a few

onlookers but today Septimus saw that a fairly substantial crowd was gathered. Suddenly he heard the sound of Lucy Gringe yelling through a megaphone, “Stand back! Stand back! Will you all *get out of the way!*” There was a noise like thousands of flapping sheets, and the tarpaulin fell to the ground.

This was greeted by cheers evenly balanced with boos. Now revealed, the Alchemie Chimney stood tall and oddly out of place. It looked to Septimus like a stranded lighthouse.

Five minutes later, Septimus hurriedly looked into Sarah’s sitting room. Sarah and Sally were giggling by the fire. “I’m off, see you later,” he said.

“Bye, love,” said Sarah. “Don’t forget, I’m cooking a special supper for your last night.”

“I won’t. Bye, Mum, bye, Sally.”

“Lovely lad,” said Sally, as Septimus closed the door.

Septimus ran out of the Palace and headed up Alchemie Way, pleased that the mist—and Jo-Jo’s old Forest tunic that he had taken to wearing—meant that people would be unlikely to recognize him. Something told him that Marcia would not be happy about where he was heading. As Septimus reached Alchemie Circus, he caught sight of Lucy’s distinctive multicolored dress fluttering like a bright butterfly against the granite-gray stones of the base of the chimney. He weaved his way through the onlookers to get a closer look. The sound of Lucy making the scaffolders refold the tarpaulin reached him. “That’s rubbish. Do it again—and do it right this time!”

Septimus was glad Lucy Gringe was not his boss—she made Marcia look like a softy.

“Hey, little bro!” Lucy called out. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Septimus looked up at the chimney. Below the tracery of scaffolding, he saw stone cut so precisely that you could scarcely see the joints and above the stone, the neat circles of frostproof, heatproof and pretty-much-everything-proof brick began. The bricks were graded by size, getting smaller as they delicately traveled upward, each circle subtly different. “Brilliant!” Septimus called back.

Lucy beamed with delight.

Some lettering carved into the great granite slabs at the base of the chimney caught Septimus’s eye. There was the date, followed by:

MARCELLUS PYE: LAST AND FIRST ALCHEMIST.

SIMON HEAP: ALCHEMIE APPRENTICE.

LUCY HEAP: ARCHITECT.

HEATHER, ELIZABETH AND SAMSON SNARP: STONEMASONS AND LIGHTHOUSE BUILDERS.

Septimus looked at the names for a few minutes, taking them in. There it was, set in stone—he was no longer anything to do with Marcellus. Or Alchemie. Or the **Fyre**. Where his name could have been, there was Simon's.

Lucy was so busy supervising the dismantling of the scaffolding that she did not notice Septimus wandering away disconsolately and disappearing into the shadows of Gold Button Drop. The mist in the Drop was thicker than in Alchemie Way. It settled around him like a blanket; it muffled the sound of his boots and set his Dragon Ring glowing in the dull light. The conical shape of the lock-up solidified out of the mist, flat at first like a cardboard cutout; then details came into view: the rough stone blocks, the dark arch of the door. And then he saw the door open and a black-and-red-cloaked figure emerge.

"Marcellus!"

"Ah, Septimus. Well, well, what a coincidence. I was on my way to find you."

Septimus brightened. "Really?"

"Indeed. The chimney is complete and we are about to bring the **Fyre** up to its operating level. I would like you to see this, so that when you become ExtraOrdinary Wizard—"

"ExtraOrdinary Wizard?" said Septimus. "*Me?*"

Marcellus smiled. "Yes, *you*. Do you not expect to be?"

Shaken by seeing Simon's name carved into the chimney, Septimus was full of regrets for Alchemie. He shook his head. "No. Oh—*I don't know.*"

"Well, just in case it turns out that way. I want the **Fyre** to be as much part of your life as it is part of mine or, indeed, Simon's. I want you to trust it and understand it, so that never again does an ExtraOrdinary Wizard even *think* of killing the **Fyre**."

"I would never do that. *Never,*" said Septimus. "The **Fyre** is amazing. It makes everything, even the Wizard Tower, feel dull."

"Ah. But you have made your decision, Septimus."

"I know," Septimus sighed. "And it's set in stone."

Marcellus and Septimus took the climbing shaft and tunnel down to Alchemie Quay and then transferred to a much narrower and steeply sloping tunnel that wound its way in a spiral, down between the web of Ice Tunnels that radiated off from below the Chamber of Alchemie. It was over half an hour later that they reached the end of the tunnel where the upper **Fyre** hatch, illuminated by a **Fyre** Globe, lay.

"This is but a short climb down, Apprentice," said Marcellus. "But we must make it a fast one. This is the one point where we can be seen on the *Live Plan*. And I do not wish to be seen just yet. You do understand?"

"Yes," said Septimus a little guiltily.

Marcellus placed his Alchemie **Keye** into the central indentation of the

hatch and it sprang open. A waft of heat came up to meet them. Septimus waited while Marcellus swung himself into the shaft, then he quickly followed and pulled the hatch shut. He clambered down the metal ladder and waited while Marcellus opened the lower **Fyre** hatch, then dropped down after Marcellus onto the flimsy metal platform.

Simon, in his black-and-gold Alchemie robes, was waiting for them.

“Hello, Simon,” said Septimus, not entirely pleased to see him.

Simon, however, looked happy to see his little brother. “Hello, Sep,” he said. “What a place. Isn’t it beautiful?” He pointed to the **Fyre** below.

“Yes, it is. It’s amazing,” said Septimus, thawing a little at Simon’s enthusiasm.

“Apprentices,” said Marcellus. “It is not safe for the secrets of the **Fyre** to be known by only one person. Or even two. By the end of today, I hope that there will be three of us who will understand all there is to know about the **Fyre**. ‘Safety in numbers’ is the expression, I believe. And safety is what we want.”

And so, they became a team. Patiently, Marcellus took Simon and Septimus through all the stages of bringing the **Fyre** to its full power, which, now that the chimney was completed, it was safe to do. They worked through the day, methodically running through Marcellus’s long checklist. They regulated the water flow through the Cauldron, cold when it entered, hot when it left to find its way out through the giant emergency drain into the river. They drummed the Cauldron, they measured the height of the **Fyre** rods, they checked the levers that operated the huge hoppers of coal buried in the cavern walls—the **Fyre** blanket, Marcellus called it—and a hundred other small things that Marcellus insisted upon. “For safety,” as he said countless times that day.

It was late afternoon when Marcellus, Septimus and Simon stood once more on the dizzyingly high platform at the top of the **Fyre** Chamber. Above them was the huge oval opening to the Alchemie Chimney, which would take up the heat and the fumes and provide a much-needed airflow through the Chamber. But it was not the unobtrusive opening in the roof that claimed their attention—it was, of course, the perfect circle of the eye of **Fyre** far below, brilliant red brushed with its delicate blue flame, that returned their gaze. Underneath the blue they could see the dark twinkling of the graphite rods, each one a perfect five-pointed star, silently powering the **Fyre** around it. Marcellus smiled. All was well. They climbed up the pole to the lower **Fyre** hatch, sweaty, tired and longing for fresh air once more. But there was one more thing to do.

An hour later, the decoy fire in the furnace of the Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik was lit and burning well. Marcellus lowered the conical fireguard over it so that the flames were safely contained. “Good,” he said. “That will produce enough smoke to satisfy everyone. Time to go.”

They headed wearily up the long incline back to the lock-up. Septimus had been so impressed with Marcellus's insistence on safety that—even though he knew Marcellus did not like to talk about it—he said, “I just don't understand how the Great Alchemie Disaster ever happened.”

Marcellus sighed. “That, Septimus, makes two of us. I don't understand either. It makes no more sense to me now than it did all those hundreds of years ago. But what I do know is that if the ExtraOrdinary Wizard had not intervened in such a high-handed manner—excuse me, Septimus, it rankles to this day—and closed down the **Fyre**, then many lives would have been saved. And my house in Snake Slipway would not be so perishing cold every Big Freeze.” Marcellus smiled at Septimus's bemused expression. “The Ice Tunnels were not just the old communication tunnels between the ancient Castle buildings; many of them were also part of the Castle heating system. As you know, they run beneath every old house. The hot water from the **Fyre** kept us all warm. People loved the **Fyre** in those days.”

“Ah,” said Septimus, thinking that that made a lot of sense.

Evening was falling when they emerged from the lock-up. They hurried off to Alchemie Circus, where Lucy had been anxiously awaiting the first plume of smoke to appear from the chimney. She ran excitedly toward them.

“It's working—look!” Lucy pointed up to the thin wraith of white smoke that was climbing lazily up into the evening sky.

“Well done, Lu,” said Simon. “It's a brilliant chimney.”

“Thanks, Si,” said Lucy.

“Yes,” said Marcellus. “It's very nice. Very nice indeed.”

People had been hanging around Alchemie Circus all day, waiting for the first breath of smoke to emerge from the chimney, but with the onset of dusk, most had drifted away. But although the Living had got bored and gone home for supper, Alchemie Circus was, in fact, still packed—with ghosts. They had come to see what many considered to be the very heart of the Castle come alive once more. Most approved, but there were some who did not. These were the ghosts who had been present at the Great Alchemie Disaster. Indeed there were some there who had entered ghosthood because of the disaster. Some had been burnt to death by the hundreds of subsidiary fires that had swept through the Venting system and burst, unannounced, up through the floors of houses. Others—like Eldred and Alfred Stone—had been frozen into the Ice Tunnels during the panic to **Freeze** them. But those who had lived before the disaster had good memories of the **Fyre**. It had been the beating heart of the Castle, and those who had known life with it considered the present-day, **Fyre**-free Castle to be a poorer place.

But nothing stayed secret in the Castle for long and word soon spread that the **Fyre** was lit. Later that evening, after Septimus had gone back to the Palace for Sarah's last-night-of-the-holiday supper, Marcellus, Simon and

Lucy joined the edgy crowd at the foot of the chimney, many of whom were clutching the recently reissued *All You Need To Know About The Great Alchemie Disaster* pamphlet.

“Oi!” someone called out. “It’s the Alchemist fellow.”

A young woman carrying a toddler waved the pamphlet angrily. “Have you read this?” she demanded.

“Madam, I *wrote* it,” said Marcellus.

“Rubbish!” yelled a bookish, elderly man wearing a fine pair of gold-rimmed glasses.

“Well, I’m sorry you didn’t enjoy it. I did my best.”

“I meant there is no way you wrote this. You *Alchemists!*” the man spat out the word in disgust. He waved his copy of the pamphlet under Marcellus’s nose. Marcellus caught a waft of old paper—it was one of the original ones. “You Alchemists always covered everything up. And you, Mr. Pye, were one of the worst offenders.”

Marcellus held his hand up in protest. “I am sorry,” he said. “Please believe me, the Great Alchemie Disaster was not of our making.”

“So whose fault was it, then?” demanded a teenage boy. “The tooth fairy’s?” The crowd giggled.

Marcellus had known that the return of the **Fyre** to the Castle would not be popular. He had given the problem a lot of thought and he hoped he had a solution. He raised his voice above the murmurings of discontent. “To prove to you that we have nothing to hide, we will be starting guided tours of the Great Chamber of Alchemie.”

There was a stunned silence.

“All will be welcome and it will be my pleasure to meet you at the UnderFlow Quay and show you around personally. You may book the tours with Rupert Gringe at the Boathouse. I look forward to seeing you all again shortly.” With that Marcellus bowed and strode away.

Lucy ran after him. “Guided tours?” she asked. “Are you *sure?*”

“Just to the Great Chamber. It will make them feel involved. We show them the furnace and all the gold. They’ll *love* the gold. Give out a few souvenirs, that kind of thing. Simon can talk to the young women. They’ll love that.”

“Huh,” said Lucy.

“People need to know that there are no secrets in the Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik,” said Marcellus.

“*Aren’t* there?” asked Lucy.

“Of course not,” said Marcellus. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

Lucy wasn’t sure. All she knew was that something about the **Fyre** did not make sense. And that Simon said suspiciously little about what he did at work all day.

“Well, thank you, Lucy,” said Marcellus. “You have done a wonderful job

on the chimney. I really don't know what I would have done without you."

Lucy suddenly realized that her work was done. "Oh," she said. "Right."

"And to show my appreciation at this historic moment I would like to offer you . . ." Marcellus paused.

"Yes?" said Lucy, wondering if Marcellus was about to overcome the legendary stinginess of Alchemists and actually *pay* her.

"The chance to accompany me to the Wizard Tower tomorrow to collect the Two-Faced Ring. It is an historic occasion."

"Thanks but no thanks," snapped Lucy. "I have better things to do. Like knitting curtains."

Marcellus watched Lucy stride off down Alchemie Way, plaits flying. She looked annoyed, he thought. But he wasn't sure why.

NOT A GOOD MORNING

The next morning at the Palace, Septimus was up at dawn. He put on his new Apprentice robes—which Marcia had sent to him a few days earlier—checked through his Apprentice belt to make sure all was in order, and grabbed a quick breakfast. Yesterday’s misty drizzle had given way to a beautiful morning, crisp and clear. As Septimus walked quickly up Wizard Way, he saw the Wizard Tower rearing up into the blue sky, gleaming pale silver in the early morning sun. Septimus felt excited to be going back to work at last and was even looking forward to his practical **DeCyphering**. It was a perfect morning to take the **Flyte Charm** up to the top of the Golden Pyramid and make a new rubbing of the hieroglyphs.

Hovering in the bright, still air above the hammered silver platform, Septimus managed to produce a very good rubbing using a thin but strong sheet of **Magykal** tracing paper and a large block of black wax. The hieroglyphs came up crisp and clear, but they still made no sense—particularly the strange blank square in the center. Undaunted, Septimus took the huge piece of paper back down to the Library, where he and Rose settled down to the prospect of a happy morning puzzling.

Back at the Palace, Silas Heap was feeling considerably less perky. Slowly surfacing after a night of vivid and horrible dreams, Silas could not shake off a fuzzy, disconnected feeling in his head and a high-pitched ringing in his ears. He wandered downstairs, convinced that he had forgotten something although he could not remember what. Silas was hoping for a quiet breakfast in the family kitchen and he was pleased to see that there was no sign of Edmund and Ernold anywhere. He was due at the Wizard Tower for yet another **Seal Watch** later that morning and needed some quiet time to clear his head. But Silas was not to get it. He had just poured himself a strong cup of coffee when Sarah breezed in, slamming the door behind her.

“Ouch!” Silas winced.

Sarah looked at her husband disapprovingly. “I don’t know what you were doing last night, Silas Heap, but you deserve your headache this morning. *Really!*”

“What d’you mean?” mumbled Silas. He blinked a few times, trying to get rid of an odd blue fuzziness around Sarah. It made him feel queasy. “You know I was on midnight **Seal Watch**. And the twins were after me, so I had to wait for them too. You *know* that, Sarah. I explained at supper.”

“Silas, you didn’t get back until four o’clock in the morning. I had *no idea* you were going to be so late. You might have told me. What were you *doing?*”

Silas shook his head and wished he hadn’t. “I . . . I don’t know.” He groaned. “**Watching** that **Seal**, it makes you feel really sick.”

“Huh!” said Sarah. “Well, you can come and do something useful for a change. I need some help out here.”

“Sarah. Please. Just let me finish my coffee. I have to get to the Wizard Tower soon.”

“The coffee can wait, Silas.”

Silas gave in. He knew that arguing with Sarah would take as long as actually doing what she wanted. He got up and followed her out into the Long Walk.

All kinds of weird and wonderful objects, many of them extremely valuable, were now piled up in the Palace entrance hall, spilling out across the floor and teetering in unwieldy stacks. Sarah had grown used to it but after Silas had tripped over a pyramid of musical Coronation Frogs and become entangled in a string of metallic red and gold Coronation Bunting and nearly strangled himself, even Sarah had had to admit that things were out of control.

At Sir Hereward’s suggestion, Sarah had opened up a series of large rooms at the far end of the Long Walk to store the Coronation Clutter. With the old ghost’s help—few people are brave enough to refuse a request from a sword-carrying ghost with one arm and a dented head—Sarah now had a band of helpers. Only the Uncles—as Ernold and Edmund had become known—had

successfully eluded her, which had made her all the more determined to get Silas to help. She propelled him into the entrance hall, where a disconsolate group of Forest Heaps and assorted Palace helpers were getting to work under the eagle eye of Sir Hereward.

“Sarah, it’s a mountain,” protested Silas. “I really don’t have the time.”

Sarah was unmoved. “The sooner you start, the sooner you’ll finish. You can help the boys with that.” She waved toward a large upright piano, glittering with red and gold curlicues, and sporting some very fine gold candleholders. Sam and Jo-Jo were struggling to push it onto the old carpet that ran down the center of the Long Walk.

“What on earth is it?” asked Silas.

“It’s the Coronation Pianola,” sighed Sarah. “Apparently you press the foot-pedals and it plays the music for the Coronation Tea. Little Betsy Beetle and her grandmother brought it. They pushed it all the way from the Ramblings. And do you know, Silas, they live on the *top floor*?”

“Goodness,” said Silas. Goaded by the thought of little Betsy Beetle—who had never grown taller than four feet high—he set to. “Right then, come on, boys—*heave*.”

“So where’s Milo when you need him?” Silas muttered grumpily as they maneuvered the Pianola onto the carpet. “As soon as there’s work to be done he’s gone. *Typical*.”

“Stop wasting your breath, Silas,” said Sarah. “You’ll need it to push.” She gathered up a tall pile of silver plates on the top of which she had precariously balanced the Coronation Canary—long dead and now stuffed and living forever in a golden cage—and followed on behind the Pianola. Behind Sarah came Barney Pot pulling a trolley full of Coronation Cutlery, Maizie Smalls with the Coronation Bunting (“Keep it away from Silas, Maizie, *please*,” Sarah had pleaded), Edd pushing the Coronation Puppet Theater, which wobbled along on three squeaky wheels, and Erik struggling with a huge sack of dusty Coronation Cushions, which made him sneeze.

At last the procession reached its destination. Just as Sarah was unlocking the big double doors that led to the old Conference room where she had decided to store the clutter, a door opposite opened and Milo emerged, blinking in surprise.

“About time,” said Silas. “Give this a shove, will you, Milo? I really *must* go. Oh, hello, Hildegarde, what are *you* doing here?”

Everyone stared at Hildegarde, who had followed Milo out of the room.

“Nothing!” said Hildegarde quickly.

“Exactly,” said Milo. He quickly locked the door and pocketed the key. “Excuse me, Sarah, Silas: I really must be off,” and before either of them could protest, Milo ushered Hildegarde rapidly away down the Long Walk.

“Typical!” said Silas. “Right, boys, one, two, three, *heave*.”

By the time the Coronation Clutter was stored away in the Conference room, Silas was very nearly late for his **Seal Watch**. Edmund and Ernold were nowhere to be found—which did not surprise him. Like Milo, they were never around when there was work to be done. Silas decided to risk Sarah’s ire at leaving the twins behind and hurried off to the Wizard Tower.

As Silas walked out of the Palace Gate he glanced up to the Alchemie Chimney and, to his amazement, saw a breath of smoke curl up into the sky. Silas felt a stab of excitement. The **Fyre** was lit! Very soon the tedious **Seal Watches** would be no more and the Two-Faced Ring would be confined to oblivion. Silas was surprised at the feeling of relief at the thought. He had not realized how much the brooding presence of the ring had gotten to him over the weeks.

A breeze coming in from the river obligingly bowled Silas quickly along Wizard Way and cleared his head in the process. He climbed the marble steps up to the Wizard Tower with a spring in his step, looking forward to lunch in the new canteen after his **Watch**. He whispered the password and the tall silver doors swung silently open to reveal a large crowd of Wizards in the Great Hall. This didn’t worry Silas; it was getting near lunchtime and the newly refurbished canteen was proving highly popular. As Silas wandered in, whistling a happy tune under his breath, a nearby Wizard nudged a neighbor. The word spread, and in a moment the Great Hall fell silent and all eyes—green, every one of them—were on Silas Heap.

“Um . . . hello,” said Silas, realizing that something was not as it should be. “Nice day. Well, actually a bit windy but lovely and—”

“Silas Heap!” Marcia’s voice carried across the Great Hall.

“Good morning, Marcia,” Silas called back, a little anxiously.

“No, it is *not* a good morning,” came Marcia’s reply.

The crowd of Wizards parted to give Marcia a clear run at her prey. As Silas watched the ExtraOrdinary Wizard advance toward him, an expression of fury on her face, he wished that he was still shoving the recalcitrant Pianola through a doorway—in fact Silas would have willingly shoved any number of recalcitrant Pianolas through an infinite variety of doorways in exchange for not being where he was right then.

Marcia reached him. “Where have you been?” she demanded.

“Sorry. Been moving stuff.” Silas looked at his timepiece. “I know I’m cutting it a bit fine, but I’m not late.”

“That, Silas Heap, is not the point.” Close up, Marcia looked scary. Her green eyes glittered angrily and her frown cut a deep line between her eyebrows.

“What’s wrong?” asked Silas nervously.

Marcia did not answer his question. “Silas Heap!” she announced. “You are

under a Wizard Tower Restraint Order.”

“*What?*” gasped Silas.

Marcia clicked her fingers and pointed at the three Wizards nearest to Silas. “Sassarin Sarson. Bernard Bernard. Miroma Zoom. The Ordinary Wizard Silas Heap will remain in your custody until further notice. Take him to the Stranger Chamber.”

Silas gasped. This was a terrible insult. “But, *Marcia*. I’m not a Stranger. I’m Silas. You *know* me.”

Marcia rounded on Silas. “I thought I did. Now I am not so sure. Take him away.”

THE STRANGER CHAMBER



*The Stranger Chamber had been set up some seven hundred years previously after a disastrous rampage through the Wizard Tower by a highly plausible Gula-Gula. It was a large, windowless room on the opposite side of the Great Hall from the duty Door Wizard's cupboard and was used for visitors who were considered a potential threat to the Tower. Although it showed no sign of being so, it was a completely **Shielded** and **Secure** area, and was the one place in the Wizard Tower that was devoid of **Magyk**. All the protective **Magyk** surrounding the room—and there was a lot—was sealed away in a second skin buried in the walls.*

Behind its smart blue door, the Stranger Chamber looked comfortable and inviting. It was intended to put visitors at ease and give them no cause to suspect that they were, in fact, imprisoned. It was carpeted with a thick, finely patterned rug laid beside a fake fireplace, which contained a fire basket full of welcoming candles, burning brightly. There was a squashy sofa on the near side of the fireplace with its back to the door, and on the far side facing the door was a comfortable armchair strewn with cushions. Beside it was a table piled high with interesting books to read, a welcoming bowl of exotic fruits, a tin of biscuits and a jug of fresh water. It was to this armchair that the

Stranger was always shown. The reason for this was that the Stranger's chair was placed on top of a large trapdoor over which the rug had been carefully cut out. Beside the entrance to the Chamber next to the Alarm button, and also beside the sofa, were discreetly hidden levers. These, if given a sharp tug, would open the trapdoor and send the Stranger, chair and all, hurtling down a chute. Depending on a master lever set in a small box beside the door, the chute would send the Stranger either on a rapid descent under the Wizard Tower Courtyard and eventually out into the Moat, or straight down into a cell hewn from the bedrock of the Castle.

No Stranger had ever realized the purpose of the Chamber—until it was too late. They would be offered the very best food that the Wizard Tower could supply and be provided with the companionship of a highly attentive Wizard. If the Stranger was thought to be potentially dangerous or **Darke**, very often the attendant would be the ExtraOrdinary Wizard herself.

The true purpose of the Stranger Chamber was a well-kept secret even within the Tower, and many of the junior Wizards assumed it was merely a waiting room. But Silas was an old hand: he had once been the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice. He had even once been Attendant Wizard in the Stranger Chamber to a particularly odd character that Alther Mella had been convinced was a Chimera. Alther had, of course, been right, and Silas had actually got to pull the lever that had sent the Chimera hurtling on her way to the Moat. The Wizard Tower had escaped with no more damage than a few scorch marks to the Stranger Chair inflicted when, at the very last moment, the Chimera realized what Silas was about to do.

So, as Silas was ushered into the Chamber by his three escorts, he knew that he was no longer trusted in the Wizard Tower. He was, in fact, considered to be no better than a foul-smelling, fire-breathing, malevolent hybrid that wore way too much lipstick. It was utterly humiliating.

The first thing that struck Silas as he stepped into the Stranger Chamber was its complete lack of **Magyk**. After so recently rediscovering his love for **Magyk** after many years, Silas felt its absence all the more keenly. As he walked slowly across the soft patterned rug and was shown to the comfortable blue velvet chair strewn with multicolored cushions, Silas felt desolate. He watched his three escorting Wizards take their place on the sofa opposite. But no one needed to try to fool Silas, so he did not receive the usual sociable chitchat. Instead, the Wizard guards sat like three stone monkeys, staring at him in a most disconcerting way—especially as Silas knew one of them quite well. Bernard Bernard was a regular player in Silas's Counter-Feet league and had even been to the Palace for supper. It was excruciating. Silas could not bear to look at them. He stared at his boots and tried to imagine what could possibly have happened to cause his incarceration. But his imagination failed him. All he knew was that it must be really, *really* bad. He would put a big bet

on it being something to do with Edmund and Ernold—but what?

After what felt like hours, but was only ten minutes, the door opened and Marcia came in.

Silas leaped to his feet. “Marcia!”

To Silas’s horror, Marcia immediately placed her hand on the lever. “Sit!” she barked, as though Silas were a dog. Silas sat.

Marcia nodded to the three Wizards on the sofa. “You may go.”

Silas watched the Wizards file out, each one avoiding his gaze. He saw them close the door and, although he heard nothing, he knew that they had **Locked** it. Silas looked up at Marcia. “Marcia, *please*. Tell me what has happened,” he pleaded.

Marcia walked across to the fake fireplace and stood with her back to the candles, placing her hand on the other lever.

“I suggest *you* tell me, Silas,” she said coldly.

“But I don’t *know*,” Silas very nearly wailed.

“*You don’t know?*” Marcia spluttered incredulously. “You are telling me that you don’t know that your brothers are in fact two extremely skilled and daring **Darke** Wizards.”

Silas’s laugh bordered on hysteria. “*What?*”

“It is no laughing matter, Silas. You presented these as your two bumbling, Conjuring brothers eager to learn from us. When in fact they are two of the most skillful Wizards I have ever had the misfortune to come across.”

“No, that’s not possible.”

“Unfortunately it is perfectly possible.”

“Well, they certainly had me fooled,” muttered Silas.

“It doesn’t take a lot to do *that*,” snapped Marcia.

Silas was about to say that they had had Marcia fooled too, but he stopped himself. He noticed with dismay that Marcia’s hand was not only resting on the lever, but was impatiently drumming her fingers on it.

“Marcia . . .”

“Yes?” Marcia waited for what she thought was a confession coming.

“That lever—it is on a hair trigger.”

Marcia looked surprised. She did not realize that Silas knew about the workings of the Stranger Chamber. She stopped drumming her fingers but Silas saw that she did not take her hand away.

“I will remove my hand when you convince me that you have not been party to this.”

“Party to *what?*”

“Party to a conspiracy to introduce two **Darke** Wizards into the Wizard Tower for the purpose of theft and burglary of the most serious kind. Party to aiding and abetting the two said Wizards in pursuit of their plan. Party to expediting their escape from the Castle.”

Silas spent some seconds trying to work out exactly what it was that Marcia had said. But his brain was in panic mode. All he could manage was, “Marcia, please. I don’t understand. *What have they done?*”

Marcia did not reply. There was an odd look in her eyes that Silas found disconcerting. Silas had never progressed to the **MindScreen** level of his Apprenticeship and he did not realize that Marcia was trying—without the aid of any **Magyk**—to catch a glimpse of his thoughts.

Marcia just about managed it. She got panic, anger with his brothers, but overriding everything was utter bewilderment. The bewilderment was, she could tell, completely genuine. Marcia took her hand off the lever and sat down on the sofa opposite Silas. Silas breathed a sigh of relief and fell back into the cushions. *Marcia believed him.*

“Silas Heap,” she said, “I accept that you have not conspired against the Wizard Tower.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” breathed Silas.

Marcia held up her hand. “*However . . .*”

“Oh,” muttered Silas.

“You have neglected your duty as an Ordinary Wizard. On your Induction all those years ago you promised to protect the Wizard Tower at all times. You promised to honor your word. At some time in the last twelve hours you have broken both those promises with disastrous consequences.”

“No! No, I *haven’t*.”

“You have. You promised to accompany your brothers in the Wizard Tower at all times.”

“But I *have*.”

“If that is so, then that makes your position even worse.”

“But—”

Marcia cut in. “If you were with them at all times then that makes you an accomplice, does it not?”

All Silas could do was to shake his head.

“You understand that breaking your Induction vows can lead to permanent **Barring** from the Wizard Tower?”

Silas nodded miserably.

“And I assume you are aware that the **Barring** of a Wizard will also affect their immediate family?”

Silas was horrified. “No! No, you can’t make Septimus suffer for my stupid mistake.”

“I don’t make the rules, Silas. If you are **Barred**, then it is highly probable that Septimus will find he cannot access the arcane secrets of the Tower. This will mean that, should he wish it—and right now I don’t know if he ever will—he will never be able to become ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He will be **Tainted** by you.”

Silas groaned.

“It’s not fair, but that’s how it goes. You *know* that. There would be nothing I could do about it. The Tower has a mind of its own, and the deepest **Magyk** is not available to all. Why do you think we still have a Wizard Tower after it was inhabited by DomDaniel? He never got to its heart. *Never.*”

Silas was aghast. “You can’t lump Septimus in with that awful old Necromancer!”

“Of *course* I don’t. But the Wizard Tower might.”

Silas put his head in his hands. *What had his brothers done?*

Marcia spoke. “I want you to know that it is only for Septimus’s sake that I am not **Barring** you from the Tower.”

Silas sat up. “You’re *not*?”

“I’m not. I give you my word. So I suggest you try to fix things as soon as you can.”

Silas felt bleary, as though someone had hit him on the head. “Fix what?” he asked.

“Come on, Silas. Now you have my word that I’m not going to **Bar** you—and *I* keep my promises—you can be straight with me. You knew what Ernold and Edmund were planning. You’re their brother, they’ve been living with you, working with you—of *course* you knew. Just tell me where they are and what they’ve done with it and all will be fine.”

Silas leaped to his feet. He had had enough. “Knew *what*?” he demanded. “Done with *what*? Marcia, what are you talking about? *What have my idiot brothers done?*”

At last Marcia was convinced that Silas had no part in his brothers’ deed.

She stood up and looked Silas in the eye. “Edmund and Ernold have stolen the Two-Faced Ring.”

BAD TIMING

The door to the **Sealed** Tunnel in the Wizard Tower swung to and fro like a broken window in a hurricane as the last eddies of **Magyk** drained away. A somber group of senior Wizards stood at the door, waiting until it was possible to close it once more. It was essential that the tunnel be drained of all contamination before it was **ReSealed**.

Septimus—extricated from the Pyramid Library—was there. It was important, Marcia had told him, that he saw the correct procedure for **DeContaminating**. Marcia had then hurried off to the Stranger Chamber where, Septimus guessed, she had the culprit.

Bernard Bernard—a big bear of a man with squashy features and dishevelled hair—appeared. “Anyone need a break?” he inquired. And then, seeing Septimus, he added sympathetically, “Ah, hello, lad. Don’t you worry, now. He’ll be all right.”

“Who’ll be all right?” asked Septimus.

Bernard Bernard suddenly realized that Septimus did not know that Silas was in the Stranger Chamber. He looked embarrassed. “Ah. Well, I meant to say, *we’ll* be all right. All of us.”

“So Marcia’s got the you-know-what back?” someone inquired. (Some of the more superstitious Wizards considered it bad luck to name the Two-Faced Ring.)

“Just being, er, optimistic,” Bernard Bernard flannelled.

“That’s a no, then,” observed the Wizard. A sigh ran through the group.

“It’s those two idiot Heaps in there, is it?” asked another, and then glanced apologetically at Septimus. “Sorry, Apprentice. I forgot.”

“That’s okay,” said Septimus. He wished *he* could forget.

“Not sure how many exactly,” said Bernard Bernard awkwardly. “Must go.” And he hurried off.

An embarrassed silence descended, broken only by the mournful squeak that the door to the **Sealed** Tunnel had developed: *eek-erk, eek-erk, eek-erk*.

Marcia was determined that to any visitor to the Wizard Tower it must appear to be business as usual. It was Septimus’s job to deputize for her, so when Hildegarde came to tell him that there were some important visitors for Marcia and *would he come now, please*, he felt very relieved to leave the group of **Watchers**.

Septimus found Marcellus and Simon sitting on the visitors’ bench next to the discreet door to the Stranger Chamber—and he knew what they had come for.

Marcellus got straight to the point. “Septimus. You know that I would normally be very happy to deal directly with you. But as I am sure you realize, this particular errand demands I speak to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard herself. Is she available?”

Septimus felt very uncomfortable. He wanted to say to Marcellus, *No, she’s not, she’s in a real panic, someone has stolen the Ring*, but of course he couldn’t. “Well . . . um,” he began, “Marcia is busy at the moment.” He decided to buy some time. “Would you like to come upstairs to her rooms?”

Marcellus was dismayed; he knew that Septimus was not telling him something. His hopes for complete trust between the Wizard Tower and the Alchemie began to falter. Marcellus had somewhat grumpily accepted Septimus’s offer when the door to the Stranger Chamber was thrown open and Marcia strode out.

“Marcia!” said Marcellus leaping to his feet. “Got you!”

Marcia jumped. “Ah!”

Silas appeared tentatively around the door.

“Dad!” gasped Septimus and Simon together.

“Oh,” said Silas, feeling as though he had been caught red-handed.

Marcellus had seen the panic that had flashed across Marcia’s face when she first saw him. “Marcia,” he said, “I thought you’d be *pleased* to see me. The **Fyre** is lit. All is now ready for the **DeNaturing** of the Two-Faced Ring.”

“Jolly good,” said Marcia.

“I was just taking Marcellus and Simon upstairs,” Septimus told Marcia, “so you can talk to them in private.”

But Marcia could not bear the thought of having to tell Marcellus that the ring had gone. “Tomorrow,” she said.

“*Tomorrow?*” Marcellus and Septimus chorused, one indignant, the other shocked.

“Tomorrow,” said Marcia. “Now excuse me, Marcellus, Simon. I really must get on.” Silently, she gave the password to the Wizard Tower doors and they swung open. The fresh outside air drifted in.

Very deliberately Marcellus looked Marcia in the eye. “To save me another wasted journey, I would be most grateful if you would send someone with the ring when you find . . .” He paused meaningfully.

“Find what?” Marcia dared him.

“The . . . *time*. Good-bye, Marcia.”

“Bye,” said Septimus apologetically as the doors swung silently closed, leaving Marcellus and Simon standing on the top step.

“Well!” Marcellus exclaimed.

Alchemist and Apprentice walked swiftly across the Courtyard and emerged from the Great Arch. A gust of wind blew up Wizard Way and Marcellus raised his cloak to shield himself from the chill—and eavesdroppers.

Marcellus had not defeated all eavesdroppers, however. Not far above him—returning to the Wizard Tower after a fruitless aerial search of the Castle—flew the **Unseen** ghost of Alther Mella. Alther had a Wizard’s mistrust of Alchemists and he wondered if Marcellus had anything to do with the theft of the ring. Now, he thought, was the time to find out. Still invisible, Alther swooped down low and followed Marcellus and Simon, flying no more than a few feet above their heads.

“She’s lost it,” he heard Marcellus say in a low voice.

“I thought she was quite calm, really,” Alther heard Simon reply. “I’ve seen her much worse than that.” Not entirely successfully, Alther fought back a laugh. Simon glanced up. “There’s some weird birds about,” he said, puzzled.

Marcellus looked at his Apprentice sternly. “Simon, right now there are far more important things to think about than wildlife. I meant that I believe our ExtraOrdinary Wizard has lost—” Marcellus stopped and looked around. “*It*,” he whispered.

Simon stopped dead. “No! Not the . . .” He, too, looked around and lowered his voice. “. . . *ring*. She can’t have.”

“She was panicking; I saw it in her face. She couldn’t get rid of us fast enough. Septimus wanted to tell us but couldn’t. And the Wizard Tower was in turmoil. Did you not notice?”

“Well, yes. It did seem a bit . . . frantic.”

“Frantic? It was like someone had poked an ant’s nest.”

“Yes. I suppose it was.”

“It’s an utter disaster,” said Marcellus angrily. “Marcia has lost the Two-Faced Ring—and she doesn’t even have the decency to tell us.”

Alther saw a look of horror spread over Simon’s face as he realized that what Marcellus said had to be true. “Oh, *Foryx!*” muttered Simon.

“Quite,” said Marcellus.

Alther had heard enough to convince him that Marcellus had nothing to do with the theft of the ring. He did a quick backflip and, breaking Rules numbers Two and Five in the *EOW Post-Living Handbook*—that ghosts of ExtraOrdinary Wizards do not use the door password or frequent the public areas of the Wizard Tower—he did first one, then the other. Alther then proceeded to break a few more rules for luck. He interrupted Marcia (Rule Twelve: Disrespecting the Current Incumbent). He told her she should not have sent Marcellus and Simon away (Rule Eight: Seeking to Influence and/or Criticize the Current Incumbent) and then he insisted she send Septimus out after them to bring them back (Rule Six: Interfering with the Policy of the Current Incumbent). He very nearly broke Rule One, which was about foul language, but Marcia backed down just in time.

From the Front Office of the Manuscriptorium, Beetle, who was showing his new clerk how to operate the Day Book, saw Marcellus and Simon stride angrily by. A few minutes later he saw Septimus chase down Wizard Way. Some minutes after that he saw Marcellus and Simon walking swiftly back, with Septimus beside them. A few seconds later the Manuscriptorium door crashed open, and Septimus came into the Front Office, breathless.

“Beetle!” said Septimus, and then, seeing that Beetle was with a scribe, Septimus thought he should be more formal. “Chief Scribe. The ExtraOrdinary Wizard requests your presence. At once.”

Beetle looked surprised. “Yes. Of course. I’ll come right now.” He turned to his new clerk, Moira Mole. “Moira, when’s my next appointment?”

Moira looked at the Day Book. “Not until two thirty, Chief. It’s Mr. Larry.”

Beetle’s ex-employer had taken to booking appointments to discuss the finer points of translation. Beetle was not at all sorry to miss him. “Moira, I’m going to the Wizard Tower. If I’m not back by then please give Larry my apologies.”

“Okay, Chief.” Moira smiled.

“Any problems, ask Foxy.”

“Will do.”

Moira Mole—a plump girl with short, dark curly hair, and tiny bottle-glass spectacles perched on her nose—watched Beetle and Septimus leave. She

peered around the Front Office nervously. She hoped no one else came in.

But at two o'clock Marissa turned up. Marissa scared Moira. She reminded her of the big girls at school who used to pinch her when no one was looking. Moira told herself that she was not at school anymore and, more comfortingly, there was a big desk between her and Marissa. Moira asked Marissa what she wanted but all Marissa would say was: "I want to ask Beetle something." Moira told her she didn't know when he would be back but, to her dismay, Marissa declared that she would wait.

At two fifteen, two rats knocked on the Manuscriptorium window. Moira recognized one of them as Stanley, head of the Rat Office. The other rat, a little smaller and a lot leaner, she did not recognize. She let them in and they jumped onto the Day Book on the Front Office desk. Moira hoped they had wiped their feet on the way in.

Moira was gaining confidence. Marissa was sitting on a wobbly stool pretending to be interested in an old pamphlet. Moira had the comfortable chair and important things to do. And now she had a Message Rat.

"Speeke, Rattus Rattus." Moira said the words with such aplomb that no one would have guessed she had never said them before.

Stanley prodded the smaller rat. "Go on, Florence. Do what the Office Clerk says."

The small rat looked nervous and squeaked.

"Go on," urged Stanley. "No need to be shy. You can't be a Message Rat and be shy, Florence." Stanley looked at Moira apologetically. "Sorry," he said. "Staff training."

"Of course," said Moira with the air of one who knew all about the problems of staff training. "Shall I say it again?"

"Oh, yes, please."

Moira looked at Florence, who was staring at her feet in embarrassment. **"Speeke, Rattus Rattus."**

"Come on now, Florence," Stanley said sternly. "Or I won't bring you out again. You will have to stay in the office and do the filing."

Florence gulped and took a deep breath. "First . . . I have to ask . . . er . . . is William Fox here?"

"Who? Oh, Foxy. Wait a mo, I'll go and get him." Moira disappeared into the Manuscriptorium and returned with Foxy.

"Is that him?" Florence whispered to Stanley.

"Now, Florence, I won't always be here to ask, will I? You must ask him yourself."

"So it is him?"

"Possibly. But you have to ask."

"First . . ." squeaked Florence, "I have to ask . . . er . . . is William Fox here?"

“Yep, that’s me,” said Foxy.

There was a silence broken by Stanley. “Go on, Florence.”

Florence gulped. She stood up tall and took a deep breath. “Message begins: ‘Foxy. Please close the Manuscriptorium immediately and initiate **LockDown**. Keep enough scribes with you to guard all entrances and send the rest home, right now. Let no one in, even if you recognize them. If it is me, I will give the password. If I don’t, don’t let me in. Keep **LockDown** active until I return. This message is sent from O. Beetle Beetle. Chief Hermetic Scribe. PS: don’t worry.’ Message ends.”

“Don’t worry . . .” said Foxy. “Yikes.” And then remembering the Message Rats, he said, “Thank you. Message received and understood.”

Stanley nudged Florence again.

“Oh!” said Florence. “Um . . . I regret that we are not at liberty to take a reply. The sender’s whereabouts are confidential.”

“Okay,” said Foxy. “Thanks anyway.”

“Well done, Florence,” said Stanley. He looked at Foxy and Moira. “Thank you for your patience,” he said. The rats jumped down from the desk and Moira held the door open for them to leave.

Foxy sat down in the Front Office chair with a thump. “Jeez,” he said. “That was the most scary message I have ever heard.”

Marissa, however, was rather excited by the message. “Can I stay too?” she asked.

Foxy was not sure. “Well, I don’t know. Beetle said *scribes*.”

“Oh, *please* let me. You never know, I might be useful. I *am* a witch, you know.”

“I thought you’d given all that up,” said Foxy disapprovingly.

“Yeah, I have. But you know what they say, *once a witch, always a witch*.”

Foxy reckoned that a witch might actually come in handy. “Okay,” he said.

“Bother,” said Moira, who was looking out of the door, watching the rats run off. “Larry’s on his way.”

Marissa jumped to her feet. “I’ll get rid of Larry for you, shall I?”

“Oh, yes, please,” said Foxy and Moira in unison.

Marissa shot out of the door. Foxy and Moira didn’t know what Marissa did, but Larry never appeared. Half an hour later most of the scribes had gone home and a very nervous Foxy was starting the **LockDown**—a procedure that, as deputy, Foxy had had to learn. Foxy’s hands shook as he peered at the new **LockDown** protocol that Beetle had worked out from some faded old documents, but with the help of Romilly Badger, Partridge, Moira Mole and Marissa, Foxy managed to get through to the end.

“I think it’s called battening down the hatches,” said Moira, who came from a fishing family. “It’s what you do when a storm is coming.”

Foxy had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. He didn’t like storms.

MYSTERY READING

Up in the Pyramid Library a crisis meeting was in progress. Although it was only early afternoon, the windows were shuttered and the Library was dark except for a single candle that burned on a large desk in the center of the room. Gathered around the desk were Marcia Overstrand and the two people—Septimus and Beetle—and the one ghost in the Castle whom she trusted implicitly. There were also two other people she trusted less implicitly but had been persuaded to include by Alther.

“We have a problem,” she said. “And it could be a big one.”

The candle flame flickered in the air currents that circulated around the Library, wafting in through tiny vents in its golden roof. Marcia’s green eyes, sparkling in the light, were worried. “Two things I don’t understand: First, how did those idiot Heaps break the **Seal**? Second, they were on **Seal Watch** at half past midnight, so what happened between then and when I discovered them? And why can’t we find them? **Search** and Rescue should have easily tracked them down by now. *I just don’t get it.*”

“That’s three things, Marcia,” Alther pointed out.

“What?”

“Nothing. Sorry, just being pedantic.”

“Alther, can’t you at least try to be helpful?” Marcia was still annoyed with Alther for insisting they include Marcellus and Simon.

Alther floated around the end of the desk and settled himself onto an empty shelf. “I’ve been going to the Mystery Readings recently—you know, in the Little Theater in the Ramblings. They read a mystery story every week.”

Marcia looked confused. If Alther had still been alive she would have suspected that he was going a little peculiar, but that could not happen to a ghost. A ghost remained as sane—or crazy—as he or she was on the day they entered ghosthood. And Alther had been absolutely fine on that day.

Marcia impatiently tapped the end of her pencil on the desk. “Well, Alther, I’m glad you are getting out and about. Now, please, we must get on.”

“Yes, quite. So you see, every Mystery Reading begins with the audience being told a mystery—”

“Alther, enough!”

“Marcia, be patient. I am trying to explain. The person on stage tells us the mystery. Then two more people appear. One is clever, and the other is . . . well, not so clever, shall we say. The not-so-clever person is involved in the mystery in some way but they don’t understand the significance of what they know or have seen. So the clever person makes the not-so-clever person tell them every little detail that happened. And then the clever person works out the solution purely from what the not-so-clever person has told them. Or even gets the not-so-clever person to work it out for themselves. It’s very interesting.”

Marcia looked displeased. “I think I know where this is going.”

Alther had a distinct feeling that he had not explained things as well as he could have, but he plowed on. “So, Marcia, if you tell us everything that happened today, no matter how insignificant it may have seemed to you—”

“As the not-so-clever person.”

“No! Goodness, Marcia, I don’t mean that at all.”

“Well, I seem to be fitting the part rather nicely. Which makes you, Alther, the *clever* person, who will soon be able to tell us where the Two-Faced Ring is. Right?”

“Not necessarily. But it might help us think. Besides, Beetle needs to hear everything that happened. As do Marcellus and Simon.”

“You could have just said that in the first place, Alther. It would have saved you a lot of trouble. I am quite happy to go over everything for *Beetle*.”

“Jolly good, Marcia. I suggest you begin at the beginning. When you woke up this morning.”

Marcia took a deep breath. The morning felt a very long time ago. “I woke up late. I’d had my usual bad dream over and over again and I hadn’t slept at all well.”

“Describe your dream,” said Alther.

“No, Alther. That’s witchy stuff. Dreams are *not* important.”

“*Everything* is important,” Alter insisted.

“Oh, very well. It’s the usual horrible dream. I’ve been having it since we discovered those puddles. There is some kind of fire under the Castle.”

Septimus gave a start of surprise and Marcellus flashed him a warning glance.

Marcia, lost in her dream, did not notice. “I keep trying to put the fire out, but just as I think I have, I see flames coming up through the floor of the Wizard Tower. It gets hotter and hotter and then I wake up.” Marcia shuddered. “It doesn’t sound like much, but it is not nice.”

“And then?” prompted the clever one.

“Well, I was not happy about waking up so late. I went straight downstairs and into the kitchen. Septimus had just come down from doing the hieroglyphs and he asked if I wanted some porridge but I wasn’t hungry. I couldn’t shake off the dream. I knew it was silly, but I had to go down to the Great Hall to check there were no flames coming up through the floor.” Marcia laughed, embarrassed. “And of course there weren’t. But I still felt something was not quite right so I decided to go and check on the **Seal** before I went back upstairs. As soon as I went into the lobby, I *knew* something was wrong—Edmund and Ernold were on **Seal Watch**.”

“What was wrong with that?” asked the clever one.

“Plenty. First, they were not on the rota for that morning. Second, Silas was not supervising, as he was meant to do. Third, they looked . . . weird.”

“They *always* look weird,” said Septimus, who had not taken to his uncles.

“But it wasn’t their usual weird,” said Marcia, who knew exactly what Septimus meant. “There was a greenish light all around them and they kind of *glowed*. I asked them what they were doing, and where was the Wizard on **Seal Watch**. They laughed and said that there would be no need for **Seal Watch** anymore. And you know what was really horrible? They both spoke in unison. Like some kind of . . .” Marcia searched for the words. “Twin machine.

“I was actually quite scared and I decided to get help. I backed out of the lobby, intending to **Lock** the door on them. But I didn’t get that far. They turned around and they looked so dangerous that instinctively I threw up a **Shield**.” Marcia’s voice caught in her throat. “I felt something hit me. Twice. Like being punched. Here.” She put her hand over her stomach. “I couldn’t get my breath . . . it felt like forever. All I could do was watch them. They came toward me, moving in a really weird way, like those automatons that Ephaniah makes, and **Threw** something else at me. It shook the **Shield** and knocked me back against the wall. They walked by, laughing—I think they thought I was dead. As they went past I felt there was something absolutely, utterly terrifying about them.”

Silence fell. Everyone, including Alther, looked shocked. Septimus glanced uneasily at the door, as if expecting his uncles to burst in at any moment.

“Where did they go?” asked Beetle.

“Out of the Wizard Tower—they knew the password, of course. Some Wizards chased after them but they had vanished. I got the **Search** and Rescue onto them right away. They were last seen outside Larry’s Dead Languages and after that nothing—nothing at all.”

“Is Hildegarde in **Search** and Rescue?” asked Alther.

“Yes, I insisted on it.”

“So when did you discover the Two-Faced Ring was gone?” asked Alther.

Marcia sighed. “I *knew* it was gone. They had it when they went by. That was what I could feel. It has a presence, does it not, Septimus?”

“Yes. It does.”

“But you did check?” asked Marcellus anxiously.

“Of *course* I checked. They had left a false **Seal** on the door so that it looked okay, but when I put my hand on it there was nothing there. I did an **Override Command** to the door to let go of the false **Seal** and it took three goes for the **Override** to work. I guess I was a bit shaken up. And then, of course, I saw the truth. The door was open and beyond it I could see the tunnel snaking away. With the false **Seal** gone, the **Magyk** began to drain and the door started to bang to and fro. I left some guard Wizards at the entrance and I walked down to the **Sealed Cell**. I knew what I would find and I did. The door to the **Sealed Cell** was open; there was a hole in the Bound Box. The ring was gone.”

Marcellus put his head in his hands. Simon sighed.

“What then?” asked Alther.

Marcia shrugged. “I informed **Search** and Rescue and called a meeting in the Great Hall. Just as it began, Silas walked in.”

“And what did *he* have to say for himself?” asked Alther.

“Not much. He was here late last night. He did his own **Seal Watch**, and he remembers supervising his brothers’ **Watch** but he doesn’t remember them finishing it. He remembers nothing else until this morning, when he woke up feeling very weird. He suspects he has been the victim of a **Forget Spell**. He has the classic symptoms. Which are, Septimus?”

“A blue fuzz around people. A slight ringing in the ears. An inexplicable sensation that something is missing.”

“Very good. So it seems that the Heap uncles were not mere Conjurors after all,” Marcia said. “Their actions have the stamp of powerful Wizards.” She turned to Alther. “So, clever one, what do you make of *that* Mystery Reading?”

Alther shook his head.

There was silence while everyone thought about what had been said.

Marcia looked at Beetle. “Beetle—if you were the clever one in the Mystery Reading, what would you be telling the audience now?”

Beetle ran his hand through his hair. “I suspect I am the not-so-clever-one,” he said ruefully. “It just doesn’t make sense.”

Simon coughed apologetically. It still felt strange to him to be included in a meeting like this. “Actually, I think it does,” he said.

All eyes were on Simon. “Marcia, it’s exactly what you said: *their actions have the stamp of powerful Wizards.*”

“Oh?”

“That, unfortunately, is the answer.”

“Apprentice, what do you mean?” asked Marcellus.

“Please continue, Simon,” said Marcia. “I suspect you know more about this than I do.”

Simon nodded uneasily. He didn’t like being the one with the **Darke** knowledge, but he knew that was the way it would always be. And if he could use it for good, then at least there was some purpose in what he had once done. “You said there was a hole in the box?” he asked Marcia.

Marcia stared at Simon, the awful truth beginning to dawn on her. Of course. She had been too focused on the Heap twins to think it through properly.

Simon saw Marcia’s expression. He coughed apologetically. “I believe that the Two-Faced Ring has . . .” He glanced at Marcia.

“**Migrated,**” Marcia finished for him.

“Surely not,” said Alther. “It takes thousands of years for that to happen.”

Marcia put her head in her hands. “It was on its way a few weeks ago. Septimus and I had to put it back in the Bound Box.”

Simon looked shocked. If he had been ExtraOrdinary Wizard he would not have left the ring alone for one second after that.

“But that still doesn’t explain how Edmond and Ernold were able to get the ring,” said Beetle. “I mean, they had to break the **Seal** to get it. And really I don’t think they were up to that. They were just a couple of bumbling old . . .” Beetle trailed off, aware that they were Septimus’s uncles.

“Fools,” supplied Septimus, who shared Beetle’s opinion.

“Exactly,” said Simon. “The more foolish the better.”

Marcia looked at Simon. “Simon. I think you know something about this ring that we don’t.”

Simon nodded. “When I was with, um, the ring’s previous owner, he told me that the ring was very near what he called **Reversion**. I think he was quite scared of that happening. He knew that all it needed was something big for that to become possible.”

“Like a **Darke Domaine?**” asked Marcia.

“Yes. Exactly. And I think that last night, the ring had an opportunity to

enter the first stage of **Reversion**.”

Marcia swore.

Septimus looked shocked.

“Sorry,” said Marcia. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“I would have done if you hadn’t,” said Alther.

Beetle looked confused. “What is a **Reversion**, exactly?” he asked.

Marcia indicated to Simon to speak.

Simon leaned forward. The candlelight lit up his green eyes and his fingers fiddled nervously with a stray thread from his tunic, twisting it around as he spoke, self-consciously aware that all eyes were upon him. “It is a return to a former state of existence. In the case of the Two-Faced Ring, its former existence was two **Darke** Warrior Wizards: Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn.”

The candle on the desk guttered and spat: there were some names that were not to be spoken in the Pyramid Library and these were two of them. Silence fell. Beetle got goose bumps.

Quietly, Simon continued. “A **Reversion** is not straightforward. It must go through stages. The first would be to find something unresisting to **InHabit**, which—not surprisingly—appear to be my uncles. I assume they were **InHabited** last night when they were on **Seal Watch**. And of course, there were *two* of them. I suspect that the fact that they were twins actually made them a target.”

“So it wasn’t Ernold and Edmund who stole the Two-Faced Ring,” Septimus said quietly. “It was the ring that stole *them*.”

“Yes,” said Simon. He looked upset. “Poor Ed and Ern . . . a **Consuming Habitation**. They do *not* deserve that.”

Everyone was silent. A **Consuming Habitation** was a terrible fate.

But Septimus was still puzzled. “So why did the Ring Wizards wait in the **Seal** lobby all night?” he asked.

“They would need to get control of the **InHabitation**,” said Marcia. “They would have to access the Wizard Tower password from the Heaps in order to get out.”

Simon looked at Marcia. “That’s true,” he said. “But actually, I suspect they were waiting for you. They’d want to get rid of you as soon as they could. It’s lucky you got the **Shield** right—and so fast.”

Marcia nodded.

“I wonder why the other Wizards on **Seal Watch** didn’t notice them?” Beetle said. “You’d have thought two **Darke** Wizards hanging around in that tiny lobby there would have been **Seen**.”

Simon gave a rueful laugh. “Nope. Not being **Seen** by a few very Ordinary Wizards is easy for them.”

Marcia got to her feet. “Right,” she said. “It’s not good but at least now we

know what we are up against. First we get Edmund and Ernold. Then we do the **Committal** to get the Ring Wizards back in the ring. And then we **DeNature** the ring.”

“Well, that’s this evening taken care of,” said Alther.

“But—” said Septimus.

“Alther, there is no need to be sarcastic,” snapped Marcia.

“It’s not as bad as it could be,” said Simon, trying to smooth the waters. “At least Jenna is safely out of the way. They can’t possibly find her on her Journey.”

“Why would they want to find Jenna?” Marcia asked.

“They swore revenge on the Queen’s descendants. One of Jenna’s ancestors shot them. Both. In the heart,” Simon said.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Beetle smiled.

“But we—” said Septimus.

“*What is it*, Septimus?” Marcia demanded. She was still a little snappy.

“Um. We don’t have the ring. To put them back in.”

Marcia groaned and put her head in her hands—she was just not thinking straight.

“Do they *have* to go back into that particular piece of gold?” Beetle asked.

Marcia looked at Marcellus. “You’re the gold expert.”

Marcellus tried to remember his gold history—something he had once avidly studied. “Hmm. It is indeed possible that they *don’t* have to go back into the ring. It is said that Hotep-Ra made the ring for the Queen from a lump of extremely old, **Magykal** gold that he had brought with him. A lump of gold so very ancient will develop a single identity, so that even when it is split and made into separate objects, it will recognize the other objects as itself.”

“What else was made from that lump of gold—do we know?” Marcia asked.

“It is said that Hotep-Ra also made the circlet—you know, the one that Jenna wears—from it.”

Everyone sighed. That was no good.

“Is this the same as **Cloned** gold?” Septimus asked.

“That is another word for it,” said Marcellus.

“So what about the bowls—the **Transubstantiate Triple**?”

“Of course! I *knew* there was something. Apprentice, I believe you have it!” Marcellus said excitedly. He turned to Marcia. “He’s good, isn’t he?”

Septimus looked embarrassed.

“He’s not at all bad,” Marcia agreed. “Which is, of course, why I chose him to be *my* Apprentice.”

A look of irritation flashed across Marcellus’s features. “I can get the bowls,” Septimus said hurriedly. “They are in Jenna’s room.”

“Good,” said Marcia. “Now all we have to do is find the Ring Wizards.

Before Jenna gets back.”

Marcellus was still riled. “It is impossible to find such beings if they do not want to be found, Marcia.”

“So we have to make them come to us.”

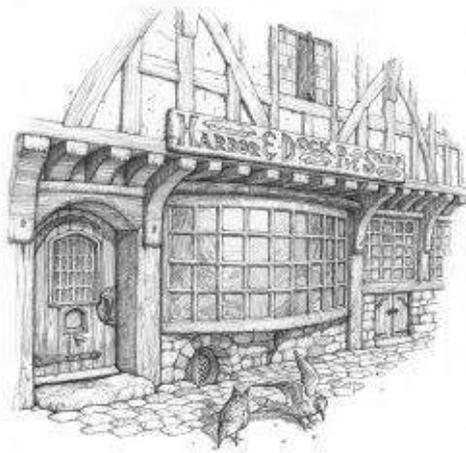
“And how do you propose to do that?” Marcellus asked.

“Bait,” Marcia said.

“*Bait?*” said three people and one ghost in unison.

“And what—or who—did you have in mind?” asked Marcellus.

Marcia smiled. “Merrin Meredith,” she said.

BAIT

“Two bacon-and-bean pies, please, Maureen,” said Septimus, out of breath. He had just managed to get to The Harbor and Dock Pie Shop before it closed.

Maureen handed over two pies. “Here, try one of our new sweet pies, apple with marshberry jam. Let me know what you think.”

“Thanks, Maureen. I will. Smells good. Do you have another one?”

“Hungry, eh? That’s what I like to see.” Maureen neatly wrapped the pies and handed them across the counter. “So, your brother—doing all right at the Castle, is he?”

Septimus did a quick mental run-through of his collection of brothers at the Castle and decided that Maureen meant Simon. “Yes. He’s doing fine, thanks.”

Maureen smiled fondly. “I’m glad. He and Lucy had some difficult times. They deserve a break. Got married too, I hear.”

“Yep. A couple of months ago,” he said, heading fast for the door.

“Lovely. Say hello to Simon and Lucy from me when you see them.”

Septimus nodded. “Will do. Thanks. See you. Bye.” Feeling bad that he hadn’t told Maureen that Simon was no more than fifty yards away, Septimus was out the door before Maureen could ask him anything else. Simon had refused to come into the pie shop with him. “I like Maureen, Sep, but she gossips. And I don’t want anyone to know I’m here, okay?”

Some ten minutes previously, Septimus and Simon had done a **Transport**

to the harbor front—the nearest open space to where Merrin lived. As Septimus walked across the deserted Quayside, clutching the packets of hot pies, which the wind tried to snatch from his hands, he thought how strange it was to be doing **Magyk** with Simon. He was surprised that it actually felt good. Septimus had not expected Simon to have such good skills with **Magyk**; they were pretty much at a level of his own although Simon had his own slightly odd way of doing things, which came, Septimus figured, from him having taught himself—and, he suspected, not being too fussy about using **Darke** sources.

Septimus found Simon sitting on a bollard by the water, sheltered from the wind and out of sight of the pie shop. As they both bit into their bacon-and-bean pies they heard the clatter of the shutters of The Harbor and Dock Pie Shop as Maureen closed them for the night.

“I can’t see Merrin coming with us without a fight,” said Septimus.

“He can have a fight if he wants it,” said Simon.

“Better not, though,” said Septimus. “We don’t want the neighbors getting involved.”

“Gerk!” said Simon, his mouth full of bacon.

“Huh?”

“Just choking. At the thought of the lovely neighbors . . . but you’re right. We don’t want a scene. The last thing we want to do is to draw attention to Merrin.” Simon glanced anxiously about. “You never know where . . . *they* might be,” he whispered.

Septimus felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. “We shouldn’t use any **Magyk** either. The **Transports** were risky enough. **Magyk** attracts **Magyk**—particularly **Darke Magyk**.”

“I know,” said Simon a little curtly. He didn’t like his kid brother telling him basic stuff he knew already. “So we have to scare him so much that he’s not going to try anything at all. So that he’s too scared to even speak.”

“Yeah,” said Septimus, handing Simon an apple and marshberry jam pie. “That’s what I thought too.”

Simon bit into his pie and red jam ran down from his mouth. “You thinking what I’m thinking?” he asked.

“I guess so,” replied Septimus.

They sat in silence eating their pies, waiting. In front of them the fishing boats bobbed and clinked in the brisk wind that was blowing in off the sea. The tide was high and the harbor full of boats; all the fishermen knew that the wind was rising and the night was going to be wild. The metal fixings in the boats’ rigging clinked against the masts and the taut ropes thrummed in the wind.

“Not a good night for flying ghosts,” Simon commented, wiping his sticky hands on his robes.

“Nope,” mumbled Septimus, spraying bits of pastry into the wind. He hoped that Alther and his companion were faring well on their flight to the Port. Simon was right—ghosts found gusts of wind very difficult. Alther would complain that it was like being **Passed Through** by pixies with boots on. How Alther knew what being **Passed Through** by pixies with boots on was like, Septimus had no idea.

Septimus was stuffing sticky pie wrappers into his pocket when he saw something big and white gliding in above the masts. A moment later a massive albatross swooped down; it skidded onto the Quayside but the ungainly bird did not stop. Its huge webbed feet acted like skis as it shot across the slippery cobbles—heading straight for Septimus and Simon. They leaped up just in time to avoid its beak, which was heading like a dagger straight for their knees.

With a soft *crump*, the bird’s beak hit the bollard. Septimus winced—that must have hurt. The albatross then performed a most unbirdlike maneuver. It rolled onto its back, put its feet in the air and covered its beak with its wings.

“**Transform!**” said Septimus.

With a small *pop* and a flash of yellow light the bird **Transformed** into a willowy man wearing yellow and what appeared to be a pile of donuts of ever-decreasing size on his head. He lay on his back beside the bollard with both hands clamped over his nose. “Eurrgh,” he groaned. “By doze. By doze.”

“That, Jim Knee, is what comes from showing off,” said Septimus, sounding uncannily like Marcia. “Where’s Alther?”

A small movement in the air answered his question.

“Here’s Alther,” said the ghost, **Appearing**. And then, noticing Jim Knee lying on the ground: “What’s he done now?”

“Pit der Pollard,” groaned the jinnee.

“I *told* you not to be an albatross,” said Alther crossly. “It was asking for trouble with this wind. You need a lot of skill to fly a bird like that. A small gull would have been quite adequate.”

Jim Knee sat up indignantly, leaving one hand on his nose. “I don’t do gulls,” he said. “Nasty creatures. They eat the most disgusting stuff. And given how hungry I am, goodness knows what some mangy gull would have picked up by now. Yuck.” He shuddered and glanced over to the pie shop. “Shame it’s closed,” he said. “I’m starving. Haven’t eaten for six months.”

Septimus felt guilty. He had woken Jim Knee up from his hibernation and not thought about feeding him anything—he really should have bought him a couple of Maureen’s pies. But Septimus had learned not to be too considerate with his jinnee. He had to keep up a tough act, even though it did not come naturally. “You can eat when you’ve done what you came for,” he said gruffly, catching a look of surprise from Simon, who was seeing a tougher

side to his little brother.

Jim Knee, however, merely sighed and said, “Very well, Apprentice. What is it that you wish?”

Septimus glanced at Simon. “I’ll tell you on the way,” he said. “It’s time we got going. I have a feeling that Merrin probably goes to bed early nowadays.”

Apprentices, ghost and jinnee set off across the harbor front and took a small lane leading off it. Port streets were dark and not particularly safe at night and Simon, who knew the Port well, led the way—heading for the Doll House, where Merrin now resided with his long-lost mother, Nurse Meredith—or Nursie as she was known to all in the Port.

“I don’t agree with this,” said Alther as they walked quietly down a narrow street that smelled strongly of cat pee. “I think you should tell Merrin the truth.”

“Alther, he won’t believe us,” Septimus said in a low voice. “Think about it. The two people that Merrin loathes most—me and Simon—turn up on his doorstep at night and say, *‘Oh, hello, Merrin. You know those two **Darke** Wizards who were in your ring? You know, the one we cut your thumb off to get back? Well, they’ve escaped and because you have worn the ring, you’re on their hit list. But don’t worry. Because we like you such a lot, we’ve come to take you to the Wizard Tower, where you’ll be safe.’* I don’t think he’s going to say, *‘Thank you so much. I will come with you right away,’* do you?”

Alther sighed. “If you put it like that, I suppose you are right. I just don’t like your solution, that’s all.”

The party reached the end of the smelly street and took a turning into a long, marginally less smelly street with tall houses on either side, unlit apart from a pool of light at the far end. They walked swiftly along, heading toward the light. A few nosy residents twitched aside their curtains and saw a strange procession: a man who appeared, from the black and red robes he wore, to be a **Darke** Wizard, followed by a lanky Wizard Apprentice, and a man trying to keep a pile of yellow doughnuts on his head. But they thought little of it—living not far from the Port Witch Coven, they had seen much more bizarre sights. They soon closed their curtains and went back to their fires.

Toward the end of the road the group stopped opposite a garishly painted house on the other side of the street. This was the Doll House. It was, underneath its paint, a typical Port house: tall and flat-fronted, with the front door just a broad step up from the street. But the Doll House stood out from all the others in Fore Street by virtue of its freshly painted glossy pink and yellow bricks that shone in the light of a lone torch that burned brightly beside its front doorstep.

Septimus looked anxiously at the house next door—a gloomy, ramshackle building in urgent need of repair that, even from the other side of the road, smelled faintly of sewage. He was relieved to see it looked quiet, although he

guessed that now that night had fallen the occupants would probably be stirring. This was the residence of the Port Witch Coven.

Septimus scanned the jaunty Doll House and searched for clues as to what might be happening inside. The Doll House's cheery façade gave nothing away, but Septimus could not help but wonder if they were too late—were Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn already inside?

"It all looks very quiet," Alther whispered nervously.

Simon glanced around. "So far. Best not to hang around." He looked dubiously at Jim Knee, who was biting his nails. "Septimus, your jinnee does understand what he has to do?"

"He understands," said Septimus.

"Jolly good," said Alther. "Over we go, then."

They crossed the street to the doorstep of the Doll House and listened. All was quiet. Jim Knee, consumed with nerves, checked his reflection in the shiny surface of the brass letter box, bobbing up and down to get a full view of his face.

Septimus addressed his jinnee sternly. "Jim Knee, stop preening and *listen to me.*"

"I am all ears, Oh Apprentice." Jim Knee prodded at his somewhat protruding ears. "Unfortunately. They never came back properly after that ghastly turtle you made me—"

"Good," Septimus cut in. "You will fit the part perfectly. Are you ready?"

Jim Knee looked sick. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"Jim Knee, I command you to **Transform** into the likeness of—"

"Septimus, are you absolutely sure about this?" Alther interrupted apprehensively.

"It's only a likeness, not the real thing."

"Even so . . ."

Septimus addressed his jinnee with a formal command. "Jim Knee. I wish you to **Transform** into the likeness of . . . DomDaniel!"

DOORSTEPPING

From an attic window in the house of the Port Witch Coven, Dorinda saw a portly man wearing a stovepipe hat, a purple ExtraOrdinary Wizard's cloak embroidered with **Darke** symbols and an impressive array of rings on his stubby, fat fingers. Dorinda's huge elephant ears twitched in amazement. *Surely that was DomDaniel?* Her mouth went dry. *But wasn't he dead?* She peered out again and saw the man lift the knocker and knock loudly on the door. Dorinda knew no ghost could do that. She sat down on her bed in horror. He's real, thought Dorinda. And then she thought: DomDaniel is visiting Nursie! Dorinda began to panic; clearly there was more to Nursie than she'd realized. She just wished she'd known that earlier—before she'd tipped a bucket of **Darke** spiders over her that afternoon while she was hanging out the washing. Dorinda groaned. She wrapped her elephant ears around her head and began to chew a soft ear-edge for comfort. Nursie had looked up and *seen* her—so that was what she had meant by “I'll get you for that, you little trollop!” *Nursie was going to set DomDaniel on her.* Dorinda shook her elephant ears free, leaped to her feet and *screamed*. And when Dorinda screamed, the whole of the Port Witch Coven knew it.

Down on Nursie's doorstep, Jim Knee was, to his surprise, enjoying himself. He had a penchant for rings and he rather liked his new collection. He raised his hand to knock once more and admired the flash of the diamond cluster that nestled on his little finger. As he was about to let the knocker go, the door surprised him by opening to reveal the back view of a lanky youth with short black hair and a neat dark tunic, who was yelling back into the house.

"What?"

"Answer . . . the . . . door!" a disembodied voice yelled from somewhere at the top of the house.

Septimus, who was standing hidden in the shadows behind Jim Knee, was relieved to see that Merrin Meredith seemed his usual self—clearly the **Darke** Wizards had not yet found him. Septimus thought that Merrin looked surprisingly neat and tidy—pretty normal, in fact—apart from a bandage around his left hand, which, as it grasped the edge of the door, showed an odd flatness where the thumb should be. But Merrin himself had yet to notice who had knocked. He was too busy yelling, "I'm *doing* it!"

"Merrin! Answer . . . the . . . door!" came the voice from upstairs.

"I've answered the stupid door are you deaf?" Merrin screamed into the gloom of the house. "Jeez!" He swung around grumpily and saw his visitor for the first time. His mouth fell open and stayed that way.

"Who . . . is . . . it?" yelled the voice from upstairs.

Merrin was in no state to reply—all he could do was stare at the apparition on the doorstep in terror.

Jim Knee perused his dumbstruck victim with an air of satisfaction; things were going well. The jinnee drew himself up to DomDaniel's full height—which was not much, although the stovepipe hat added enough to be just taller than the boy at the door—and was surprised by the nasty little voice that came out of his mouth.

"Apprentice." Jim Knee coughed and tried to get the voice deeper and more scary. "Ahem. Apprentice."

Merrin emitted a small squeak and leaned against the doorframe. His long, thin legs wobbled as though they were made of rubber and looked ready to fold in half at any moment. From inside the house heavy footsteps could be heard coming downstairs accompanied by a voice yelling, "Merrin! Who is it?"

"Hurry up!" Septimus urged his jinnee.

"Apprentice," intoned Jim Knee. "You will accompany me to the Castle."

Merrin leaped back and tried to slam the door, but Jim Knee stepped forward and wedged his foot against it. Merrin stared at his old Master in horror. It was worse than his worst nightmare ever. "N-nah . . . ah . . ." he gurgled.

“Apprentice. Come with me!” Jim Knee boomed, getting control of the voice now. He leaned close to Merrin and said in a voice so laden with threat that even Septimus got goose bumps, “Do I have to make you, you little toad?”

Wide-eyed, widemouthed, Merrin shook his head. Very reluctantly, he began to edge forward. Suddenly footsteps could be heard on the stairs.

“Mum!” squeaked Merrin.

Septimus panicked—events were going a little too fast. In a moment Nursie would be there and they would have lost their chance. “Grab him, quick!” he told Jim Knee.

Jim Knee grabbed Merrin’s arm.

Nursie’s voice came echoing along the corridor. “Merrin! Tell them we’re full!”

“Mum! Help!” Merrin at last managed a small yell.

Thud, thud, thud came the sound of hobnail boots on floorboards: mummy monster was coming to rescue her baby. “Oi, what’s going on? You let go, you great big bully!”

“Ouch!” yelled Jim Knee.

A large fist landed square on the jinnee’s nose, which was still very sore from hitting the bollard. To Septimus’s dismay, Jim Knee collapsed in a heap on the doorstep. Septimus leaped forward and grabbed hold of his jinnee’s collar—a greasy affair that protruded over the purple cloak.

“Get up, you idiot,” he hissed. Merrin stared at Septimus in amazement. He would never have dared call his old Master *that*.

A shadow fell across Septimus. He looked up and saw the substantial bulk of Nursie looming over him. “Get that horrible man away from my Merrin,” she told Septimus. Nursie took in Simon. “And you can buzz off too. Blasted Heaps. Nothing but trouble.” She turned to Merrin, who was leaning against the doorway, pale as a ghost. “Are you all right, my precious?” she asked.

Merrin nodded weakly.

It was at that moment that the door to the Port Witch Coven was wrenched open and the Witch Mother staggered out. “Master!” came the loud rasp of her voice. All on the doorstep turned in amazement to watch the Witch Mother—a round barrel of black robes smelling of cat poo—clatter precariously across to the Doll House in her tall, spiked shoes. The Witch Mother’s face, creased from sleeping in her thick white makeup (which covered her allergy to woodworm) was set in an expression of extreme humbleness. She grabbed hold of the Doll House railings and hauled herself up, heading for Simon and Jim Knee. Jim Knee stared at the Witch Mother in horror. He did not like witches.

Neither did Nursie. “And you can buzz off too, you old carcass,” Nursie informed the Witch Mother, and gave her a push. The Witch Mother wobbled

precariously and grabbed hold of Simon to stop herself falling. Simon pushed her away and the Witch Mother clattered back against the railings.

Alther watched in dismay as a full-scale brawl threatened to break out on the doorstep of the Doll House. He decided to **Appear**, making himself as opaque as possible, for he was sure that Nursie was one of those who never normally saw ghosts.

“Madam,” he said.

“What?” demanded Nursie.

“There seems to be some kind of misunderstanding.”

“I understand perfectly. This horrible old *baggage*.” Nursie stabbed her finger on Jim Knee’s nose for emphasis.

“Ouch!”

“Not only kidnapped my little boy when he was a baby but now he has the nerve to come back and try it *all over again*. Well, I’m not having it. Not this time.”

“Madam,” said Alther. “Please let me explain. We have come to help your son; he is in grave danger from—”

“*Him!*” Nursie poked at Jim Knee again for emphasis.

“Ouch!”

“And he is lucky I don’t do worse than poke—”

“Ouch!”

“Him—”

“Ouch!”

“In—”

“Ouch!”

“The—”

“Ouch!”

“Nose.”

“Ouch, ouch, *ouch!*”

The Witch Mother watched Nursie’s treatment of DomDaniel in amazement. A new respect for her neighbor began to dawn. “Er . . . Nursie,” she ventured.

“What *now?*” demanded Nursie.

“Please accept my most humble apologies for any inconvenience that the Coven may have caused you in the past and my assurances that we will do all we can in the future to assist you in any way. Any way at all . . .” The Witch Mother made an awkward bow to Nursie.

Nursie was on a roll. Her enemies were falling before her like bowling pins and she was going to make the most of it. “And you, you smelly old bat—you can buzz off an’ all,” she snapped at the Witch Mother.

The Witch Mother continued bowing frantically and began to back away. “Yes, thank you. I will indeed buzz off as you so kindly suggest.”

The motley group on the doorstep of the Doll House watched the Witch Mother totter back next door, lift the **Darke** Toad doorknocker and let it go with a *bang*. The door opened and the Witch Mother staggered inside. As soon as the door to the Port Witch Coven closed Septimus told Jim Knee to **Transform**. There was a flash of yellow light on Nursie's doorstep and DomDaniel was gone; in his place stood an exotic-looking man dressed in yellow holding his red, swollen nose.

Nursie looked at her visitors quizzically. A few weeks back she had received a letter from Marcia explaining what had happened to Merrin and telling her that he was her son. Nursie, after all the years in the wilderness, searching for her son, had at last begun to think clearly. And the more she thought, the more she knew that she was never, *ever*, going to let Merrin out of her sight. She perused the Apprentices, the odd-looking man with the doughnut hat and the ghost. Taking the ghost to be the most reasonable of them all she addressed her comment to him.

"Is my Merrin really in danger?" she asked Alther.

"Unfortunately, madam, he is."

"Why?" demanded Nursie—quite understandably, Alther thought.

"It relates to the **Darke** ring he used to wear, madam."

"But he doesn't have it anymore. Look. Show them, Merrin."

Merrin meekly held up his bandaged hand.

"Indeed, madam. But the two **Darke** Wizards who were in the ring have escaped. This puts your son in great danger. Which is why we wish to take him to the Wizard Tower for his own protection."

Nursie was suspicious. "Why do you care about him all of a sudden? You never did before."

"It is to do with the ring, madam," said Alther, who tried to never tell a lie.

Nursie narrowed her eyes and looked at Alther. "If you wasn't such a nice, honest-looking gentleman, I'd say you was thinking of using my Merrin as bait," she said.

"Bait!" gasped Alther.

"To get the ring back."

"Oh. Goodness me!"

"Near the mark, am I?" asked Nursie.

"No, no!" Alther rapidly abandoned his principles for the greater good. "We would not dream of doing such a thing. Oh, dear me, no."

"And he'll be safe in the Castle?"

"As safe as we can make him, madam."

"Very well. On one condition," said Nursie.

"Yes, madam. And what would that be?"

"I will take him myself. I am not letting my Merrin out of my sight ever again."

Alther knew when to give in. Short of abducting Merrin by force—and with Nursie present he didn't give much for their chances—it was the best they were going get.

“Very well, madam. I beg the honor of escorting you.”

“To make sure we don't escape?” asked Nursie.

“No, madam, not at all. To try to protect you from the **Darke** Wizards.” And this time, Alther did indeed speak the truth.

They were just in time to catch the late Barge to the Castle. Merrin and Nursie joined the Barge's only passengers—two excitable women who were planning to join a **Magyk** tour of the Castle the following morning. They took their seats under cover and wrapped themselves in the rough barge blankets provided for nighttime journeys. Alther hovered above the barge, watching for any signs of trouble. But despite the wind and the spattering of rain that was beginning to fall, all was quiet. It seemed as though the whole Port had gone early to bed.

Septimus, Simon and Jim Knee watched the barge edge away from the Quay and head out into the choppy waters of the river. They saw the wind catch its huge white sail and send it plowing rapidly through the spray. Very soon it was gone into the night, heading upriver to the Castle.

“It won't take them long with this wind,” said Simon. “It will blow them straight there.”

Septimus and Simon headed away from the Barge Quay into the maze of alleyways that would take them back to the harbor front, where they could safely do their **Transports** back to the Castle. Jim Knee followed, debating with himself whether he might request being an owl for the return journey. He was so hungry that the idea of fresh mouse was quite appealing. And then he thought about mousetail and changed his mind.

Septimus was pleased with the way things had gone. “Bait dispatched,” he said. “Now all we have to do is wait for Edmund and Ernold to turn up for it.”

But seeing Merrin shivering in the barge, setting off into the night—and who knew what danger—had made Simon thoughtful. “Poor Merrin,” he said.

Septimus was not in the mood to feel sorry for Merrin. “None of this would have happened if he hadn't taken the ring in the first place.”

“True,” agreed Simon. “But then, you could say the same about many things. None of it would have happened if DomDaniel hadn't kidnapped him instead of you. Maybe you should be thankful to Merrin for taking your place.”

Septimus fell into kid-brother mode. “I wouldn't have been such a little tick as him, even if it had been me,” he retorted.

Simon smiled ruefully. “You can't know for sure. Not until you have walked the same road in the same shoes.”

“But my feet are different from his,” said Septimus.

“They are now. But baby feet are soft. You have to take care they don’t get squashed.” Simon grinned at Septimus. “Well, that’s what Lucy says, anyway.”

The alleyway narrowed and Septimus dropped back. They hurried, single file, through Fat Man’s Crush and Weasel Slip Slide and soon emerged onto the deserted harbor front.

“Ready to go?” Septimus asked Simon.

Simon nodded.

Septimus decided to give Jim Knee the choice of bird to **Transform** to—the jinnee had done well. “Time to go, Jim Knee. I’ll see you at the Castle—at the Port barge landing stage. We have someone to meet. **Transform!**”

There was a flash of yellow light, a small *pop*, and an albatross stood at Septimus’s feet. Septimus heard a sharp intake of breath from Simon.

“Oh, *no*.”

“It’s okay. I said he could be what he liked.”

“Not the stupid albatross. Over there. *Look!*”

Heart in mouth, Septimus looked up, expecting to see two wild Heap uncles heading their way. But hurrying out of the shadows came a very different Heap.

“It *can’t* be,” said Septimus.

“It is. It’s *Jenna*.”

PORT PALACE



“Oh, Sep. It is so good to see you!” Jenna threw herself at Septimus and hugged him hard. “And you too, Simon.”

“What are you doing *here*, Jen?” Septimus whispered.

“You would not believe it, Sep. You just would *not*. She is totally, utterly *impossible*.”

“Who is?”

“The Queen—my *mother*. She is a complete control freak. Mum never, *ever* behaved like that.”

Septimus recognized the expression in Jenna’s eyes. “You mean you had a fight with the Queen?”

“You bet I did,” said Jenna.

“Wow.”

“I stuck it out for *forever*, Sep, until I couldn’t stand it a moment longer. I just *had* to come home.”

“You *walked out*?” Septimus was amazed.

“Yep. But I was so mad that I didn’t look where I was going and I ended up here. There’s a kind of crossroads in the Queen’s Way, I think.” Jenna grinned at Septimus. “And now I’m really glad I did.” She stood back and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

Jenna began to notice how oddly her brothers were behaving. They were standing really close to her—like a couple of guards—but neither of them was looking at her. Instead they were gazing around the empty harbor front like they were expecting someone else to arrive at any moment.

“Hey, you don’t look very pleased to see me,” Jenna said.

“We’re not,” said Simon tersely.

“Well, thank you, Simon Heap. Thank you so much.”

“He didn’t mean it like that, Jen,” Septimus whispered.

“Well how *did* he mean it, then?”

“There’s no time for this,” said Simon, also whispering. “Right now we need to get somewhere safe.”

Jenna was beginning to feel scared. She glanced around and thought for the first time how scary an empty harborside can be. “Why, aren’t we safe here?”

“No.”

“I guess it *is* creepy here. Anyway, I’m off. I’ve stayed here too long as it is—I really must get back and see Mum. I’m going to get the late Barge to the Castle.”

“You’ve missed it,” said Septimus.

A gust of wind whipped across the open harbor front, sending the ships rigging zinging, and a rumble of thunder drifted in from the ocean beyond. Jenna shivered. In her time away she had become accustomed to the heat. Suddenly she felt tired, cold and frightened. “Well, I suppose we can go back to the Port Palace,” she said reluctantly.

“Where’s that?” asked Simon, who knew the Port well, but had never seen or heard of a Palace.

Jenna pointed over to the Customs House, a tall building on the edge of the harbor front where Simon had, until recently, lived in one of the attic rooms. “There’s an alleyway down there.”

“No, there isn’t,” said Simon.

“Yes, there is,” said Jenna. “But you don’t see it—unless you’re with me. So, do you want to go there or not?”

A flash of something by the side of The Harbor and Dock Pie Shop caught Septimus’s eye. “Yes, we do. Right now,” he said, accompanied by the bang of Maureen’s broom as she chased out two rats she had found sleeping in the warmth beneath the pie ovens.

“Okay.” Jenna set off across the harbor front. Flanked on either side by her guards and waddled after by a reluctant albatross, who longed to be spreading

its wings and lifting off into the wind, she led them into the shadows of an old brick wall beside the Customs House. Jenna turned to her brothers.

“Is that yours?” she asked, pointing to the albatross.

“Yes.” Septimus sighed. “It is.”

Jenna grinned. “You can bring your, er, *bird* too, Sep. This place even has an aviary.”

The albatross gave a raucous squawk of protest and pecked at Septimus’s foot.

“Ouch!” he said. “Okay, Jim Knee. I give you permission to **Transform.**”

With another *pop* and a yellow flash Jim Knee was once more back in human form, shivering in the chill wind. Albatross feathers were remarkably warm.

“I thought it might be you,” said Jenna with a smile. “The yellow beak was a giveaway.”

Jim Knee bowed politely. “Good evening, Your Majesty.”

To Septimus’s surprise Jenna did not object—as she certainly would have in the past. She merely replied, “Good evening, Jim Knee.”

Jenna turned to Septimus and Simon. “We’ll go in now.” She leaned forward and placed her hand on the old bricks. The bricks shimmered like stone on a hot day and slowly disappeared to reveal a ghostly archway. Septimus and Simon were impressed, Jim Knee less so—he’d seen plenty of these Arcane Alleys before, although this one looked rather smart compared to many of the dingy dives he had known. The name of the alley, he noticed, was The Queen’s Way.

“Okay, now it’s like going into the Queen’s Room. We all need to hold hands to get across the threshold,” said Jenna, holding out her hand to Septimus. He took Jim Knee’s hand, who took hold of Simon’s, and the chain followed on quickly, afraid that both the alley and Jenna would disappear. As Jenna crossed the threshold, a line of candles in golden holders sprang alight showing a narrow alley, glittering in tiny red and gold tiles snaking away into the darkness along the side of the Customs House.

Once everyone was safely in, Jenna waved her hand across the entrance and the view of the harbor faded away and was replaced by the other side of the brick wall. “Okay. We’re safe now,” she said. “No one can get in here. Now you can tell me what all the fuss is about.”

“It’s a long story,” said Septimus.

“It usually is, Sep,” said Jenna with a smile, “especially when you’re telling it. Come on, then, let’s get somewhere warm. And there’s someone else who’d like to hear the story too,” she added mysteriously.

Jenna set off along the winding Queen’s Way, which was quiet and still after the blustery harbor front and carried no sound from outside. She hurried forward and Septimus, Simon and Jim Knee followed in single file, their

footfalls quiet on the smooth mosaic. Soon they were around the first bend and another line of candles sprang alight, illuminating the next stretch of the alleyway. This way and that the Queen's Way took them until they had lost all sense of direction. As they rounded yet another bend Septimus—who was now a little taller than Jenna—could see over her shoulder to a wide wooden door, which formed the end of the alley. From a small window in the middle of the door shone a bright yellow light. The light grew brighter as they approached and soon Jenna was taking a large golden key from her pocket, unlocking the door and holding it open.

“Welcome to my Port Palace,” she said.

They stepped inside. A few fat candles on a table lit a wide passageway—which Jenna called the cross passage—with a warm glow. In the dim light Septimus could see that to his left was an ancient screen of dark wood carved with a series of crowns and initials, in the middle of which was an ornate door covered in gold leaf that glowed a deep red gold in the light of the candle flames. To his right was a plainer wooden screen, which had two smaller doors set into it.

Jim Knee put his hand out to touch the right-hand wooden screen, which was warm from the heat of the kitchen behind it—as he knew it would be. The jinnee felt a little strange. He took advantage of his Master being occupied to lean against the warm wood and think. Sometimes the incessant clatter of humans, particularly young ones, was too much for the jinnee and he longed for some stillness. The shadows of the cross passage gave him just that.

Septimus had forgotten about Jim Knee. He and Simon followed Jenna along the passage and watched her turn left, as he expected she would—nowadays Jenna and gold seemed to go together. He saw Jenna lean on the gold-leaf door and give it a shove. The door protested with a creak—as Jim Knee knew it would—and reluctantly opened a little. Jenna put her head around the gap and yelled, “Hey! Guess who I’ve found!” Then she turned to Septimus. “Come on, Sep. *Push.*”

Together they pushed the complaining door open to reveal an ancient hall, as tall as it was wide, with finely carved oak timbers soaring up into the shadows of the roof. Layers of woodsmoke hung in the air, blurring the light from candles placed in alcoves in the walls and giving the place a mysterious air. A blazing log fire in a wide, low-arched fireplace set into the right-hand wall threw a semicircle of light into the gloom—and standing in the middle of the light was Nicko. Grinning.

Septimus was amazed. “Nik! What are you doing here?” he asked, hurrying across to his brother.

Nicko looked amused. “Same as you both, I should think. Pootling around the Port minding my own business—well, Jannit’s business, actually. Bumped

into Jenna.”

“The Queen’s Way from our Journey Palace came out here,” said Jenna. “See that cupboard?” She pointed at a small cupboard near the fireplace, with faded gold letters that read UNSTABLE POTIONS AND PARTIKULAR POISONS. “I was expecting to end up at home, or maybe at Aunt Zelda’s, so I was really surprised. I had no idea where I was. I had a look around, and eventually I found the way out along that alleyway. I was so relieved to find I was in the Port. And then I saw Nik and it was so good to talk to someone *normal* again.”

Nicko grinned. “There I was, looking forward to a nice, cold night on the supply boat when I got dragged back to yet another Palace—sheesh, how many do you need—to hear all about *Mama*.”

“Aha, *Mama*,” Septimus said. “I’ve not heard about her yet.”

“You will,” said Nicko with a grin.

“No, you won’t,” said Jenna sternly. She joined them by the fire and threw herself down on the pile of cushions in front of it. “Not unless you tell me what’s going on first. Sit down, Sep. Simon. Spill the beans.”

Septimus held his hands out to the fire to warm them. “This is so weird, Jen. I’ve never seen this place before. Where actually *is* it?”

“You know the last of the really old houses on the waterfront? Just before you get to the beach?”

“I think so . . .”

“There’s a boarded-up old warehouse just past them—well, it looks like an old warehouse. But it isn’t. It’s a façade built around this place. Listen. We’re right by the beach; you can hear the waves outside.”

The hall fell silent and they listened. Septimus realized that the background sound he had thought was the hissing of damp logs on the fire was actually the muffled swash of waves on the shore.

“Okay, Sep,” said Jenna. “*Now* tell me what’s going on.”

And so Septimus explained all that had happened since Jenna had left the Palace for her Journey. At the mention of her uncles, Jenna exclaimed, “I’m not surprised. I *thought* there was something weird about them.”

Septimus shook his head. “I think they were just unlucky, Jen. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn were—”

“Shh!” hissed Simon. “Don’t say their names.”

Septimus laughed. “I didn’t know you were superstitious, Simon. That’s witchy stuff.”

“No, it’s . . .” Simon looked around; he could not get rid of a feeling of being unsafe, sitting with his back to the room. “**Darke** stuff too, you know,” he whispered. “Names matter. You *know* that, Sep.”

Jenna looked surprised at the new familiarity between her brothers.

Septimus remembered his own **Darke** name, Sum. “Yeah. Okay,” he admitted.

To the background of an increasingly noisy sea crashing onto the beach outside, Septimus told the whole story of the Two-Faced Ring—apart from one thing. He didn’t want to spook Jenna. But she knew.

“But it’s not only Merrin who’s the bait, is it, Sep?”

“Well . . .”

Jenna got out her little red book and with a practiced ease of one who knew her way around it backward, she flipped to a page titled *Feuds and Enemies* and passed it to Septimus.

It was a long list and Septimus wondered about the confrontational nature of some of the Queens. But he did not have to look far—right at the top of the list were the names of the Ring Wizards. “Ah,” he said.

“I know about the Queen shooting them both in the heart, Sep,” said Jenna. “I know it was *her* ring they were **Committed** to. I know they swore revenge on her descendants. And, right now, I know that means me.”

Everyone looked around uncomfortably. Hearing Jenna say what they all knew made it sound far too real. Jenna lowered her voice. “This place is kind of creepy. I reckon something bad happened here and that’s why they closed it up.”

Nicko lightened the atmosphere. “Doesn’t it say in your Queen instruction manual, Jen?”

“If you are going to be rude, Nicko Heap, I won’t tell you about my Journey. Or anything else, for that matter.”

“Oh, go on, Jen. You know you want to tell us.” Nicko’s stomach rumbled loudly. “You know,” he said, “the weird thing is I can smell roast potatoes.”

Jim Knee had once spent a short but not unpleasant life as a jinnee-cook in a Palace kitchen. As soon as he walked into the cross passage, Jim Knee knew he was back. After getting over his shock, Jim Knee remembered how much he had enjoyed his time there—until the very last ten minutes. And so, when Jenna, Septimus and Simon had gone into the hall, Jim Knee had taken a deep breath and, remembering the motto—*in left, out left*—he had pushed open the little left-hand door and stepped into the kitchen.

A trail of goose bumps swarmed over Jim Knee’s skin as he had walked into the room. It smelled the same. It looked the same. It *was* the same. This was where he had spent twenty years of his last life and to Jim Knee’s surprise, all was exactly as he had left it.

Because there was a Queen-to-be in residence, the kitchen and all its contents, like the candles in the Queen’s Way, had **Magykally** come to life. Jim Knee wandered around, looking at everything he remembered so well, and very soon he was pottering happily. He found a large roast chicken and a

pile of cooked potatoes exactly as he had left them, and set about carving the chicken and roasting the potatoes using his high-speed fire method, which worked well and left surprisingly few scorch marks on the wall.

Ten minutes later Jim Knee pushed his way into the hall carrying a huge plate of cold chicken and hot roast potatoes. He paused a moment and studied the smoke-filled room. It was the just the same: the soaring beams, the inefficient fire, the crest on the massive lintel above it. Jim Knee gritted his teeth and inspected the wall behind him. Yes, there it was—low down, carved into the plaster in old-fashioned angular writing:

TALLULA CRUM
HAS A BIG BUM.
IF SHE EATS ANY MORE
SHE'LL GET STUCK IN THE DOOR.

Jim Knee harrumphed quietly to himself. He was surprised to find that it still annoyed him. He remembered the little brat of a Princess who had taken a dislike to her—for Jim Knee had been a *her* in that life. He remembered how the child had very carefully written the graffiti in her best pen and made sure she, Miss Tallula Crum, a cook of generous proportions—and portions—had seen it. And how the Queen had insisted it stay because “children must be allowed to express themselves.”

Jim Knee set his plate of chicken and potatoes in front of the fire. He offered it to all, as a jinnee is bound to do, but to his relief there was plenty left for him. And so, to the background swash of the waves outside and Jim Knee’s quiet sucking of chicken bones, Jenna began the story of her Journey.

JENNA'S JOURNEY

“Well, after she, I mean my mother, the Queen, nearly had a fight with Mum—yes, Sep, she was really rude to Mum—we went up to the Queen’s Room, like I expected, and through the Queen’s Way. Only we didn’t come out at Aunt Zelda’s, we came out into . . .” Jenna shook her head in disbelief. “Oh, it was so *weird*. One minute I was in a tiny dark cupboard with the ghost of my mother; the next I was standing in a boat.”

“A boat?”

“Yep. And not just any old boat. It was amazing. Long and narrow with a sweeping-up pointy thingy at the front—all right Nik, a *prow*—covered in gold. The inside of the boat was all shiny and black and there was a big red canopy at the back with lots of tassels hanging down from it. Underneath the canopy were three chairs, just like these . . .” Jenna waved her hand at the line of little red-and-gilt chairs that were set back against the wall.

“Two of the chairs were empty but sitting on the right-hand one was an oldish lady—a Queen—who had spoken to me at the Dragon House. I was really pleased to see her; I felt like I had a friend there.

“My mother took my hand very formally, like we were at a dance or

something; she led me to the chairs and we both sat down. It was then I realized something really amazing. She wasn't a ghost anymore—my mother was alive! I didn't know what to say—I kind of wanted to jump up and hug her but she just sat on her chair and smiled at me like I was some kind of visiting aunt or something. But the old lady put her hand on mine and squeezed it and said, 'Hello, Jenna, dear. I am your grandmother and I've been so looking forward to this.'

"I must have looked really shocked because she said, 'Do not worry. We've all been on the Journey. It was just as strange for me.' Which was lovely, but my mother still said nothing, which upset me. I've always been disappointed that she had never **Appeared** to me at home but since I read *The Queen Rules*, I knew there was a reason for that. But now there was no excuse for her being so distant with me. My grandmother seemed to understand, though. She kept hold of my hand and squeezed it tight. Oh, Sep, she was *lovely*.

"Anyway, I decided that if my mother was going to be so stuffy with me then I would be the same way with her. So I got into Princess mode and sat on my dinky little chair, looking around me like I did this kind of thing every day. I decided to try and figure out what was going on. The first thing I realized was how *hot* it was. I longed to take off my winter cloak but I was determined not to move a muscle before my mother did. We were definitely at sea because I could smell the salt in the air, but it was weird, because it wasn't like the sea at all. It was so flat that the surface looked like it had a skin over it and it glistened like a mirror. But I couldn't see much more than that because we were surrounded by mist with just a pool of light around our boat. The light came from two big candles, one in a lantern set high on the prow and the other in a lantern behind us set on a smaller prow—yes, Nicko, I *know* it's not a prow at the back, but you know what I mean. Sternpost? Okeydokey, sternpost, then.

"The boat was being rowed by four men—two at the back and two at the front—dressed in black and gold with funny red hats a bit like Mum's gardening hat. They were standing up and had long oars that they kind of twisted into the water. The boat moved very smoothly and I could tell we were making good progress because through the mist I suddenly saw a glow from a flame about six feet off the water. We went past it quite fast and along came another and another, and I realized we were following a line of lights. I felt a bit less scared then, because the boat had felt really flimsy to be out at sea and I was relieved that we must be near land.

"Soon I saw some beautiful buildings a little bit like the Palace, only taller and much thinner, looming out of the mist. They went right down to the water and had big striped posts in front of them that glinted in the sun that was beginning to break through the mist. The oarsmen steered our boat through a line of gold-and-red posts and up to a landing stage in front of a big archway.

My mother stood up. She arranged her cloak and spoke to me for the first time since we had arrived.”

“What did she say?” asked Septimus.

“We are here,” said Jenna, pulling a face.

“Nice,” commented Nicko.

“Yeah. The oarsmen helped my grandmother, then my mother, then me, out of the boat and we walked up some wide pink marble steps into a massive hall that smelled of damp stone and seaweed. It was so cool in there and such a relief not to be boiled like a lobster anymore! The hall was totally empty and I guessed it was because the sea often came up into it, because the old stones were shiny with water. But even though it was just a bare space, it looked full because it was made with hundreds of different kinds of marble laid in complicated patterns. The walls had kind of wavy stripes in lots of different colors and the floor was laid with a black-and-white pattern that kept zigzagging in front of my eyes. So we walked through the hall in a kind of weird procession with my grandmother at the head of it, then my mother and then me. We went up an amazing wide staircase, each step a different colored marble but all with wavy black stripes running through them. By the time I got to the top I felt really sick. I must have looked pretty green or something because my grandmother took hold of my arm and said, ‘Cerys, Jenna is exhausted. She must rest.’

“My mother looked a little annoyed, I thought, but she nodded and said, ‘Very well, Mama, I am sure you know best as always. I shall see you in the morning . . . *Jenna.*’ She always said my name like it made a bad taste in her mouth.

“My grandmother took me to a long narrow room that led off from the big upstairs hall. She was really sweet and told me not to worry and that ‘everything is just as it should be, Jenna dear.’ The bed was cold and lumpy, and when I lay down it smelled damp, but I didn’t care. I was so tired and I just longed to be back home with Mum and Dad and wake up to find that this was all a dream.

“When I did actually wake up, I thought for a moment that I *was* in a dream. But it smelled so different from home—so damp and old—that I soon remembered. I tried to get back to sleep but I couldn’t, so I decided to explore. Someone had lit a candle and left it on a table by the door, so I took it and crept out of the room.

“Once I was out of my stuffy room and in the upstairs hall, I felt quite excited. It was much nicer being on my own and not feeling upset all the time about my mother. So I decided to look around. It was dark and my candle didn’t shed much light but I could see delicate old chairs and tiny sofas, each with a table, set along the walls between the massively tall double doors that opened off. On every table burned a candle so I could see the walls really

clearly, especially as they were covered in gold leaf, which shone even though I could tell it was very old. It was a beautiful place.”

“Palace,” Nicko said, grinning. “Another one.”

Jenna stuck her tongue out at her brother. “Yes, Nicko, another Palace. One needs at least *three*. So anyway, rude boy, I decided to head for the huge window at the end of the hall and see what was outside. I tiptoed past beautiful paintings hung all over the wall—all of people who looked a little bit like me, I thought. But they weren’t Queens or anything special, just people in all kinds of old-fashioned clothes. And as I went by I felt like they were all looking down at me, kind of saying hello. It was weird, but nice too because I began to feel that I belonged, that somehow I was part of this place just as much as I was part of the Castle back home.

“So I got to the huge window—which had rows of little circles of glass in it—and I looked out. It was amazing. Outside there was a river, not very wide compared with ours, but totally different. It had houses all along it on both sides and there was no riverbank because all the houses went straight down into the water. And they were really, *really* old. Some were kind of falling into the water, some were wrapped up in what looked like shiny paper and others were just about okay. There were lights on and I could see people moving about inside them; I could look right into their rooms. But no one noticed me and I just watched and watched. A few boats came down the river; some were quite big and made a strange noise. And they moved without sails or oars too. There weren’t many because I could tell it was really late, but I could still hear the sounds of people laughing and talking and having fun.”

Jenna continued. “So there I was, watching from the window, feeling quite happy, really, when I heard a soft, smothered cough from somewhere way back in the big room behind me. I decided to act like I had known whoever-it-was had been there all the time—which I was suddenly sure they had been. I swung around and stared into the dark. I could see nothing in the middle, just the edge of the room in the low lights of the little candles on the tables and the soft shine of the walls, but I wasn’t going to let the watcher know that.

“‘Good evening,’ I said. ‘I don’t believe we have been introduced.’ My voice sounded weird in the dark and I realized that this was the first time I had spoken in that place.

“‘Good evening,’ came a reply. The voice surprised me—it was a girl. She had a really weird accent and she sounded a bit like that stupid witch Marissa. So I wasn’t about to like her.”

“You and Marissa fallen out, have you?” teased Nicko.

“She’s a two-faced cow,” said Jenna.

“Fair enough.”

“Anyway, I told this girl that it was rude to hide away in the shadows and stare. By then I could see better in the dark and I saw that she was sitting on

the floor in the middle of the room. I saw her get up and walk toward me. I decided not to move. *She* could come to *me*.” Jenna smiled. “I guess I was already picking up some Queen stuff.

“As she came closer I could see that she looked nothing like Marissa at all, so I felt a lot better about her. She turned out to be really nice. She came up and kissed me on both cheeks—that’s what they do there to say hello—”

“Sounds fun,” Nicko said with a grin.

“Nicko, you have become so *rude* recently,” Jenna told him sternly. “You spend too much time in the Port.”

Nicko looked sheepish.

“Actually, if you had been there you would never have met any girls at all, because it turned out that girls pretty much weren’t allowed out. If they did go somewhere they were never on their own. I wasn’t allowed out, that was for sure. If it hadn’t been for Julia—that was her name—I wouldn’t have seen anything but the inside of that crumbly old Palace and what I could see from the window. All the time that I spent there I was with my mother and grandmother.” Jenna sighed. “Gosh, I was so bored sometimes. They droned on and on about our family and where they came from, all the things I was expected to do when I got home, blah blah blah.”

“So if girls weren’t allowed out, how did you and Julia get away with it?” asked Nicko.

“We wore masks. At night anyone could go *anywhere* with a mask on. All you needed was a long cloak and a pair of boy’s shoes. As long as you didn’t speak, everyone thought you were a boy. It was brilliant. Julia took me to all kinds of places. It was a beautiful city.”

Jim Knee finished his last potato. Very quietly he got to his feet and moved away into the shadows. He felt sick, not because he had eaten nearly two pounds of roast potatoes and half a greasy chicken, but because he had spent thirty years of a life in the place that Jenna described—and fifteen of those had been in a prison just below the waterline that had flooded with every high tide. The dank, nasty smell of it had suddenly washed right over him.

No one noticed Jim Knee get up. Jenna continued her story. “If it hadn’t been for Julia I would never have met the Alchemists.”

“There were *Alchemists* there?” asked Septimus.

“You bet. I know so much more about Marcellus now. That’s where they come from, Sep. The same place as I do—or my family did once, a very, very long time ago. They are from an island in the Lagoon.”

“The Lagoon?”

“Yep. That’s what the whole place was called. It was full of islands. We were on the biggest one, but there was another where the Alchemists lived—where they made a special kind of dark Glass. You know, Sep, like the one that Marcellus made.”

“Oh. *That.*” Septimus grimaced. He still had nightmares about being pulled through Marcellus’s Glass.

Jenna looked around and lowered her voice. “There was loads of Castle stuff there, Sep. I wished so much that you could have been there to see it all too. In fact, there was so much I—*what was that?*”

There was a loud *crash* behind them. A hidden door in the paneling sprang open and from it two wild-eyed Heap uncles came screaming into the hall.

HEAPS VERSUS HEAPS



There was a moment of stillness while the opposing Heap camps stood staring at each other, both equally shocked. With their typically Heap straw hair awry, their old multicolored robes hanging from them, wet and filthy with mud, it looked like it was just daft old uncles Edmund and Ernold who had crashed out of the wall. A pang of pity went through the four genuine Heaps at the sight of them. Jenna had to fight back a desire to rush over and ask them to come and sit by the fire. For some moments no one moved. The invaders took stock, their gaze traveling around the hall, eyes like searchlights, alighting on each occupant, noting them and moving on to the next as if checking off a list.

Those on the list stared back, like frozen rabbits. Time slowed; the moment seemed to last forever until—*crash!*—the door in the paneling slammed shut. In a flash Simon threw himself in front of Jenna but Nicko shoved him away. Simon swung around angrily. “I’m not going to hurt her, Nik!”

“I *know* that. But you’re needed. You gotta stop them. You and Sep. Use your **Darke** stuff, Si—*anything!*”

Simon grinned—Nicko had called him *Si*. It was all Heaps together now,

just like it used to be. Heaps against the world, although right now it still felt like Heaps against Heaps. It was hard not to believe Ernold and Edmund were playing a bizarre practical joke.

Suddenly any lingering doubts evaporated—they spoke. Switching seamlessly from one to another, in voices cold and empty as if they came from the bottom of a deep, dark cave.

“We have.”

“Come for.”

“The.”

“Princess.”

Their voices had a bad effect on Jenna. It was as if some ancestral memory had kicked in. Fighting off the urge to run screaming from the room—which she guessed was exactly what the Wizards wanted—Jenna steeled herself to reply. Maybe, she thought, if she answered calmly, they would merely pay their respects and leave. Jenna took a deep breath to steady her voice only to find, to her irritation, that Simon was answering for her.

“She is not here,” he said.

The Wizards exchanged knowing smiles.

“*Nomis.*”

Simon flinched at the mention of his **Darke** name.

“You are.”

“One.”

“Of us.”

“No!” said Simon. “I am—”

“Not,” Septimus finished for him, deliberately echoing the Wizards.

“You.”

“Lie,” snarled the Wizards.

“We see.”

“The Princess.”

“And you *are.*”

“One of.”

“Usssssss.” The last word was hissed like a snake rearing up to strike.

With that, the Heap uncles lurched forward, like a pair of automatons. This odd gait was mainly due to their utter exhaustion, but it was also because there was still just enough of Ernold and Edmund Heap left to resist the **Darke** Wizards’ intentions.

Septimus, Nicko, Jenna and Simon backed away toward the door. In the shadows behind the approaching Wizards Septimus could see the nervous wobble of a yellow stack of doughnuts, but he put Jim Knee out of his mind. Right now he needed to focus on one thing. He had to raise a **SafeShield**—something he had never done before.

Deciding to **Shield** only Jenna and Nicko—the less people **Shielded**, the

more effective the **Shield**—Septimus put his arm around Simon’s shoulders and walked him sideways out of the **Shield** space and then he spun around, clenched his fists and threw them open. To Septimus’s relief a bright band of purple light shot out from his raised hands and, to Jenna and Nicko’s surprise, dropped over them to form a small, cloudy dome. It was a very basic **SafeShield**, but it did the job. Jenna and Nicko stared out like a couple of mice trapped under a bell jar. The **Darke** Wizards laughed.

“How very.”

“Quaint.”

There was a sharp *snap* like bones cracking, a flash of light, and suddenly Edmund and Ernold Heap were each holding a gleaming black stave, smooth as glass.

Simon stared at the staves in horror. He had never seen one, but he knew at once what they were: **Volatile Wands**. He knew that within them, concentrated in the tiny silver spine that ran through the length of the **Wand**, lay a distillation of **Darke** power. **Volatile Wands** were powerful, accurate and incredibly dangerous. Simon felt sick—they didn’t have a chance.

There was a thunderous *craaaack*. The walls of the hall shook and from the ends of each **Wand** a bullet of light emerged, *zub zub*, heading straight for the **SafeShield**. Jenna and Nicko threw themselves to the ground but the bullets never reached the **Shield**—Simon twisted his cloak up into the air and caught them. His cloak burst into flames and, unperturbed, as though his cloak caught fire on a regular basis, Simon threw it to the floor and stamped on it.

“Come on,” he dared the Wizards. “You can do better than that.”

Septimus thought Simon was being a little rash. He had no doubt that not only could the Wizards easily do better than that, but they were about to prove it.

Simon, however, knew the game to play. He knew **Darke** Wizards fed off fear and that a scornful disdain was the best defense. He also knew that he had to back it up with a show of strength, and so Simon reneged on his promise to Lucy that he would never again mess with the **Darke**.

Using the last of the flame from his cloak, he Conjured a **FireSnake** and sent it blazing through the air. It hit the Wizards and wrapped itself around them once, twice, three times and began to tighten. But like all things **Darke** it was a two-sided weapon. In a moment Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn had turned it to their advantage. Using the flame they sent up a plume of black smoke and **Threw** it over Simon and Septimus, imprisoning them in a circle of burnt-snake fumes. Then Shamandrigger wound the **FireSnake** around his **Wand** and hurled it into the smoke, where it scorched Septimus’s hair and fell writhing to the floor. Simon had the presence of mind to stamp on it, but neither he nor Septimus could find a way out of the choking smoke.

Now the **Darke** Wizards headed across to the **SafeShield**. Holding their **Wands** like javelins, they stabbed them into the shimmering purple dome. It emitted a wounded groan and the purple light began to grow dim.

“Jen, I’ll distract them and you make a break for it,” whispered Nicko. “Get to the Queen’s Way. They can’t follow you there.”

“Shut up, Nik,” said Jenna.

“You *what?*” asked Nicko, not sure he’d heard right.

“Just *be quiet*, will you?” Jenna snapped.

Nicko felt scared. Something odd had happened to Jenna.

With that the **SafeShield** died.

Jenna found herself looking into the eyes of her pitiful, bruised, battered and utterly terrified uncles. But lurking deep within she saw the **Darke** Wizards’ malice. Jenna had been scared a few times since the day she had learned she was Princess, but had never felt as frightened as she did now. Nicko grabbed her hand and squeezed it, and Jenna regained her courage. She squared up to the disheveled, muddy figures and demanded, “What do you want?”

The reply came, filling the hall with fear.

“The end.”

“Of your.”

“Line.”

“As we.”

“Promised.”

Jenna reached up and took off her gold circlet—the one that so very long ago Hotep-Ra had given to the Queen.

“No, Jen!” whispered Nicko, thinking she was surrendering.

“Yes, Nik,” said Jenna. She held the circlet in both hands at arms length as though offering it to the Wizards, while Nicko looked on, shocked and unsure what to do.

Among the many things that Jenna had listened to on her Journey was the story of the Queen’s **Committal** of the two **Darke** Wizards to the ring. She had listened to it carefully because it was about something she recognized. But the story had come at the end of a long and tedious day involving many rules and regulations and Jenna had been sleepy. She remembered her grandmother chanting the **Committal** to her as the evening sun came streaming through the tiny round windowpanes. She even remembered dozily chanting it back. Now—hoping that it would come back to her as she spoke—Jenna began the one thing that the Ring Wizards dreaded to hear: “By our Power, at this hour, we do you . . .”

At the onset of the **Committal**, the Wizards shrank back.

From within the **Darke** smoke Septimus and Simon saw a chink of light and threw themselves at it. They burst out, spluttering, to find to their

amazement the two Wizards backing away from Jenna. Now was their chance.

Eject? mouthed Septimus to Simon.

Simon nodded and made the sign of two crossed index fingers for the **Darke**.

Septimus gave him the thumbs-up. If ever there was a time to use the **Darke** it was now.

“Tceje!”

Nothing happened. Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn swung around and pointed the **Volatile Wands** at them instead of at Jenna, who was still speaking.

“Not working. Need their **Darke** names,” hissed Simon.

Thinking of his own **Darke** name, Sum, Septimus took a gamble. **“Tceje!”** he yelled. **“Tceje, Reg and Ron!”**

“No!” shouted Jenna as—as if on castors—the **Darke** Wizards shot away from her, exiting backward like all respectful courtiers had done in the past—but at ten times the speed.

At last Jim Knee sprang into action. He opened the door in the paneling, bowed politely as the Wizards shot through it and then slammed it shut. Beaming, the jinnee leaned against it, looking as triumphant as if he himself had **Ejected** the Wizards.

“Good one, Sep!” said Simon.

“Yeah.” Septimus grinned.

But Jenna did not agree. “You dumbos!” she said.

“*What?*” Septimus and Simon said in amazement.

“What did you do that for?” Jenna demanded.

“Just trying to save your life, Jen. That’s all,” said Septimus, looking at Jenna as though she had gone crazy. “Is that a problem?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean . . . oh, Sep, you *dillop*. I had just remembered all the words. For the **Committal**. But you and Simon just helped them *escape*.”

SCORPION

Jim Knee was shocked. He'd come very close to jinnee suicide, which is what a jinnee is considered to have committed if he allows his Master to be murdered in his presence. Not only is this fairly disastrous for the Master, it is also pretty bad for the jinnee: he is evaporated on the spot into a convenient receptacle, which more often than not ends up in the hands of the murderer. There is an old jinnee saying, "Murderers do not good Masters make," which is true. However, Jim Knee was not about to impart this information to his Master. It was desirable that his shock appeared to be due to the narrow escape his *Master* had had.

But no one noticed Jim Knee's shock—everyone in the room was in a similar state. They gathered around the little door in the paneling where the Wizards had so recently been **Ejected**.

"What I don't understand is how they got into the cupboard in the first place," Nicko was saying. "And when? Me and Jen were here on our own for ages and they could easily have got us then." He shuddered at the thought. "So why wait until we were all here?"

“It is not a cupboard,” said Simon. “It’s some kind of old tunnel. You can smell it. We wouldn’t have **Ejected** them into a *cupboard*, Nik.”

“It is Smugglers’ Bolt.” Jim Knee’s voice gave everyone a surprise. The jinnee had been unusually quiet since he had arrived at the Port Palace.

“Smugglers’ Bolt?” asked Jenna. “What’s that?”

“I thought you knew, since it’s your Palace,” said Jim Knee. “It’s a tunnel to the Castle.”

“All the way to the Castle? All the way from *here*?”

“Indeed. A foul and fetid way, used only by those desperate to escape the law of the Port.”

“Or the Castle,” said Septimus.

“Quite so, Master.”

“But how do you know?” Jenna asked Jim Knee.

Jim Knee was silent. Like all jinn, he was uncomfortable speaking about previous lives.

“Answer the question, Jim Knee,” his Master told him a trifle impatiently. “How *do* you know?”

“I’ve been here before,” Jim Knee said. “I was once the Royal cook.”

“So you’ve been down the tunnel?”

“Er, no.” A terrifying memory flashed through Jim Knee’s mind: a midnight raid. Screams. Pistols firing. Axes hacking at the doors. And—as poor, unloved Tallula Crum—watching everyone escape down the tiny steps, knowing that there was no way she would ever be able to fit. Knowing that this was the end of another life.

“Then how do you know for sure that it goes to the Castle?” asked Jenna.

“I *know* it does. It was used a lot when I was cook. Precious things were taken through it for safety. The Port was wild in those days.”

“No change there, then,” muttered Nicko.

They all stared at the door, longing to open it and see what lay beyond, and yet not daring. “I think we should check to see if they’re really gone,” said Jenna.

“They won’t hang around here,” Septimus pointed out. “Not now they know you know the **Committal**.”

“But I want to see for myself,” said Jenna.

Nicko put his hand on his knife, which he always kept in a sheath hanging from his belt when he was in the Port. “Yeah,” he said. “If we’re going to stay here tonight, we have to check. We don’t want them sneaking up on us when we’re asleep.”

“But I **Ejected** them,” said Septimus, a little peeved that his **Magyk** was not being taken seriously. “They can’t come back.”

“They’re **Darke** Wizards, Sep,” said Nicko. “They can do what they like.”

“Nik’s right,” said Simon. “We should put an **Anti-Darke** on the door at

the very least. In fact, I would suggest a **Lock and Bar** as well.”

“I wasn’t going to leave the door unguarded,” said Septimus irritably. “That would be stupid. But I need to think carefully about what to do.”

“We *all* need to think,” said Simon, annoyed at not having his expertise considered.

Jenna was tired of all the discussion. It was her Palace and she wanted to know everything about it. So while the boys were bickering, she pulled open the little door to Smugglers’ Bolt.

“Jen!” A chorus of protest greeted her action.

Jenna took no notice. She peered into the dark. A waft of stale, unpleasant air blew into her face. She picked up a nearby candle and pushed it into the darkness beyond the open door. In its light Jenna could see some tiny steps, no more than a foot wide, disappearing downward between two tapering walls of chiseled stone. It was the narrowest tunnel she had ever seen.

The boys were all looking over Jenna’s shoulder now. Even Nicko—who loathed confined spaces—wanted to see. To everyone’s relief the tunnel was deserted.

“They’ve gone,” whispered Jenna. And then she realized where they had gone. “*Back to the Castle.*” Quietly, Jenna closed the little door. She had heard that sound could travel a long way through a tunnel. She put her finger to her lips and beckoned everyone away to the fire, where she took up her position in front of the huge stone lintel and said, “We have some plans to make. Fast.”

Simon, Septimus and Nicko nodded.

“We can’t let them loose in the Castle—we absolutely *can’t*. So that means I have to do the **Committal** before they get out,” said Jenna. “And to do that I have to be ready and waiting for them at the exit from Smugglers’ Bolt.”

“Jim Knee, how long does it take to go through Smugglers’ Bolt to the Castle?” asked Septimus.

“It used to take about nine hours,” replied Jim Knee. “It was not a pleasant trip, I was told. But who knows the state it is in now? It could take even longer.”

“Where does it come out?” asked Jenna.

“Number Sixty-Seven Wizard Way—in the backyard. Of course it was a secret but my little scullion-boy’s mother used to live at Number Sixty-Seven and he told me. He was a brave lad. On his day off he’d run all the way home through that tunnel and be back first thing the next morning. Without fail.”

“Where *is* Number Sixty-Seven?” asked Simon—the numbering system in Wizard Way bore little or no relation to where the building was sited.

Septimus sighed. “It’s Larry’s place,” he said. “Larry’s Dead Languages. *Great.*”

Jenna had been thinking. “So . . . I need to be there in nine hours’ time.

Unless **Darke** Wizards travel faster?”

“They are constrained by the bodies they **InHabit**,” said Septimus. “Until they can get their own form back—which they can’t until they win the battle with the person they are **InHabiting**. And so far Edmund and Ernold are still hanging on in there. So far . . .”

The full horror of what had happened to her uncles began to dawn on Jenna. “Oh, that is so *horrible*,” she whispered. “Poor, poor Uncle Ernold and Uncle Edmund.”

“Yes,” said Septimus. “There’s a book I had to read before my **Darke** Week, called **InHabitees Remember**. There aren’t many that do remember, of course, but a few have been rescued before they were completely **Consumed**. It’s unbelievably awful. There’s an entity inside your head, controlling your body, pushing you to exhaustion, trying to get you to give up, to allow them to take you over. And you can’t rest, not even for a second . . .”

“I can’t bear to think about it,” murmured Jenna.

“But our uncles are tough old birds,” said Simon. “I think we can be sure that the time the you-know-who take to travel the Bolt will still be limited by the state that Eddie and Ern are in.”

“You mean they won’t die on the way back?”

Simon looked uneasy. “Um, yes. So I think nine hours minimum to the Castle is right.”

Nicko looked worried. “We ought to get going,” he said. “The tide’s against us now, though with any luck the wind is still in our favor. It will be a bit bumpy but I reckon if we leave now we’ll get to the Castle in about five hours.”

“But the Port Barge went ages ago,” said Jenna.

“I’ve got Jannit’s supply boat, Jen,” said Nicko. “That’s how I got here.”

“Oh! Yes, of course. Okay, we’d better go.”

“You’ve forgotten something,” said Simon.

“What?”

“You’re assuming that the you-know-whos are going to keep going to the Castle. But there is nothing to stop them turning around. In fact, maybe they aren’t heading for the Castle at all.”

“Once Merrin is there, they will,” said Septimus.

“Even so, we need to make totally sure that that is where they go, *now*. And for all we know there may be branches off the tunnel. Are there, Jim Knee?”

Jim Knee shrugged. “I don’t know. No one ever told me there were. But then no one ever told me anything, as I recall.” Jim Knee didn’t like to remember how lonely he’d been as Tallula Crum. His only friends then had been the homesick little scullion-boy and the sweet pies he used to make at night for comfort. Now that Jim Knee thought about it, he could see that there had probably been something not right about Tallula Crum; she had, he

suspected, been a little slow in the head. But when he had actually been Tallula Crum he hadn't understood that. He had just felt puzzled and unhappy. All the time. Jim Knee sighed. Life was much better now.

Unfortunately for Jim Knee that was about to change.

"There *must* be other entrances in the Port," said Nicko. "I can't imagine all the smugglers politely lining up outside the Port Palace to get into the Bolt, can you?"

"You're right," said Septimus. "Jim Knee will have to go after them. Quickly."

"What?" said Jim Knee, hoping he hadn't heard right.

"Well, it's too dangerous for anyone else to go."

"It is too dangerous for me too, Master," said Jim Knee.

"As Jim Knee, yes. But not as a scorpion."

Jim Knee was horrified. "A *scorpion*?"

"A scorpion can survive almost any conditions. They are particularly good in dark tunnels and superb at traveling over bumpy terrain. And with its pincers a scorpion will be perfect for herding two **Darke** Wizards."

"They are also particularly *small*, Master. It will take a scorpion many weeks to scuttle all the way to the Castle. That's if it doesn't get stamped on first."

"So you will **Transform** into a *large* scorpion, Jim Knee. As large as is compatible with scorpion life. Which, if I remember rightly, is about the size that will fit nicely down those steps."

Jim Knee stared at his Master. Sometimes he was too clever for his own good. He was certainly too clever for Jim Knee's good. Jim Knee leaned back against the little door and his yellow hat drooped disconsolately. He thought of the bony exoskeleton, the eight little pointy legs, the clamping pincers, the horrible hairy tail looped up behind him, dangling its sting, and all those *segments*. Jim Knee shivered. He hated segments.

"About ten feet long, plus pincers," said Septimus. "That should give you enough speed to catch up with them."

"And what do I do when I catch up with them, Oh Master?"

"You will herd them toward the Castle end of the tunnel. You will not allow them to turn back. Jenna and I will be waiting there when you arrive."

"Very well, Oh Master," said Jim Knee. "Your wish is my command and all that. Unfortunately."

"Yes, it is," Septimus replied gruffly. He felt bad about Jim Knee. It was tough being a jinnee, he thought. Tough to have all the sensibilities of a human, and yet to be forever at the mercy of another. And it must be especially tough to not even be in control of the form your own body took. But Septimus knew that if he wanted Jim Knee to do his bidding he must not show any weakness. And so, when Jim Knee caught his eye pleadingly,

Septimus merely said, “**Transform.**”

There was pop of yellow light and a loud clattering. Suddenly a ten-foot-long scorpion stood in Jim Knee’s place, waving its yellow-tipped sting at the end of its tail.

“Eew!” gasped Jenna. The scorpion turned toward her and gave her a reproachful stare. “Sorry, Jim Knee. Nothing personal.”

In reply the scorpion opened its pincers and shut them with a sharp *snap*. It wanted to say that it didn’t get much more personal than this, thank you very much, but its conversational skills were severely limited. It consoled itself with waving its sting angrily at its Master. It could tell from the expression on its Master’s face that he wasn’t too keen on pointy stings.

Septimus was not at *all* keen on pointy stings. He moved smartly off and opened the door to Smugglers’ Bolt. “Jim Knee, it’s time to go. *Move.*”

Jim Knee’s Master had no idea how difficult it was to obey. The scorpion swayed from side to side in utter confusion. There were so many legs. How did you move *eight* of them? And they were so complicated—he had, for goodness’ sake, *fifty-six knees*. Which way did they bend? And—oh, no—some of them swiveled too. What should he do—move the front two first and then the back two? Or first one side and then the other? Or was there some weird combination like one-three-five-seven, then two-four-six-eight? And if there was, how did you number your legs? Did you begin at the front or at the back? Left or right?

Septimus returned to the scorpion. “Come on, Jim Knee,” he said impatiently. “Get a move on.”

The scorpion regarded Septimus accusingly. Clearly its Master had given not a moment’s thought to the question of *legs*.

“Command him,” said Jenna. “Then he’ll have to.”

“Jim Knee, I command you to—” He glanced back at the open door to the tunnel and lowered his voice. “Enter Smugglers’ Bolt. *Go!*”

The scorpion was thrown into a state of panic: it was commanded; therefore it had to go. It activated its third left leg, the leg shot backward and its pincer feet snagged on the back leg. The back leg, which was more powerful than the others, wiggled to free itself and the scorpion began to wobble. It teetered for a few seconds, its legs splayed out and it landed on its stomach. Its tail drooped and clattered down onto the floor. Ten long feet of glistening black scorpion—plus pincers—was laid out in front of them like a bizarre rug.

“Rats,” said Septimus.

“Might be better if he *was* a rat,” observed Nicko.

“Rats are notoriously sensitive to the **Darke**, unlike scorpions, which are impervious,” said Septimus. “Come on, everyone. Help him get up.”

“Right.” Nicko gulped.

Jenna kneeled down and pushed her hands under the smooth black carapace. “It’s only Jim Knee,” she said. “If we all just put our arms underneath we can kind of flip him back on his feet.”

The scorpion’s pectines waved unhappily. It did not like the sound of “flip.”

Septimus, Simon and Nicko joined Jenna. “One, two, three—*flip!*”

The giant insect was surprisingly light. It flew up into the air, legs waving, and landed delicately on its eight little pointy pincer feet. Its tail resumed its curve and the scorpion staggered forward, segments breathing hard, inhaling the damp air that was rolling in from Smugglers’ Bolt.

Transformations are slower to take over the mind than the body, but now the scorpionness of Jim Knee’s being was seeping into his brain and his legs began to work. He discovered that it was easy—there were just two movements.

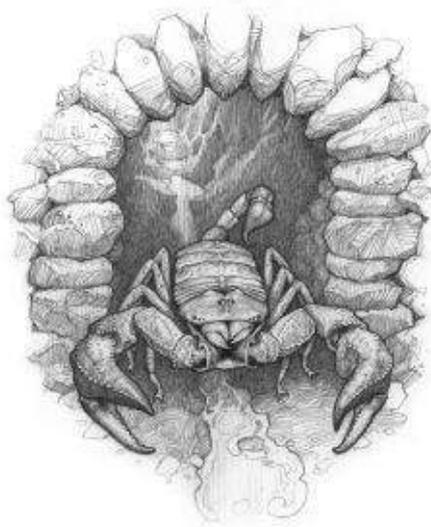
Legs-number-one: forward. Legs-number-two: back. Legs-number-three: forward. Legs-number-four: back.

And then: legs-number-one: back. Legs-number-two: forward. Legs-number-three: back. Legs-number-four: forward. It was simple: in the first step the middle two legs acted as a pair. In the second step the front two legs and the back two legs acted as two pairs.

Chanting silently to himself, Two-three-together, two-three-apart, Jim Knee trundled past four tall, blobby things—wondering how they balanced on only two legs—and headed gratefully for the delicious smell of damp and decay that wafted out from the darkness of Smugglers’ Bolt.

The four blobby things watched him go, seeing the reflection of the candle flame on his shiny pincers and listening to the rattle of pincers on stone as Jim Knee headed slowly downward. (With fifty-six knees, steps required particular attention.) As the scorpion disappeared into the darkness and all became quiet, Nicko closed the door. “I wouldn’t like to hear *that* coming along the tunnel behind me,” he said.

Far below in the darkness, Tallula Crum’s final wish had been granted: she was running freely through Smugglers’ Bolt.

SMUGGLERS' BOLT

*When a jinnee is **Transformed***, he or she becomes a strange hybrid. In the very center of the **Transformed** creature, like the stone within the fruit, its old human self remains, observing and guiding from deep within. But it is the outer creature that it has become that floods the jinnee's senses. And so, as Jim Knee scuttled along the rough rock floor of the Smugglers' Bolt, it was scorpion instincts that drove him onward through the dark—which was lucky for Jim Knee, for the Smugglers' Bolt was a place no human would choose to be.

The tunnel was utterly devoid of light but the scorpion felt at home; the darkness was where it belonged. It trundled merrily along, its pincers brushing against the narrow walls, its yellow sting arched high above its head gauging the height of the tunnel, telling it all it needed to know. A wonderful feeling of lightness and agility suffused it as it hurried through the tunneled rock, heading out of the Port, following the tunnel downward as it dipped below the Marram Marshes.

Jim Knee was free—there was no way that his Master could get to him. He could do whatever he chose. Jim Knee's choices were, however, severely limited. He could not turn around, for Smugglers' Bolt was much narrower than he was long, and Jim Knee did not relish the thought of spending eternity as a giant scorpion wedged across a tunnel. Neither could he stop moving, because he had discovered that when he did, his legs had a disconcerting

desire to tangle and send him crashing to the ground. And going backward with fifty-six knees to think about was not an option. So, Jim Knee could indeed do whatever he chose—provided that what he chose to do was to move forward along Smugglers' Bolt.

Smugglers' Bolt—or the Bolt, as it had been known to generations of smugglers, brigands and footpads—had been hewn from the great plate of rock through which the river carved its way from the Castle to the Port. Some half a mile out from the Port, the Bolt dipped even more steeply down to dive below the Marshes. The air quality fell and the atmosphere became oppressive. It was this section that had once terrified even the most hardened of Bolters—as regular users of the tunnel were known. Here the more fainthearted would turn and run back, often leaving their contraband behind. But not the scorpion—it scurried along, trundling over the rotten old barrels of ill-gotten gains that lay strewn along the rocky floor of the tunnel. Down, down it went through the darkness, and when it reached the muddy water filling the lowest point of the Bolt it did not panic as many a smuggler had done, but plunged into the brackish gloom and waded on, closing its spiracles, tightening its segments to protect its delicate little book lungs and keeping tabs on its middle legs which, Jim Knee had discovered, were the key to smooth running and had a tendency to get tangled if not concentrated on. And so, like a large mechanical toy, the scorpion clattered on its way—*two-three-together, two-three-apart, two-three-together, two-three-apart, two-three-together, two-three-apart*—rapidly closing in on the two desperate men staggering through the darkness.

Down in the deepest, foulest part of the Bolt, gasping in the bad air, Edmund and Ernold Heap staggered onward as their **InHabitants** pushed them ruthlessly forward through the tunnel, sending them stumbling through pools of sludge, tripping over fallen rocks, crashing into the rough tunnel walls in the pitch-blackness. The Ring Wizards were utterly careless of the two Heaps, using them up in their drive to reach the final stage of their **Reversion**, when they would be able to take their ancient form once more.

It was here, in the depths below the Marram Marshes, that Jim Knee caught up with his quarry. He heard them first—the sound of their labored breathing and their groans as they tripped, the splash as they fell, and their cries as they were forced to their feet or sent hurtling into yet another rock. Jim Knee slowed his pace—the last thing he wanted was to mow Edmund and Ernold down like a steamroller—and now he kept his distance, matching them step for step. And even though pity had no place in a scorpion brain, in the deep Jim Knee part of its thoughts, pity is what the scorpion felt.

On the far side of Deppen Ditch, the strange procession began the upward climb. The air began to feel fresher and the scorpion noticed that ahead of it,

the desperate gasping for breath had eased a little. With its pincers waving in excitement at the change of air, the scorpion scrambled up the now-sandy floor as the tunnel dried out and leveled off below the fields. The going was faster now and the scorpion clattered happily on, pausing only when the two Heaps stopped for a moment to gulp in a downdraft of fresh air, like parched men swallowing water.

Edmund and Ernold had stopped beneath the first farmstead after Deppen Ditch. Named Smugglers' Rest, it was here, clambering up a ladder through a shaft known as the Bail Out, that those who had braved the Bolt would emerge gasping for fresh air and the sight of the wide sky. Even now, air still poured into the tunnel from the ventilation shaft—a large chimney—around which the farmhouse was built.

The Heaps were not allowed long to drink the air, but from Smugglers' Rest onward their path was easier. Smugglers' Bolt now became a shallow tunnel, running no more than six to eight feet below the orchards and fields of the Farmlands. In the past, it had had numerous exit points into farmhouses along its route to the Castle. Most farmers had indulged in a little bit of smuggling when duty on brandy, lace and sweet wine from the Far Countries was astronomically high. In those days it had been well known in the Castle that, if you wanted to buy good wine at a reasonable price, then a lonely farmhouse on the winding road to the Port was your best bet. And if the farmer declared that it was her own homemade wine, you would be well advised not to comment on the surprising lack of a vineyard—or indeed the weather to grow the grapes.

The exits to the farmhouses had also served as ventilation points for the tunnel, and its closeness to the surface had allowed many other ventilation shafts to be driven down through the soil—camouflaged by drinking troughs, sheep shelters, cow barns and all manner of farm equipment. While these were maintained, the tunnel had been so well ventilated that it was said that in springtime you could smell the apple blossom in the Bolt.

But not anymore. Some two hundred years earlier, the Port duty rate had been drastically reduced and the whole smuggling business had stopped overnight. Smugglers' Bolt quickly fell into disuse. Over the following years many ventilation shafts had filled up with soil, or simply collapsed, but the tunnel—solid as the rock it ran through—had stayed as it was.

And now there was no scent of apple blossom for Edmund and Ernold as they staggered on toward the Castle, just the thick smell of soil and the unkindness of rock.

In Smugglers' Rest, Daisy Pike sat up and nudged her husband awake. "Mooman," she said. "There's someone downstairs. Go and have a look."

"Why me?" asked Mooman.

“Why not?” said Daisy.

Mooman was no good at arguing. He sighed, got out of bed and tiptoed down the stairs, avoiding the creaky one. At the foot of the stairs his legs felt weird and he had to sit down on the bottom step. A magnificent ghost in ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes was pacing to and fro in their front parlor. Mooman had never seen a ghost before—not a ghost of a human, anyway. He had seen plenty of cow ghosts, of course; all his much-loved old cows still grazed in their fields and came to greet him. But he had never seen a human. Until now.

As Mooman stared in amazement, the ghost stopped pacing and appeared to be deciding something. Mooman thought it looked like it was something really important. Then, clearly having made a decision, the ghost hurried across the room to the huge stone chimney that came up through the middle of the farmhouse. It positioned its feet carefully, stood up poker-straight with its arms by its sides and slowly began to sink through the rug. Mooman wondered where the ghost was going—and then he remembered what lay beneath: an old trapdoor that he had hammered shut years ago and covered with a rug after Daisy had complained about “nasty, smelly drafts” coming up from it. Mooman watched until all that was visible of the ghost was his rather distinguished head resting on the rug like a stray football. Then it, too, sank and disappeared.

Mooman shook himself and went back upstairs to find Daisy sitting terrified, bolt upright in bed with the sheets pulled up around her.

“Why were you so long?” she whispered. “I thought something awful had happened. I thought you were dead or something.”

Mooman got back into bed and discovered that he was trembling. “N-no,” he said. “It’s not me what’s dead. It’s him.”

Daisy’s eyes widened in horror. “Who?”

“That ancestor of mine. That ExtraOrdinary Wizard. It were his ghost.”

“Not *Julius Pike*?” asked Daisy.

“Yeah,” said Mooman. “The very same. Amazin’ when you think about it. Me bein’ descended from him.” He grinned at Daisy, showing the gap where his two front teeth should have been. “Maybe I got some **Magyk** in me—eh?”

“No, Mooman, you most definitely do *not*,” Daisy told him.

Mooman blew out the candle and settled back under the covers. “I wonder what he was doin’ down there. He looked in a right state. Hope he doesn’t start playin’ up and chucking things around.”

Daisy yawned. “He’ll be all right. They’re good ghosts to have, the old ExtraOrdinaries. Nice and civilized. Now go to sleep, Mooman. It’ll be time to milk the cows before you know it.”

The ghost of Julius Pike sank down through the Bail Out—an oak-lined shaft

with a ladder propped up inside. Smugglers' Bolt held no terrors for Julius Pike. He had, as a boy, "Run the Bolt" many times, and he remembered it well.

Julius had enjoyed growing up in a farmhouse at the center of so much activity. The farmhouse was isolated—bounded by the Marram Marshes, the river and its extensive lands, which contained orchards, sheep and a small herd of dairy cows (but not a single grapevine), but to the young Julius it had felt like the center of the universe. Julius was the youngest of five much older brothers, who all worked on the farm, and he was a solitary child. He would sit by the big ventilation chimney, reading quietly, but also **Listening** for footsteps—and often the rumble of trolleys—coming along the tunnel not very far below. He would open the trapdoor beside the chimney and wait, hoping that someone interesting would emerge. And usually someone did.

However mad or bad the person was, whatever crime they had committed in the Port or were planning to do in the Castle, they were unfailingly polite and grateful to Julius's mother, Martha Pike. She would sit them down by the kitchen fire and feed them a hot drink and a mutton pie, no questions asked. In return they would give her a little "merchandise" and tell the young Julius stories of their adventures, keeping the inquisitive child amused for hours. It was a Wizard— indulging in a little part-time smuggling—who had first awakened Julius's interest in **Magyk** and who had told him what his mother already knew—that he had a **Magykal** gift. And so, at the age of fourteen, Julius Pike had left the farmhouse for an Apprenticeship at the Wizard Tower and had, for the first time, traveled to the Castle overland. But when he was homesick he would—like Tallula Crum's little scullion-boy—Bolt home to see the orchards and eat a mutton pie.

And now he was back in the Bolt once more. The ghost hurried along, heading toward the Castle. He felt quite disturbed by the trail he was following. It was **Darke** and full of what his mother used to call Bad Intentions.

A ghost can move a great deal faster than two exhausted human beings and it was not long before Julius Pike heard the pitiful moans of Edmund and Ernold. The ghost hung back and **Listened**.

It was then Julius realized that he was not the only one following them. Beneath the malevolence of the Ring Wizards and the despair of the Heaps, he caught a whisper of something else: the presence of an ancient entity. As the ghost wafted along, slowed by the pace of the two failing humans in front of him, Julius pondered what the entity could be. There was a strange sound to it, a rhythmic rattle, which intrigued him. It sounded oddly insectlike and yet there was something old and wise and human about it. It puzzled Julius for some time as he followed the twists and turns of the tunnels and the gasps and groans of the Heaps. It took the ghost a few miles to figure out that the

mysterious entity must be a **Transformed** jinnee. Julius felt relieved. Even as a ghost he did not relish the thought of being alone in such close confinement with two evil beings. It was good to have some company.

And so, through the night, not far below the Farmlands, the strange procession made its way slowly and painfully along Smugglers' Bolt, heading toward the next exit—Number Sixty-Seven Wizard Way.

Back at the Port, Jenna, Simon and Nicko stood shivering on the harborside, watching Septimus do his **Transport** back to the Wizard Tower—the sooner Marcia knew what had happened, the better. As the purple fuzz of **Magyk** dispersed into the night air and Septimus was gone, Nicko hurried them off to Workman's Quay, where Jannit's supply boat was moored. Soon they were heading out into the night. Nicko had been right: it was a bumpy ride. The wind against the tide threw up waves and the boat reared up and down as it crashed its way into the mouth of the river where the tide and current met.

Nicko stood at the helm, smiling broadly. He loved the excitement of sending the boat through the wild water—something that he did not do often enough, now that he was Senior Apprentice at the boatyard and was so often overseeing work and enviously watching the new Apprentice, sad little Eustace Bott, head off on yet another errand to the Port. Nicko's two passengers were less thrilled with the journey. Jenna and Simon sat in the cuddy, wrapped in damp blankets that smelled of tar, and tried to get some sleep.

It was going to be a long night.



At the top of the Wizard Tower, Septimus was back safe from his **Transport** and asleep in his bed. Marcia, however, was wide-awake. She had just finished sending out a practice **Alert** to the entire Castle and was now touring her new **LookOuts** checking on the result. Judging by the huge number of candles that had rapidly appeared in the majority of upstairs windows, the practice had been a great success.

The **Alert** was a new safety measure. Shocked by the casualties caused by the **Darke Domaine**, Marcia had been determined that no Castle inhabitant would ever again be caught unawares by **Darke Magyk**. To this end she had set up an intricate system of **Alerts** in every building. Of course not everyone had accepted the presence of a **Lert** in their home or business—Larry in Number Sixty-Seven Wizard Way being one of those who didn't—but most were only too glad.

Marcia watched the lighted windows grow dark once more and retreated to her kitchen to instruct the coffeepot. While she was waiting for the coffee to brew, she picked up an unopened envelope banded with red and gold. It was, she knew, from Milo. Marcia stared at the envelope while the coffee-pot made its usual happy spluttering sounds. "Huh," she muttered at the envelope. "More pathetic excuses." The coffee began to bubble up; Marcia leaned over

to the cooker and set fire to the envelope and whatever lay within.

Marcia had just poured the coffee when she heard a knock at the big purple door. That night, the door was under instructions to admit any senior Wizard Tower Wizard, and Marcia heard it swing open. She braced herself for Jillie Djinn's stare and strode through the sitting room to see who was there.

It was Dandra Draa. Marcia was pleased; she liked Dandra and right then she could do with some company. The Sick Bay Wizard was hovering uncertainly, unsure whether to come in. "I have something important, Madam Marcia," she said.

"Oh, please, just call me Marcia," said Marcia.

To both Marcia and Dandra's shock, the ghost of Jillie Djinn chose that moment to speak for the first time. Her high, wavering voice poured into the room, a brittle stream of noise. "*Call me Marcia . . . oh, please, call me. Oh, Marcia, call me, please.*"

Dandra emitted a small shriek.

"Drat!" said Marcia. "I'd hoped for at least a couple more months' silence."

"*A couple more . . . I'd hoped for . . .*"

Marcia sighed. "Come in, Dandra," she said. "It's very good to see you."

"*To see you . . . too . . . see you . . . see too you too see you.*"

"If she carries on like this I'm going to *kill* her," muttered Marcia.

"Job done, I think," said Dandra with a wry smile.

Marcia smiled grimly in return. She liked Dandra's sense of humor. "Indeed. Come through to the kitchen, Dandra; have some coffee."

"*Have some coffee . . . coffee some. Have . . . the kitchen, Dandra. Come.*"

Marcia thought that she would go crazy if she listened to the ghost's jangled singsong a moment longer. She steered Dandra briskly through the room and closed the door very firmly behind her.

The ghost of Jillie Djinn sank back into the cushions of the sofa. She wore a satisfied smile. Jillie Djinn: one, Marcia Overstrand: nil. And she had nine more months to hone her skills.

As Marcia instructed the coffeepot—*two cups, with sugar, and hot this time*—Dandra placed a mangled band of gold on the kitchen table. "I find this," she said. "It is the ring, I think."

Marcia picked up the fragile gold circle with care, then got out her **Enlarging Glass** and inspected it. "Goodness, I do believe it is," she said. "It shows signs of recent **Darke** activity. And . . . ah, yes . . . here, I can see the imprint of the heads." She looked up and smiled for the first time that evening. "Dandra, that is wonderful. Wherever did you find it?"

Dandra smiled. "Stuck in a Wizard's shoe."

"*Really?*"

"He come to Sick Bay with sore foot. So first I look at the shoe. And this is

stuck in it. There is nothing wrong with his foot.” Dandra shook her head. “He is, what you say—fusspot?”

“Yes, that is exactly what we say,” said Marcia. She smiled at the forlorn, distorted ring thinking how, according to legend, it had once been treasured by a Queen and yet had spent so long containing such evil beings. Marcia felt sad that it would have to contain them once again, but it was much safer that the Ring Wizards should be **Committed** to their original ring, rather than risk one of the untried **Triple** bowls.

“Thank you so much, Dandra. It’s so lucky you found it—and that you knew what it was.” Marcia sighed. “Right now I could do with a bit of luck.”

Dandra sipped her strong, sweet coffee, made exactly how she liked it. She took her job of being responsible for the health of *all* the Wizards in the Tower seriously and thought that Marcia looked in need of some support. “Your ghost, he not here? I mean nice old ghost with naughty jokes.”

“Oh, Alther. No. He’s, er, out.”

“You alone too much,” said Dandra. “Is not good.”

Marcia sighed. “It goes with the territory,” she said.

Dandra looked puzzled.

“My job. It goes with the job.”

“But you need talk. Everyone need talk.”

Marcia did not reply. It had been a long time since anyone had been concerned about her in this way and she felt quite emotional.

“You worry about Ring Wizards,” said Dandra.

Marcia nodded.

“You know how to get them come to you?”

Marcia looked interested. “Do you?” she asked.

“You find person who have last worn ring. Then you take prisoner.”

Marcia smiled. She liked Dandra’s no-nonsense approach.

“You do this, I think?” asked Dandra.

Normally Marcia would not have confided what she called sensitive information to a new Wizard, but she felt she could trust Dandra. “Yes. In fact, he is on the way here, right now.”

Dandra smiled. “Then all will be well. The Ring Wizards return to get him and *you* get them, yes?”

“Well, yes. At least, when Jenna—Princess Jenna—gets here.”

“Huh. Why wait for Princess?” asked Dandra, whose experience of royalty had not been good, having involved three warring Princesses, all of whom had in turn laid siege to her home village.

“She’s the only one who knows the **Committal**,” said Marcia.

Dandra looked horrified. “*You* not know?”

“No,” admitted Marcia. Knowing that it made her appear incompetent, she hastened to explain. “But you see, Dandra, that’s what the Pyramid Library is

for. It's like an extra brain for the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. We couldn't possibly remember everything, but what we *do* know is where things are and how to find them." Marcia smiled ruefully. "But even an ExtraOrdinary Wizard can't find what isn't there."

"And the **Committal** *not* there?" asked Dandra.

"Not anymore," said Marcia. "Some ExtraOrdinary Wizard in the past **Removed** an awful lot of stuff. And he or she was none too careful how they did it." Marcia shook her head. "It's disgraceful. And this afternoon I have discovered that the **Remove** has spilled over into the Ancient Arcane section and taken out some of most delicate and precious information."

Dandra was shocked. "You only *just* discovered?"

Marcia could see Dandra's good opinion of her rapidly disappearing. "Well, yes. But we don't open the Ancient Archives unless we absolutely have to—they are extremely fragile. Of course we check the indexes occasionally, and in the Archive Index the **Committal** was listed as present."

"But it *not* present?"

Marcia shook her head miserably. "No. It's gone. Utterly gone. So the only record of it we now have is with Princess Jenna."

"Who not here."

"No. Well, not yet. She is on her way. I . . . just don't know if she is going to get here in time."

Dandra was silent for a while. "I see why you worried," she said.

"Thanks," said Marcia, feeling a whole lot worse.

Silence fell. Marcia stared at the frying-pan clock on the kitchen wall—one of Alther's old treasures. Looking at it usually made her feel better, but tonight it had no effect. All she could think was that she was now drawing two **Darke** Wizards back to the Castle with no means of destroying them once they arrived. And when they did arrive she would have to rely totally on Jenna's version of the **Committal**. It was not a position any ExtraOrdinary Wizard would choose. She was placing everyone in terrible danger. Marcia put her head in her hands—she felt very frightened.

Dandra put her arm around Marcia's shoulders. "It okay. We all here. Together." Marcia nodded. She blinked away tears and saw that the hour hand on the frying-pan clock had crept around to three. "They should be in sight now," she said. "Would you like to come up to the **LookOut** with me?"

Marcia's rooms, which took up the whole of floor twenty of the Wizard Tower, had four new **LookOuts**—one on each face of the Tower. She and Dandra headed for the South **LookOut**, a long, narrow chamber next to Septimus's bedroom, more like a corridor than a room. The chamber was dark but light poured in from a round window at the end, so crystal clear and bright that it seemed to Dandra as though the moon itself was sitting at the end of the room.

Dandra followed Marcia inside and as she closed the door behind her, the atmosphere in the room became hushed and heavy. Marcia hurried to the window at the end and beckoned Dandra to stand next to her. There was only just room. Dandra was amazed at how clear the view from the window was. The crystal concentrated every detail and showed a huge vista below, extending from the Forest—where Dandra was sure she could see every leaf and branch as they shook in the wind that was howling in and buffeting the Castle—along past the Moat, where a chop of waves was breaking up its dark surface, and away to the cold snake of the river heading down toward the Port.

Marcia was shocked; she hadn't realized it was such a wild night. She raised her hands and held them cupped over the crystal window, focusing on the most distant bend in the river as it emerged from the swath of Forest. It was here she hoped to see Nicko's boat—with Jenna safe inside it. Dandra watched, fascinated, as Marcia squeezed her hands together and then drew them apart so that a small circle of glass was visible between them. Slowly Marcia drew her hands farther away from each other and Dandra saw the view of the river bend enlarge, until it filled the whole window. Marcia let her hands fall and she and Dandra stared into the distance.

"There!" said Marcia. "Look!"

It was no more than a tiny white speck. But as Dandra looked, she could see that it was the sail of a boat, heeled over, leaping through the waves. "Big waves for river," said Dandra.

"It's awful," said Marcia. "I had no idea the weather was so bad." She shivered and enlarged the view again. The image became a little blurred but within the fuzz she could see Jenna and Simon sitting wrapped in blankets, while Nicko stood at the helm, clearly loving every minute of it. Marcia watched the little boat, fascinated by its rapid progress as it danced through the water; the sight of Nicko's breezy confidence made her feel a whole lot better. "They'll be fine," she said. "Nicko will bring them back safely."

"Now is the barge boat," said Dandra. "See, she comes too."

Sure enough, the huge white sail of the night Barge now hove into view. Heavy but steady, the Barge plowed around the bend that Nicko had very nearly flown around. Nicko must have only just overtaken it, thought Marcia. She imagined that he had enjoyed that. Marcia smiled and looked more closely at the Barge. Hovering above she saw a faint glimmer that she knew to be Alther; on the Barge below she saw no more than the flapping canvas cover of the passenger area. But Marcia knew that if Alther was there, then so were Merrin and Nursie.

Marcia turned to Dandra and smiled. "They're all on their way," she said.

"Good. I go now," said Dandra. "You sleep."

"Maybe," said Marcia doubtfully.

But Marcia did sleep. The **Alarm** woke her two hours later and she was up at once. Five minutes later she was shaking Septimus awake. There was no time to lose.

Down in the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower, in the soft blue light of early morning **Magyk**, all was quiet. Marcia and Septimus stepped off the stairs—still slow on Nighttime mode—and walked over to the tall silver doors. As they went, the floor greeted them: GOOD MORNING, EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD. GOOD MORNING, EXTRAORDINARY APPRENTICE. IT IS A BEAUTIFUL MORNING. ALL IS LOOKING GOOD. Marcia grimaced—the floor only became optimistic when things were really bad.

The wind had blown away the rain clouds and the dawn sky was a clear, pale green as Marcia and Septimus emerged from the Wizard Tower. Wizard Way was peaceful and deserted—apart from the lone figure of Beetle, muffled in his dark blue robes, waiting outside the Manuscriptorium. As soon as he saw Marcia and Septimus emerge from the shadows of the Great Arch, he gave a brief wave and hurried to meet them. The three walked quickly down the middle of the Way, moving through the long, sharp shadows that fell across the yellow stone, catching shafts of crisp yellow light as it glanced through the occasional gap. The floor was right; it was indeed a beautiful morning.

The trio stopped outside the rundown façade of Number Sixty-Seven Wizard Way—Larry’s Dead Languages Translation Services—and took a collective deep breath. Marcia ran her hand down the edge of the door and Septimus and Beetle heard the rapid clicks of the line of locks unfastening themselves.

So did Larry.

Larry was up early, translating an obscure dialect spoken only by six people who lived beside an oasis in the Hot, Dry Deserts of the East. He was not in the best of moods, having had a disturbed night due to a crowd of what Larry called “yobs” banging on his door half the night. So when Marcia pushed open the door with a hefty shove, Larry was not at his best.

“Oi!” he yelled.

To Larry’s great irritation Marcia strode in, followed by his ex-employee, Beetle—who had snubbed him the previous day—and the know-it-all ExtraOrdinary Apprentice. Larry grabbed a chair—one of his favorite weapons—and was on his way to meet the intruders. “Out!” he ordered, jabbing the chair at them in the manner of a lion-tamer who was thoroughly sick of lions.

Marcia was not a fan of Larry. “Indeed, Mr. Morologus, that is *exactly* where you are going. Out.”

“How dare you?” Larry demanded, advancing with the chair.

Marcia's answer quickly followed in a flash—a small purple one, to be precise. And when the flash disappeared, Larry was sitting on his chair outside his door, looking in.

“Rude man,” said Marcia and then, as Larry rattled the door handle, **“Lock!”**

The door obeyed. Marcia raised her voice above the furious banging of Larry's fists on the door. “Now, Beetle, perhaps you would be so kind as to show us the way?”

Beetle led Marcia through the shop and along a maze of narrow corridors, lined with shelves stacked with chaotic mountains of papers. At last Beetle stopped by a cupboard whose door had fallen off, spilling its papers across the floor. He drew back a smelly old curtain, unbolted the collection of nailed planks that Larry called a door and gave it a hefty kick. The door creaked open to reveal a small, damp courtyard stuffed full of Wizards.

“Good morning, everyone,” Marcia said perkily.

“Morning, Madam Marcia,” came a gloomy chorus from the fourteen Wizards who had been on guard all night. Marcia surveyed the bedraggled group, clustered around a ramshackle wooden hut standing in the middle of the courtyard, typical of one of the old Castle outside lavatories—or privies, as they were known. The Wizards, sodden after the night's rain, stood huddled together like a small herd of blue sheep lost on a lonely, windswept hill. The courtyard was pervaded by the dismal smell of wet wool.

“I take it there is nothing to report?” Marcia said briskly.

“No, Madam Marcia,” came the gloomy chorus.

“Can we go now?” came a brave voice from the back. “We're perished.” Others chimed in.

“Frozen.”

“Totally, utterly *frozzled*.”

“I think my toes have fallen off.”

Marcia sighed. Wizards were not what they used to be. She could see they would be no use at all in the state they were in. “Yes. You can go. Thank you all very much. I realize it hasn't been the most interesting night's work.”

To a background of mutterings—“You can say that again”; “I've had more fun having my teeth taken out”; “Bloomin' waste of time”—the Ordinary Wizards climbed up the ladder they had fetched after Larry had refused to answer the door for them, and clambered over the wall. The soggy Wizards then trailed back to the Wizard Tower, their job done.

Beetle's job of guiding Marcia through Larry's warren of a house was also done, and there was somewhere else he very much wanted to be. “I think it would be a good idea,” he said, “if I went down to the Palace landing stage and met Jenna.”

“A very good idea,” said Marcia. “Bring her straight here.”

Beetle clambered up the ladder and over the wall. Then he was gone, hurrying down to the river, feeling more excited about meeting Jenna than he thought he should be.

Marcia rubbed her hands together in the early morning chill of the dark courtyard. “Right, Septimus, let’s have a look, shall we?” Gingerly, she opened the door of the rickety old hut and peered inside. “It’s clever,” she said, her voice muffled by the hut. “You wouldn’t think anything of it. Just an empty old privy with a wooden floor. But when you look closer you can see that the entire floor is a trapdoor.”

Marcia stepped back to let Septimus see.

“We should make sure it really does lead to Smugglers’ Bolt and isn’t just a hiding place for contraband,” she said. “There are a few of those around, apparently. I suggest you lift the trapdoor and have a look.”

Warily, Septimus unfastened the bolts and lifted the trapdoor up a few inches. A smell of damp and mold wafted out. Marcia kneeled down and got out her **FlashLight**. She shone it into the gap and saw a line of narrow steps leading down into darkness. Suddenly she switched off the **FlashLight**.

“Something’s coming,” she whispered. “*I can feel it.*”

Very carefully, Septimus let the trapdoor down. “That’s way too fast,” he said.

Marcia stood up, brushing the dirt from her robes. “Septimus, I am so sorry. This must mean that Ernold and Edmund have been . . .” She stopped, unable to bring herself to say anything more.

Septimus said it for her. “**Consumed.**”

To the Castle



“*We must prepare ourselves,*” Marcia said. “I doubt that Jenna will get here in time. We need to keep the *you-know-who* at bay until she arrives.”

“**Encapsulate?**” asked Septimus.

“Precisely. It must be done very carefully. We can’t risk any fissures forming.”

“So not too fast.”

“Indeed.”

“An even depth.”

“Precisely. About three inches all over.”

“That’s *thick*.”

“There’s a lot of power to keep at bay, Septimus. We must be sure.”

“Okay. Shall I pace it out?”

“Yes.” Marcia got out her pocket sextant and quickly calculated the height of the hut. “Seven point five eight recurring,” she said.

“Circumference: thirteen exactly,” said Septimus.

“Right. Let’s get this as good as we can!” Marcia did some rapid calculations. “Okay. Now, Septimus, I’ll need you to—”

“*Got you!*” Larry’s angry face appeared at the top of the wall. “How *dare*

you throw me out of my house, you interfering old witch!”

Marcia bristled.

Larry was treading on dangerous ground, but he clearly did not care. “Get out of my yard!” he yelled. “Or do I have to come over and drag you out?” Larry—or possibly his ladder—wobbled with indignation.

“If you value your safety,” Marcia said icily, “I suggest you do no such thing.”

“Are you threatening me?” Larry demanded. “Because if you are I—”

There was a loud crack of splitting wood and Larry was gone.

“Never trust a ladder,” said Marcia. “Now, let’s get on. I dread to think how close they are.”

One hundred and eighty seconds later the old privy hut had taken on a very different appearance. It was covered with a glowing skin of purple light, which was slowly hardening, like a chrysalis. Septimus watched, enthralled—he had never seen a real **Encapsulation**. It was a tough piece of **Magyk** to get right. Septimus had practiced on a few small objects but the **Capsules** either collapsed like a burst balloon or ended up lumpy like an old potato. But Marcia’s was perfect. It covered the hut evenly and smoothly, and as it hardened it began to lose its purple sheen and turn a delicate blue. Soon the color would leave it and a transparent glasslike substance would cover the entire structure, forming a barrier so impenetrable that not even a ghost would be able to get through.

But until all color was gone, the **Capsule** could be breached. It was an anxious time. Just in case, Marcia stationed Septimus around the back of the little hut, and she watched the front.

Suddenly a gasp came from behind the hut. “There’s something . . . coming through . . .”

A flash of fear shot through Marcia. She raced around to Septimus in time to see a tall purple ghost pushing itself through the hardening **Capsule**.

Marcia was extremely relieved. “It’s an old ExtraOrdinary,” she murmured. “How very . . . *extraordinary*.”

An elegant figure emerged, his cropped gray hair banded by an old-fashioned ExtraOrdinary Wizard headband, his thin features and sharp, beaky nose giving the impression of a gaunt bird of prey.

“Oh,” said Septimus. “It’s Julius Pike!”

“That,” said Marcia, “is extremely good timing.”

As Julius Pike **Composed** himself after the unpleasant **Passing Through** of the back of the hut—wondering why someone had decided to put the door on the other side from where it always had been—the **Capsule** lost its last tint of blue and became completely clear. Marcia smiled. Nothing was going to get out of there now.

Julius bowed to Marcia in the old-fashioned formal style. “ExtraOrdinary,”

he said. “Forgive my intrusion in your most excellent **Magyk**. I am sorry to have interrupted your tutorial.”

“No apologies necessary, I assure you,” said Marcia.

It was a tradition among ExtraOrdinary Wizards that whenever they met an ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghost for the first time (**Gatherings** did not count) the Living must introduce themselves and, bizarrely, inquire after the health of the ghost. With the immediate threat lifted, Marcia proceeded to introduce herself and then Septimus.

The ghost of Julius Pike stopped her. “No need, ExtraOrdinary, for Septimus and I have met before. In another Time—my Living Time.” The ghost smiled sympathetically at Septimus. “I am very glad to see you safe here, Apprentice. I would like to say that when we met before I was not aware of what had happened to you. I merely assumed you were yet another mildly deranged Alchemie Apprentice.” The ghost turned to Marcia. “Marcellus Pye was, at that time, my very good friend, but even then there were things he did that I could not endorse.”

“Indeed?” said Marcia.

“Kidnapping a boy from another Time was one of them.”

“Quite,” said Marcia. Every word the ghost spoke made her like him more. Marcia remembered her manners. “I trust you are well?” she inquired.

Julius gave the standard reply: “As well as any ghost may be.” The ghost continued, “I have come to warn you”—like everyone who spoke of the Ring Wizards, he dropped his voice to a whisper—“that two most **Darke** and foul Wizards are, at this very moment, on their way to the Castle through the Bolt. It is extremely fortuitous that you have chosen this very place for your **Capsule** tutorial.”

“It’s not one little bit fortuitous,” said Marcia. “It is totally deliberate.”

“Ah. So you know. So it is *your* scorpion following them?”

“It’s mine, actually,” said Septimus.

“Well, well.” Julius was impressed. He turned to Marcia. “ExtraOrdinary, these **Darke** Wizards are from the Two-Faced Ring, which I know of old. In the early hours of the morning I **Felt** them heading for the Castle. I have come to warn you.”

“We know,” said Marcia. And then, thinking she had been a little curt, she said, “But thank you. I very much appreciate your concern.”

There was something Septimus had to ask. “What did the Wizards look like?”

“It is very sad,” said Julius Pike. “They are **InHabiting** two old tramps, probably found them sleeping in a ditch somewhere. **Darke Magyk** is not kind to—”

Marcia cut in. “How long have we got?”

“I overtook them using an old passing place in the Bolt some two hours

ago, but the tramps are being pushed forward at a merciless pace. I estimate possibly an hour.”

“An hour!” Marcia was horrified. “Septimus, go! As soon as Jenna arrives bring her here. There must be no delay. *None whatsoever*. Hurry, hurry!”

Septimus was halfway up the ladder when he realized that leaving Julius with Marcia was not a good idea. He was pretty sure that Marcia knew that Julius Pike had been the ExtraOrdinary Wizard at the time of the Great Alchemie Disaster. It would not take her long to start asking the ghost a lot of awkward questions—and getting even more awkward answers. Septimus now shared Marcellus’s opinion that Marcia would close down the **Fyre**, even at this late stage, if she knew about it. He also knew from Marcellus that it was Julius who had closed it down previously. It was not safe to leave the ghost of Julius Pike alone with Marcia.

Septimus looked down from the ladder. “Um, Marcia,” he said. “I wonder if Julius could come with me?”

“Whatever for?” Marcia asked.

Septimus felt bad about what he was going to say, but he told himself it was actually the truth. “I’d just feel happier, that’s all. It’s hard to explain.”

Marcia had never heard Septimus talk like that. It worried her.

“Yes, of course. Now, hurry, *hurry!*” Marcia watched Septimus climb up the wall and drop down the other side, avoiding the broken ladder. He was followed by Julius Pike, who had done the very same thing in his time as an Apprentice. With the backyard to herself, Marcia fretted. She hated waiting but there was nothing else to be done.

Septimus and the ghost of Julius Pike hurried along Wizard Way toward the Palace. The warmth of the sun and the spring tweeting of birds made Septimus’s spirits rise: soon all would be back to normal. He had no doubt that the Capsule would hold the Wizards securely until Jenna got there. Then all she had to do was say the **Committal**—which, knowing Jenna, she would have been practicing all night—then the Wizards would be back in the ring and Marcellus could **DeNature** it in the **Fyre**. It could all happen that very day, he thought. And he was really looking forward to seeing the **Fyre** with Marcia. It would be good to have no more secrets. Septimus pushed to the back of his mind the thought of Ernold and Edmund. Right then he did not want to think about that.

They headed across the Palace lawns toward the Palace landing stage, where Septimus could see Sarah, Silas and Beetle waiting. Beetle and Silas were shading their eyes against the glare of the sun and Sarah was jumping up and down, waving. Septimus knew that Nicko’s boat must be in sight. He raced the last hundred yards to the landing stage and saw Jannit Maarten’s supply boat speeding toward it, dancing through the sparkling water. Nicko

was windswept and smiling at the helm, Jenna and Simon leaning out, waving.

Septimus turned to Julius with relief. “Jenna’s back,” he said. “It’s going to be okay.”

Unconcerned about the safety of royalty, the ghost was staring at Beetle. “Why is the Chief Hermetic Scribe not in the Manuscriptorium?” he asked.

Septimus remembered that Julius Pike had a reputation for being picky about protocol. It seemed a little misplaced right then. “A Chief Scribe doesn’t have to always be at the Manuscriptorium—does he, Beetle?” Septimus raised his voice to include Beetle in the conversation.

Beetle turned and saw the unfamiliar ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghost approaching. The first-time greeting etiquette applied also to Chief Hermetic Scribes. Beetle bowed politely.

“O. Beetle Beetle, Chief Hermetic Scribe at your service, ExtraOrdinary.”

“Julius Pike, at yours,” said the ghost impatiently.

“I trust you are well?” asked Beetle.

“As well as a—oh, *for goodness’ sake!*” spluttered Julius. “I’m well—which is more than you or anyone here will be if you don’t get back to the Manuscriptorium right now.”

“*What?*” Beetle looked shocked.

“Chief Scribe. I really don’t know what you think you are doing, leaving the main exit from the Bolt unsupervised by yourself at a time like this.”

Beetle’s jaw dropped. “Main *exit*? In the *Manuscriptorium*?”

“Where else would it be?” snapped Julius.

“I—in the backyard of Number Sixty-Seven,” stammered Beetle.

“Does an old privy hut look like a main exit to you?” asked the ghost scathingly.

“No . . . but . . . oh, *sheesh*. Where *is* it? Where in the Manuscriptorium, I mean?”

Shocked, Julius Pike realized that no one knew about the main exit. “There’s a trapdoor at the back of the Vaults,” he said.

“*Where?*” asked Beetle.

“I will show you,” said Julius. “There is no time to lose.”

EXITS

A *flustered Foxy* peered through the Manuscriptorium door—the **LockDown** was really spooking him.

Password? he mouthed at Beetle. Beetle spoke into the hidden speaking tube beside the door and the password whispered through the Front Office. Trembling, Foxy **UnLocked** the door and let his Chief in, along with a very disheveled Princess and an unfamiliar ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghost.

“Hi, Foxy,” said Jenna. And then, “*Marissa*. What are you doing here?”

Marissa shrugged. “Oh, you know. *Stuff*. Like waiting for Beetle.” She giggled. “*Hello, Beetle.*”

Jenna was pleased to see that Beetle did not look particularly thrilled to see Marissa.

“Hello, Marissa. Hey, Foxy, is everything okay?” Beetle asked anxiously.

Foxy didn’t think anything was okay at all, but he knew what his boss meant. “Um, yeah.”

“We missed an entrance,” said Beetle, striding past Marissa. “We have to find it right now.”

“But we **Locked** all the entrances that were in the book, honest,” said Foxy.

“It wasn’t in the book,” said Beetle. “I didn’t know about this one when I wrote the protocol.”

“Oops-ee,” said Marissa.

Beetle stopped at the door that led from the Front Office into the

Manuscriptorium. “Okay, Jenna?” he said. “We better get straight down there.”

“Hey, can *I* come?” said Marissa.

“No,” said Beetle as he and Jenna hurried into the Manuscriptorium.

“Oh, after *you*,” said Foxy as Marissa pushed by him and barged after Beetle.

Beetle set off between the rows of tall desks, trailing Jenna, Marissa, Foxy and the increasingly anxious ghost of Julius Pike.

“Princess, Chief Scribe,” said the ghost. “You are putting yourselves in great danger. We *must* wait for the ExtraOrdinary.”

“I could go with Beetle instead,” said Marissa. “Then Jenna could go home. I could easily do the whatever-it-is. Couldn’t I, Beetle?”

“No,” Beetle and Jenna said together.

To everyone’s surprise, the agitated ghost suddenly took a turn to the right and began to **Pass Through** a row of desks. In Julius’s day the desks had been arranged differently and he was forced to tread the old aisles. “Princess,” he called as he veered rapidly away from them, “you must wait!”

Beetle, Jenna and Marissa reached the concealed door in the bookcase at the back of the Manuscriptorium and the ghost emerged spluttering from a nearby desk.

“Princess, hear me, I beg you. They gain strength with every second,” said Julius. “Septimus told me you survived one encounter—which was very fortunate—but do not assume you will survive another. This time they are unlikely to just stand there and politely listen to you.”

Beetle hesitated. He hadn’t thought of that. He looked at Jenna. “Perhaps we *should* wait for Marcia.”

“No!” said Jenna. “This is our only chance. If we hurry we can be waiting for them when they come out of the Bolt and we can surprise them. Anyway, I’ve got a **Protection Charm**.” Jenna opened her hand to show a small **Shield Charm** that Marcia had given her a while back. She smiled. “It’s worked so far.”

Julius Pike snorted derisively. “A speck of ice in a furnace.”

Jenna put on what she now thought of as her Queen voice. “Julius, I refuse to discuss this any more. It is my duty to do whatever I can to protect the Castle. Beetle; let’s go.”

“Yep. Foxy, go to the Front Office. Septimus went to fetch Marcia. When they arrive bring them down to the Vaults. Fast!”

“Okay, Chief.”

Marissa watched the concealed door in the bookshelves close with a quiet *click* behind Beetle, Jenna and the ghost. Grumpily, she followed Foxy back to the Front Office, plonked herself down in the big chair by the desk and began doodling rude words in the Day Book. Marissa was very annoyed. She

had spent the most boring night *ever* with a load of geeks, only for Beetle to snub her. She hoped Jenna's stupid **Protection Charm** was rubbish. It would serve her right.

Foxy, who was a little scared of Marissa, went to the front door and stared anxiously out into Wizard Way. A group of Printer's Apprentices hurrying along to work saw Foxy's long nose squashed against the glass in the door and made rude faces. Foxy returned the compliment. Everything outside seemed so normal, thought Foxy, and it was such a lovely morning. Surely, he thought, nothing could be really bad when the spring sun was shining so brightly.

But Julius Pike knew better. As Beetle led the way down the steeply sloping passageway that went to the Vaults, the rushlights flickering as he and Jenna ran past, Julius became increasingly upset—the Princess was heading toward certain death and it was *all his fault*. He should have gone back and informed the ExtraOrdinary Wizard of the missed main exit, not blurted it out to a couple of impulsive teenagers, which was what the Princess and the Chief Hermetic Scribe were. And now the reckless teens were hurtling down the tunnel to the Vaults with apparently no more concern than if they were late for lunch.

Julius did not give up. "Stop, stop!" he urged, rushing along the snaking twists and turns of the tunnel as it headed sharply downward. Jenna and Beetle took no notice. Sometimes, thought Julius, being a ghost was incredibly frustrating. He longed to race ahead, block the tunnel and tell them to act sensibly, but he could do nothing except beg them to stop.

Jenna and Beetle had now reached the long, steep flight of steps that went down to the Vaults. Julius's hopes were raised when he saw that the Chief Scribe had stopped for a moment. Maybe he was, at last, seeing sense. But to Julius's disgust, all he did was to reach out and take the Princess's hand, and then lead her down the steps—to her doom, the ghost was convinced.

The ancient door to the Vaults, with its wide slabs of oak studded with nails, was at the foot of the steps and it was, to Julius's relief, firmly closed. As Jenna and Beetle reached it, Julius made one last plea.

"Princess, leave now, I *beg* you!"

Jenna wheeled around angrily. The ghost was stopping her concentrating on the **Committal**. "Just shut up and *go away*," she hissed.

Julius Pike looked aghast. The manners of the young were shocking. No Princess would have ever spoken to an ExtraOrdinary Wizard like that in his Time—especially not to a ghost. Ghosts were *always* treated with respect. No wonder the Castle was such a mess. He saw the Chief Scribe squeeze the Princess's hand and give her an encouraging glance. Then Jenna pushed open the door to the Vaults.

And screamed.

Standing behind the door, as if waiting for her, were Ernold and Edmund Heap. Wretched, ragged, hollow-eyed, bruised and battered, they stood holding on to each other for support. Who knows what, if anything, the two Heaps were conscious of at that moment. They were now thirty-eight hours into their **InHabitation** and during that time had been forced to run to the Port and back through the most punishing terrain. The very few people who have been rescued from a **Consuming InHabitation**—one that is designed to end with the exhaustion of the body rather than mere continued use—have reported that there is a moment when the mind becomes aware that it is on the verge of total occupation and makes a last, desperate stand against its invader.

And it was this moment that had arrived for Edmund and Ernold. The sight of Jenna once again opening a door to them brought back memories of when they had first seen her at the Palace, and stirred a last-chance rebellion. Now, for a few desperate moments, they found the strength to fight the Ring Wizards.

The ghost of Julius Pike watched, amazed, as Jenna stood her ground in front of the two desperate-looking tramps. He realized now that they were identical twins—two wretched, exhausted men who were bravely surviving against the **Darke** Wizards. The ghost watched Jenna take the gold circlet from her head and offer it out in both hands to the men. Terrified, Julius waited for the **Darke** Wizards to pounce—surely they would not allow this opportunity to destroy the Princess to pass. But no, somehow their victims were still holding out. Julius saw the two men wrap their arms around each other's shoulders and stare at the Princess as if willing her on.

And so, looking deep into the eyes of her uncles, Jenna began the **Committal**.

Julius was impressed; the words flowed easily and fluently, and as Jenna moved through the words, both the ghost and Beetle felt that time itself had slowed down. Neither dared move. They watched as Jenna held herself utterly still, all her concentration poured into the words she was speaking. The Heaps, too, were immobile, each trying to hold on to his mind as he struggled to keep the last glimpse of consciousness that would allow him to stand against the Ring Wizards for a few precious seconds more. But the stillness belied a huge tension of opposing forces, perfectly balanced for that moment, like a tug-of-war rope that is still only because the two teams are evenly matched.

Julius did not know the exact words of the **Committal**, but he knew the pattern that ancient **Incantations** took, and he could tell that Jenna was now heading toward the end. But both he and Beetle could also tell that the Heaps were nearing the end of their strength. Silently they urged Jenna on, Julius waiting for the **Keystone** word that would signal the beginning of the end of

the **Committal** and render the Wizards powerless. The ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghost knew all 343 possible **Keystone** words and, increasingly anxiously, he waited for one of them.

Suddenly, Jenna stopped speaking. Julius waited for her to continue—it was dangerous to pause for too long. But Jenna stayed silent and Julius realized with horror that Jenna thought she had finished.

The Heaps' eyes began to roll.

Jenna waited for the **Committal** to work.

The Heaps' fists began to clench.

Julius Pike could stand it no longer. "Run!" he yelled. "For pity's sake—*run!*"

Beetle grabbed Jenna's hand and pulled her away. Jenna looked shocked. It hadn't worked. *It hadn't worked.* Why? She had remembered every word right. She *knew* she had.

To the accompaniment of groans from Edmund and Ernold, Beetle and Jenna tore up the seemingly endless steps. It was like one of Beetle's nightmares. He ran as fast as he could, aware that he and Jenna were in full view of the Wizards, presenting what must have been the easiest target they had ever had. At any moment he expected them to be felled by a **Thunderflash** or worse. Up, up they ran, and suddenly they were at the top, around the corner and leaning breathless against the wall.

"Breath . . . back," panted Jenna, cramming her circlet back on her head.

Beetle nodded, unable to speak. He had the most terrible stitch in his side. As he fought for breath, Jenna peered around the corner. She turned back and grinned, holding her arms out and making pincer movements with her hands.

Down in the doorway, two giant scorpion claws held Edmund and Ernold Heap prisoner; beside them lay two snapped **Volatile Wands**.

Beetle and Jenna crashed into the Manuscriptorium. "Foxy, get everyone out!" Beetle yelled.

Foxy didn't need telling twice. Thirty seconds later Marissa, Partridge, Romilly and Moira Mole were outside. "I'm taking Jenna to the Wizard Tower for her own safety," said Beetle. "I suggest you all come too."

"Forget it," snapped Marissa. "I've got better things to do," and she headed off to Gothyk Grotto.

Beetle headed up Wizard Way, pulling Jenna behind him. "Beetle, *wait*," said Jenna, who had seen Septimus and Marcia hurrying up Wizard Way. "There's Sep and Marcia. We have to tell them."

"No!" said Beetle. "It's not safe."

"I'll tell them," said Foxy, determined to be brave. "You go on ahead."

"We'll *all* tell them," said Partridge. "Come on, Foxy."

As Jenna and Beetle hurtled through the Great Arch they overtook the

ghost of Alther Mella, who was herding Merrin and Nursie across the Courtyard in the manner of a shepherd rounding up two particularly stupid sheep. He watched Jenna and Beetle disappear into the Wizard Tower and heard hurried footsteps behind him. Moments later Marcia and Septimus, along with an assortment of scribes, came pounding through the Great Arch. As soon as they were in, Marcia took off her amulet and pressed it into a small indentation beside the Arch. The pitted old Barricade came rumbling down through the middle of the Great Arch, **Sealing** the Courtyard.

Edmund and Ernold Heap dragged themselves up the long, steep steps from the Vaults. Behind them lay a badly damaged scorpion, its pincers mangled and burned.

The Ring Wizards were becoming angry—their hosts were putting up much more of a fight than they had expected. What the Wizards had not accounted for was that Edmund and Ernold Heap were identical twins. All through the nightmarish trek along the Bolt, if one weakened the other encouraged him onward; in this way the Heaps had managed to keep going far longer than would have been possible if two unrelated Wizards had been **InHabited**. But the Heap twins had used their very last ounce of energy in protecting Jenna and now, as they fell out of the concealed door and ricocheted through the desks of the Manuscriptorium like two slow-motion pinballs, they were at the end of their endurance—and the Ring Wizards were at the end of their patience. The twins were hurled through the flimsy door that separated the Manuscriptorium from the Front Office, smashed into the stacks of papers piled up by the window and thrown through the front window.

Edmund and Ernold Heap lay crumpled on the pavement in front of the Manuscriptorium, sprinkled with rainbow shards of glass. A few passersby rushed over to help—but they stopped dead when a green mist began to swirl out from the bodies of the Heaps and rise up to form two pillars at least ten feet tall. Recognizing the **Darke Magyk** for what it was, people ran to the Wizard Tower for help only to find, to their dismay, that the Barricade was down. They hurried home and locked their doors.

But two visitors, Vilotta Bott and Tremula Finn, who had just arrived on the night Barge for the *Magyk of the Castle* tour, stayed to watch. The tour had not been going well. The Wizard Tower was unaccountably shut; not even the Courtyard was open. In the fabled Wizard Way most of the shops were closing, rather than opening, and now, to cap it all, the tour guide had run off.

“At least someone’s putting on a bit of a show,” Vilotta whispered to her friend.

Within the striking green pillars Vilotta and Tremula saw the mist circling slowly, purposefully, creating shadows and shapes. They were very impressed when within each one a human form began to solidify—ten feet tall, wearing

the ancient carapace armor of a Warrior Wizard and a very odd cloak, which looked dark and sparkly at the same time. Vilotta and Tremula were pleased—this was more like it. They watched in delight as shimmering green particles spun around the two impossibly tall figures like candy floss.

“I suppose they’re on stilts,” whispered Tremula.

“They’re very good; it’s really hard to stay still on stilts,” replied Vilotta.

As each wandering atom found its place the beings became clearer. The mist began to evaporate, sending sparkling, dancing motes up into the beams of sunlight that glanced off the silver torchpost outside the Manuscriptorium.

“So pretty,” murmured Tremula.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash of light and four beams of thin red light shot from the beings’ brilliant green eyes.

Vilotta and Tremula gasped with excitement.

In unison, Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn flung out their arms and two new **Volatile Wands** appeared. They swung around, the pinprick beams from their eyes sweeping along Wizard Way. Vilotta and Tremula offered a shy round of applause.

“It’s very realistic, isn’t it?” said Tremula, a little nervously.

It was horribly realistic.

Four red rays of light swung back and came to rest on Vilotta and Tremula. “Ooh, that prickles,” giggled Vilotta.

“This is a bit scary,” whispered Tremula.

“It *hurts!*” Vilotta gasped. “Ouch! Get *off* me.” She tried to brush the beams away.

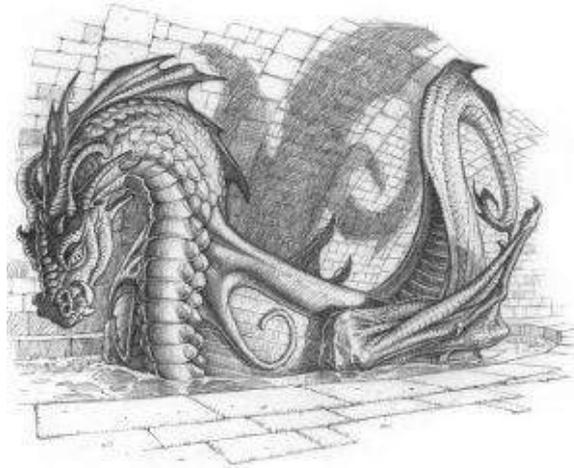
Tremula screamed.

Craaaaack! A **Bolt** of lightning zipped from each **Wand** and Vilotta and Tremula fell to the ground, wisps of green smoke rising from their new trip-to-the-Castle summer dresses.

Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn looked at each other, the ghost of a smile playing about their thin lips. Thousands of years spent trapped side by side in the Two-Faced Ring had given them a communication that did not require speech.

Fyre . . . We smell it . . . In the air . . . The means of . . . Our destruction . . . Must be . . . Destroyed.

The Ring Wizards spun around and marched down Wizard Way in perfect step. They left behind two brightly colored piles of rags outside Bott’s Cloaks, and outside the Manuscriptorium what appeared to be two empty, muddy sacks, strangely sad in the late spring sunshine.

DRAGONS AWAY

The fat, opalescent **Searching Glass** sat like a crouching spider on its gimbals in the center of **Search** and Rescue. The circular black-walled room was dim with shadows, the only light coming from the **Magykal Glass** that floated mysteriously inside its delicate black frame. Marcia and Hildegarde were staring into its depths in horror.

Hildegarde had her hands clamped over her mouth. “*They’ve killed them!*” she cried.

“Oh, those poor, *poor* men,” Marcia murmured.

“I . . . I can’t believe it. It’s so *awful*,” said Hildegarde. “And those women. Fancy just standing there, *watching*.”

Marcia shook her head. “People forget that **Magyk** is a dangerous thing.”

The quiet gloom of the **Searching Room** mirrored their somber mood as Marcia and Hildegarde stared at the image of two ten-foot-tall armored figures striding off down Wizard Way, their cloaks streaming behind them, trailing wisps of **Darke Light**. Wizard Way was, Marcia was relieved to see, deserted—the **Alert** was obviously working.

“Where are they *going*?” Marcia muttered anxiously. “Why aren’t they coming here for Jenna and Merrin?”

“But they don’t know Jenna and Merrin are here, do they?” Hildegarde said.

Marcia was finding Hildegarde irritatingly dense. She wondered if she had made a mistake in allowing her to move from sub-Wizard to a full Ordinary.

“Hildegarde, of *course* they **Know**. These Ancient Beings have links to their past like . . .” Marcia sought for a way to explain. “Like *fish*.”

“Fish?”

“On a line. A long line. Which you reel in.”

“So what are they reeling in now?” asked Hildegarde. “Haddock?”

Marcia glanced sharply at the new Wizard—was she being cheeky? But Hildegarde, who was a mistress of deadpan, looked utterly serious.

Marcia sighed. “Who knows?” she said. “Watch where they go. Keep me informed. Thank you, Hildegarde.”

Back in her rooms, the ghost of Jillie Djinn greeted Marcia in her own special way.

“*A fine fish . . . a haddock is . . . reel it in . . . reel it in.*”

Marcia gave a start. Jillie Djinn’s powers of speech had progressed a good deal and the ghost now had a disconcerting ability to know what she had just been talking about, which Marcia found extremely creepy. She rushed past and headed up to the Pyramid Library, where another almost equally annoying ghost greeted her.

“You will be pleased to know that we have found the Hotep-Ra **Committal Template**,” said Julius Pike.

“You *have*?”

“Here it is,” said Septimus. He pointed to a small square of yellowing vellum lying in the middle of the desk around which he, Rose, Beetle and Jenna—who was busy writing—were gathered. Marcia rushed over to inspect it. She took the delicate **Template** between finger and thumb and gazed reverentially at Hotep-Ra’s tiny, spidery writing, full of swirls and curlicues.

“*This really is it. The **Committal Template**.*” Marcia felt as though she had been given a reprieve. But something, she thought, did not make sense. She looked at Julius sharply. “So where was it?”

“In the **Hidden** Shelf in the Ancient Archives.”

Marcia was flummoxed. “But there *is* no **Hidden** Shelf in the Ancient Archives.”

Julius looked smug. “Clearly there is.”

“So why was this not recorded in the **Hidden** Index?”

The ghost did not reply. He looked, thought Septimus, decidedly shiftily.

“It seems to me, Mr. Pike, that in your time as ExtraOrdinary Wizard you **Hid** a good many things without recording them,” Marcia observed tartly.

The ghost was evasive. “Like all ExtraOrdinary Wizards, I did what I considered best.”

“An ExtraOrdinary Wizard cannot take it upon themselves to decide what future ExtraOrdinaries will or will not need to know. Your behavior is worse than high-handed—it is downright dangerous. Your actions have put us all in

great peril.”

There was an awkward silence—everyone knew that it was very rude of a current ExtraOrdinary Wizard to criticize previous incumbents—particularly to their face. Septimus decided to smooth things over. “Well, at least we have it now,” he said.

Jenna put down her pen and pushed a sheet of paper across to Marcia. “There—that’s what I said.”

“Thank you, Jenna.” Marcia took the paper. She placed it next to Hotep-Ra’s writing and compared the words on both. After some minutes she shook her head, puzzled.

“I don’t understand. Will you check them please, Septimus?” Painstakingly, Septimus compared what Jenna had written with Hotep-Ra’s **Template**—twice—and he, too, shook his head and passed it along to Beetle. Beetle did the same and passed it round to Rose.

“Well?” said Marcia.

“They’re the same,” all three said. “Identical.”

Marcia turned to Jenna, choosing her words with care. “Jenna, when you spoke the **Committal** you were in a terrifying situation. Maybe you didn’t say this *exactly*?”

Julius Pike chipped in impatiently. “Marcia, I assure you, the Princess said those very words. The problem is that the words were incomplete.” He stabbed a thin, ghostly finger at the vellum **Template**. “As is that. They are *both* missing the **Keystone** word.”

“Julius, don’t be ridiculous. How can Hotep-Ra’s very own **Template** be incomplete?”

Julius Pike spoke very slowly, clearly fighting to keep his temper. “I do not know. But it is. What is written there does not have a **Keystone**.”

“Not everything has a **Keystone**,” said Marcia, also trying to keep her temper.

“Everything that Hotep-Ra did had a **Keystone**. It is the ancient way.”

Marcia stared at the vellum. “Well, not in this one, Julius. *Clearly*.” She looked at Jenna. “I think you must have transposed or omitted a word.”

“But I *didn’t*.”

“Jenna, this is no reflection on you. But someone once said—someone I admire very much—that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth. And it is impossible that Hotep-Ra has not written the **Committal** right.”

Jenna stood up angrily. “But this *is* what I said.”

Marcia adopted a soothing tone that really annoyed Jenna. “Jenna, you were incredibly brave. It cannot have been easy to remember—”

“There is no need to patronize me as well as disbelieve me, Marcia. Excuse me, everyone.” With that Jenna walked out of the library. They heard her

rapid, angry footsteps clattering down the stone steps.

“Someone go after her, please,” said Marcia wearily. “Thank you, Beetle.”

Those left fell silent. Septimus was thinking. “Maybe,” he said, “there is more than one improbable truth. You see, when I spoke to Hotep-Ra—”

“When you *what?*” Julius Pike interrupted.

“Spoke to Hotep-Ra,” Septimus repeated.

The ghost gazed at him openmouthed.

From his pocket Septimus took a large blue-black pebble with a slight iridescent sheen to it. It nestled in his palm, showing a brilliant gold “Q” set into the stone. He put it on the desk in front of the ghost. “I went on the **Queste**.”

Julius Pike went virtually transparent. “The **Queste?**” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“And you *returned?*”

Septimus could not resist. He grinned. “Here I am, so I guess I must have.”

“*Septimus . . .*” warned Marcia.

Julius Pike looked stunned. “You *came back*. Unlike two of my Apprentices. Oh, my poor, dear Syrah. . . .”

Marcia held her hand up to stop Septimus. She knew what he was going to tell Julius. “This is not the time,” she said.

“So you met the ghost of Hotep-Ra on the **Queste?**” asked Julius.

“No. I met Hotep-Ra himself.”

“But . . . *how?*”

“It’s a long story,” said Septimus. “I’ll write it down one day.” He turned to Marcia. “One of the things Hotep-Ra asked me about was damage to his **Templates**. He was afraid they might have been degraded by the **Darke** stuff that DomDaniel brought to the Tower—degraded just enough so that they still looked okay, but they no longer worked. Of course I didn’t know anything about them at the time. But I think this is what must have happened.”

“Well, that *is* an explanation,” Marcia conceded. “If the **Template** is changed, then all other forms change with it at the very same time—including the spoken form. Which was why Jenna’s was identical.” She sighed. “So it’s hopeless. The **Committal** is lost forever. *Septimus, where are you going?*”

Septimus was already halfway out of the door. “I’m going to see Hotep-Ra,” he said.

Marcia leaped to her feet. “Don’t be ridiculous!”

“I’m not being ridiculous. I’m going to ask him what the **Committal** is. He must know.”

“Septimus, I will *not* allow you to go back to that ghastly House of Foryx. You’ll never come out again.”

“My **Questing Stone** gives me safe passage,” he said. “I can go into the House of Foryx and always come out in my own Time. *Always.*”

Marcia sighed. She thought of the alternative: of the **Darke** Wizards roaming the Castle unhindered, of the never-ending danger to Jenna—to everyone—and she knew she had no choice but to agree. “So . . . how do you propose to get there?”

There was only one way that made sense right then. “By Dragon Boat.”

Septimus found Jenna and Beetle down in the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower. Beetle was trying to persuade Jenna to come back upstairs, with little effect.

“Jen,” said Septimus. “I’m going to get the original **Committal** and I’d like you to come with me.”

“You bet,” said Jenna. “Anything to get out of here.”

The door of the duty Wizard’s cupboard opened a fraction and Milo’s head appeared. “Jenna,” he whispered. “I *thought* I heard you. I hope you’re not going outside.”

“Milo! What are *you* doing here?” said Jenna.

Milo sighed. He had been stuck in the cupboard ever since the Barricade had come down. “I do sometimes wonder,” he said. “Jenna, please, you *must* stay here. You are in great danger.”

“Jenna will be okay,” said Septimus. “We’re leaving the Castle at once.”

“Very sensible. I will escort you.”

Jenna was about to protest, but Septimus stepped in. “Thank you,” he said. “We’re going to Jannit’s boatyard.”

Milo took a serious-looking dagger from a small scabbard at his waist. Its shiny steel glinted purple, reflecting the lights flickering across the floor. “They won’t get past me,” he said. “Oh. *Bother.*”

Milo saw Marcia striding purposefully across the Great Hall at the head of a group of seven of the most senior Wizards. “Jenna, here are your guards,” she said. “You must allow them to surround you completely until you are safely aboard. *Milo!*”

Milo sighed. “Hello, Marcia.”

“You’ve had a wasted visit, Milo,” Marcia said acidly. “Hildegarde is busy at the moment. She has more important things to do.”

“Marcia, please, it’s not—”

“Of any consequence,” Marcia cut in. “Put it away, please, Milo. The Wizard Tower is a weapon-free zone.”

Milo sheathed his knife, muttering, “Sorry.”

Marcia turned to Septimus and Jenna. “**Search** and Rescue have a fix on Saarn and Naarn. They are heading up Alchemie Way, so you have a clear run to the boatyard. Hurry!”

Jenna looked at Beetle. “Will you come too? *Please?*” she asked.

Very regretfully, Beetle shook his head. “I can’t leave the Manuscriptorium

at a time like this.”

Jenna sounded disappointed. “No, of course you can’t. I’m sorry, I didn’t think.”

“But I’ll come with Milo and make sure you get to the boatyard okay,” said Beetle.

The great silver doors to the Wizard Tower swung open, and the party set off down the steps and headed across the Courtyard. Septimus, Beetle and Milo led the way, followed by a protective ring of seven Wizards, in the middle of which was Jenna. They **UnLocked** a small side gate and moved stealthily along the snaking pathway that led to the tunnel into Jannit Maarten’s boatyard.

The two Ring Wizards marched up Alchemie Way *left-right-left-right-left* covering the ground fast in their five-foot-long strides. At the foot of the Alchemie Chimney they stopped and stared up at it. Some brave watchers from the corner house on Gold Button Drop saw four pencil-thin beams of red light travel up the chimney and linger on the thin line of white smoke that emerged. They saw the ten-foot-tall shining beings turn to each other and agree something between them. Then, to their terror, they saw them swivel on their heels and head toward them. They dived under their bed and did not come out until the next morning.

Spit Fyre was in his usual place beside the Dragon Boat. His presence every night since Jenna had **Revived** her had given the Dragon Boat great strength. She was now fully recovered and her long, dark days covered in ice were no more than a distant memory. Spit Fyre opened an eye and regarded the oncoming party with interest, and at the sight of his Master he thumped his tail down with a bang. The Dragon Boat opened her eyes and bent her neck toward Spit Fyre, who lifted up his head and gently bumped her nose.

Nicko was showing Eustace Bott how to fix a keel bolt, but when he saw Milo, Septimus and Beetle leading a group of Wizards toward the Dragon Boat he put down his tools. Something was going on. “Eustace, I’ll be back in a moment,” he said.

Nicko headed over to the Dragon House, not quite believing what he was seeing—it looked to him as though Jenna and Septimus were going off in the Dragon Boat. The Wizards were now gathered inside the Dragon House and above their heads Nicko could see Septimus standing at the tiller, looking as if he was waiting for the wind to change. Jenna was in the prow, leaning down and saying something to Beetle. The dragon’s head was held high; a glint of emerald green glanced from her eyes, which were bright with excitement. With a delicate swanlike movement, the dragon lowered her head so that she was looking Jenna in the eye. Nicko saw Beetle jump back rather quickly,

then, shocked, he heard Jenna's whisper echo around the Dragon House:
"Take us to Hotep-Ra."

Nicko leaped up onto the marble walkway and pushed past the Wizards.
"Are you crazy?" he demanded.

"Nik, please don't be upset. We *have* to," Jenna said.

"You can't go back to that awful place. *You can't.*"

"I'm really sorry, Nik. We have no choice. We *have* to go."

Nicko knew Jenna well enough not to argue. "In that case," he said, "I am coming with you." And he jumped on board.

Now the purpose of the marble walkway that ran around the inside of the Dragon House became clear. It needed every one of the seven Wizards—plus Milo and Beetle—to push the Dragon Boat out from her berth. She was a heavy boat and moved slowly at first, but as the first ray of sun touched her nose, the dragon stretched her long neck out of the shadows of the Dragon House to feel the warmth. Now she began to glide easily out of the dim blue light, neck and tail arching up to greet the sun, her iridescent green scales shimmering in the sunlight.

Beetle, Milo and the Wizards walked the Dragon Boat along the narrow confines of the Cut and guided her out into the Moat. Jenna, Nicko and Septimus looked at one another, remembering the night—so long ago now—that they had brought her there, wounded and dying.

"I never thought we'd all be here again. Like this," said Nicko.

"I did," said Jenna. "I knew we would. One day."

While the Wizard escort made their way out of the boatyard, the Dragon Boat floated out into the middle of the Moat. She was watched in awe not only by Beetle, Milo and Eustace Bott, but also by a small boy in an attic window above the Castle Wall. Even Jannit Maarten looked mildly impressed as the dragon's magnificent wings—neatly folded along the hull—began to move slowly upward and unfurl until they were spread so wide the wing tips touched both banks of the Moat.

"Ready?" Septimus called down to his crew.

"Aye," said Nicko, lapsing into sailor-speak.

"Ready!" called Jenna.

"Septimus! Septimus!" a shout came from the boatyard.

"Wait," said Septimus. "There's Rose."

Breathless, Rose reached the edge of the Cut. "I've"—*puff, puff*—"got something for you. From Marcia. Here!" She waved her arm.

"Chuck it over, then," said Nicko.

Rose shook her head. "I'm a really bad shot," she called. "It might fall in the water."

"I can row you out," Eustace offered. "I got my boat." He pointed to a small rowboat tied up to the bank.

“Oh Eustace, you’re a star!” said Rose.

Eustace blushed. No one had ever called him a star before. A few minutes later Rose was standing on tiptoe, leaning against the smooth, burnished gold of the Dragon Boat’s hull, and Septimus was stretching down to take a small velvet **Charm** bag, in which he knew was the **Flyte Charm**.

“She’s such a beautiful boat,” said Rose shyly. “Does she really fly too?”

“Like a bird,” said Septimus.

“Wow . . .” Rose breathed. “That is just so . . . wow.”

“Are we going or what?” demanded Nicko.

“Oh, sorry, I’ll get out of your way,” said Rose.

“You’re not in our way,” said Septimus, reluctant to see Rose go.

“Oh, but I am. Good luck. I’ll be thinking of you.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” said Nicko. “Get the girl on board and stop fussing.”

“Gosh!” said Rose. “I *wish*. But . . .”

“Marcia would have a fit,” Septimus finished for her.

“Yes, she would.” Rose smiled. “Well, safe journey.”

The Dragon Boat got ready for takeoff. She pushed down the tip of her tail and stretched out her neck as though reaching for something far away, and then with a loud *thwoosh* her wings came down, sending water splashing onto the banks and Eustace Bott’s boat rocking. She began to move down the long, straight section of the Moat in front of the boatyard, slow at first but soon picking up speed. Seven wingbeats later Nicko felt the *thrum* of the water running below the hull disappear and he suddenly remembered how disturbing it felt to be in a boat that flew.

Septimus, however, felt utterly at home. He was surprised how much flying the Dragon Boat felt like flying Spit Fyre. Confidently, he pushed the tiller away from him, wheeling the creature up above the Castle walls. A continuing gentle pressure on the tiller brought the Dragon Boat around once more above the boatyard where Beetle, Milo and Eustace Bott waved. Jannit, however, stood impassive, arms folded, not at all pleased to see her Senior Apprentice going absent without leave—although she was more than pleased to see that *that wretched dragon* was going too.

As the Dragon Boat flew high up above the Castle, Spit Fyre—like the dutiful son he was—followed her. But Septimus had yet to realize that Spit Fyre was coming too. All the Dragon Boat’s passengers had eyes for was what they could see far below: the Wizard escort now gathered outside the Manuscriptorium around the bodies of Ernold and Edmund Heap.

INTRUDERS

Simon was home for an early lunch when he and Lucy—like the rest of the Castle—had received the **Alert**. Every house that had accepted the **Alert** system now possessed a small luminescent box beside their front door, which normally glowed a dull green. When this was **Activated** by the Wizard Tower, the box turned a brilliant red (or yellow for practice drills). The door of the box then flew open and released the **Lert**—which looked like a large red hornet—which proceeded to buzz noisily through the house and **Alert** everyone there. Lucy hated the **Lert**.

“Argh, get it off me!” she yelled, batting it away as it circled her head.

“Just keep still, Lu,” said Simon. “It will go away in a minute and look for someone else.” Sure enough, the **Lert** suddenly switched its attentions to Simon, sending him running back to the door to thump the **Alert Off** button. The **Lert** zoomed back into its box, Simon clicked the little door shut and raced back to the kitchen.

“It’s a bit much doing another drill so soon after last night,” Lucy grumbled as she fished two boiled eggs out of a pan. Then she noticed Simon’s expression. “Si . . . what’s the matter?”

“Lu, it’s not a drill.”

“It’s *not*?”

“Nope. The panel isn’t yellow—it’s red.”

Lucy jumped to her feet. “What’s going on?”

“I dunno, Lu. But I have to go and warn Marcellus. He won’t know a thing about this.”

Lucy was horrified. “Simon, no!”

“I’ll be fine. I’m quite good at looking after myself, you know.”

Lucy sighed. One look at Simon told her she could not stop him. “Oh, Si, be careful.”

Simon took a heavy gold **SafeCharm** from his pocket—the strongest one he possessed. “Lu, keep hold of this *all the time*. I will put a **Bar** on the house when I go. Love you.” Simon gave Lucy a quick kiss and hurried off before she could make him change his mind.

Marcellus was blissfully untroubled by any **Lerts**. Now that the **Fyre** was at full strength, he was terrified that it might reveal a new weakness in the Cauldron so, in addition to his regular tapping, he had begun to do visual inspections. In the old days his Drummins had done this, running across the Cauldron like lizards on a hot rock, their suckered fingers and toes taking them wherever they wanted to go, their sharp eyes seeing every detail. But Marcellus had to do it the slow, human way—with spectacles, a ladder and a **Fyre Globe**.

This morning, Marcellus had dispensed with the ladder and was inspecting underneath the Cauldron. Spectacles firmly clamped onto his nose, he looked up at the circle of light that the **Fyre Globe** cast onto the Cauldron’s smooth iron surface. Suddenly something caught his eye—a small, lighter-colored circle of metal from which a starburst of skillfully repaired cracks radiated out. Marcellus peered through his **Enlarging Glass** at the tiny circle. He smiled; it was a typical Drummin repair: a little plug of iron surrounded by a ring of brass solder that glinted red in the light. He ran his fingers lightly over its surface but felt nothing—it was smoothed flat, blended in perfectly with the surrounding darker metal. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship. But Marcellus was puzzled. He peered again at the little circle at the center of its web, wondering what could have caused it. It looked almost like a bullet hole, he thought. It was very odd. And then it struck Marcellus—*this* was the damage that had caused the Great Alchemie Disaster. The sudden certainty took his breath away, and a thousand questions raced through his mind with no hope of an answer. How he would love to be able to ask old Duglius Drummin what had happened. A great wave of sadness washed over Marcellus and he leaned against the rock, taken aback by how very alone he felt without the Drummins.

Suddenly, Marcellus heard the *claaaang* of the lower **Fyre** hatch closing and the distinct sound of *two* sets of heavy footsteps on the top platform. Marcellus was not particularly sensitive to atmosphere, but in his **Fyre** Chamber his instincts were heightened. And right then his instincts were telling him *keep out of the way*. Marcellus shrank back into the shadows beneath the Cauldron, wondering *who was it?* He supposed it was possible that in some kind of emergency Simon had brought Septimus with him. Or even Marcia. But there was something about the footsteps that did not sound like Simon or Septimus—and they certainly did not sound like Marcia. Marcellus realized that for the first time in his life he actually *wanted* to hear the tippy-tappy sound of Marcia Overstrand’s pointy purple pythons. Things, he thought, must be bad.

Marcellus listened to the protesting squeaks of the ladder as the intruders began to climb down. After what felt like an eternity listening to each step getting closer, a clang reverberating above his head told Marcellus that the intruders had reached the Viewing Station.

Marcellus decided to risk a quick look. Silently, he slipped out from the protection of the Cauldron and looked up. Some thirty feet above, silhouetted against the red light, Marcellus saw a nightmare—two impossibly tall figures wearing cloaks of what he could only describe as dark light, moving and shifting, so that it was impossible to see any boundaries in their form. And beneath the cloaks Marcellus caught a glimpse of iridescent green armor, segmented like the carapace of a giant insect. Like two passengers on a ship, gazing at the sunset, the figures stared down at the brilliant circle of **Fyre**.

Marcellus experienced another Time Slip. Back to a time a few weeks before the Great Alchemie Disaster, when Julius Pike had brought a visiting Wizard to see the **Fyre** without asking his permission, and he had spotted them from pretty much where he was standing now. It was such a strong feeling that Marcellus was on the verge of yelling, *Julius—what do you think you are doing*, just as he had done before, when one of the figures stepped back and Marcellus saw the green glow of his face and the searing glance of his brilliant green eyes.

The Time Slip vanished.

Up until that moment, Marcellus had not believed in evil. During his long life he had come across many variations of being bad: lies, treachery, deceit, violence and just plain nastiness, and he would be the first to admit that he had probably been guilty of a few himself. But “evil” had undertones of the supernatural that Marcellus found hard to accept. But no longer. He *knew* he was in the presence of evil. And he knew why—*these were the Ring Wizards*.

Marcellus sank to the ground, and there he sat on the dusty earth, trying to figure out what had happened, while all kinds of terrible thoughts went through his mind. Marcellus put his head in his hands. It was all over now.

Everything he had worked for was finished. He slumped down in despair and *something tapped him on the top of his head.*

How Marcellus managed not to scream was a mystery to him. Maybe, he thought later, he had recognized the soft, slightly apologetic touch. Whatever the reason, Marcellus leaped up and swung around to find himself face-to-face—with Duglius Drummin.

KEEPERS

Head held high, the Dragon Boat flew quickly away from the Castle, the gilding on her hull shimmering in the sunlight. As her huge, leathery wings beat slowly *up-and-down-and-up-and-down*, creaking a little with the unaccustomed effort, she took a direct path out across the river and over the orchards of the lower Farmlands, pink with late apple blossoms. She was followed by a smaller, greener, leaner dragon who was flying his fastest to keep pace with her.

“Spit Fyre, go home!” Septimus yelled.

Keeping his hand on the tiller, Septimus looked back, past the great scaly tail of the Dragon Boat and its golden tip to his dragon, who followed like a faithful dog.

“Spit Fyre coming too?” asked Nicko.

“No,” said Septimus. “He’s not.”

“That’s not what *he* seems to think,” Nicko observed.

Septimus was not pleased. “Spit Fyre! *Go home!*” he shouted again.

But Spit Fyre appeared to hear nothing—although Septimus suspected he heard perfectly well. His dragon wore the smug look that showed that he knew had gotten the better of his Master.

“Bother,” said Septimus. “He can’t come with us. He won’t be able to keep up.”

Jenna had not noticed Spit Fyre. She sat in the prow of the Dragon Boat, looking back at the Castle—a perfect golden circle surrounded by blue and green—and tried to shake off the feeling that she was deserting the Castle just

when it needed her.

Septimus caught Jenna's eye and smiled encouragingly. He remembered the last time they had flown together, when they were being pursued by Simon, and he thought of how different everything was now—and yet not completely different. The Two-Faced Ring was the last link of the chain of **Darknesse** that led back to DomDaniel, and Septimus was determined to break it. Jenna returned Septimus's smile and leaned against the Dragon Boat's neck. The sunlight glinted off her gold circlet and her long dark hair streamed out behind her. Septimus had a sudden sense that he would remember this moment forever.

Nicko, however, was less inclined to remember the moment. To his embarrassment, he was feeling sick. He couldn't believe it—he was never seasick. But there was something very unsettling about the constant *up-and-down-and-up-and-down* motion of the Dragon Boat that bore no relation to anything sensible like waves. Queasily, Nicko stared over the side and concentrated on the world in miniature as it passed far below, hoping that would make the sickness go. Soon he saw the fine silver line of Deppen Ditch and the hazy green flatness of the Marram Marshes beyond, peppered with little round islets rising out of the mist.

Jenna made her way along the deck toward Septimus. "Sep . . . you know . . . Uncle Eddie and Uncle Ern . . ."

"Yes," Septimus said quietly.

"Well, do you remember how Aunt Zelda got Merrin back from being **Consumed**?"

"Pity she ever did," growled Nicko.

"Yes . . . well, maybe she could do the same for them."

"Maybe." Septimus looked down at the Marshes below. Somewhere among the mist lay Aunt Zelda's island—but where?

"The Dragon Boat knows how to find Aunt Zelda," said Jenna. "It wouldn't take long. *And it's their only chance.*"

"You're right," said Septimus. He looked back at Spit Fyre. "Besides, I have a package to drop off. A great big green one."

Wolf Boy was standing by a large and very gloopy patch of mud, trying to persuade the Boggart to collect some Marsh Bane.

"I don't go out fer Marsh Bane in the day," the Boggart was saying. "Not anymore. If yer so set on it, you can come back an' ask at midnight."

"But you're never here at midnight," Wolf Boy was saying.

"I is."

"Not when *I* come to see you, you're not—*hey!*"

"No need ter shout," complained the Boggart—but to thin air.

Wolf Boy was running back to the cottage, yelling, "Zelda! Zelda! The

Dragon Boat—the *Dragon Boat is coming!*”

Aunt Zelda came to the door, her face flushed from boiling a mixture of eels and a fresh crop of Bogle Bugs. Stunned, she watched the Dragon Boat and her faithful follower cruise low over the island, circle twice and swoop in to land on the Mott—the wide Marsh ditch that encircled the cottage.

Aunt Zelda was so shocked that she could do no more than shake her head in disbelief and stare at the great plumes of muddy water that arched into the air as the Dragon Boat hit the Mott. When Aunt Zelda wiped the spray from her eyes, she saw her beautiful Dragon Boat furl her wings and settle into the Mott, and it seemed to her as though the Dragon Boat had never been away. There was a sudden flash of red against the gold of the hull, and Aunt Zelda saw Jenna leap down and run up the path toward her.

“Aunt Zelda!” yelled Jenna.

“Hmm?” said Aunt Zelda, still transfixed by the sight of the Dragon Boat.

“Aunt Zelda,” Jenna said urgently, grabbing both of Aunt Zelda’s somewhat sticky hands. “Please, listen. *Please*. This is *very* important.”

Aunt Zelda did not react.

“Give Zelda a moment,” said Wolf Boy. “She’s had a shock.”

Jenna waited impatiently while Aunt Zelda, her eyes full of tears, gazed at the Dragon Boat. Suddenly Aunt Zelda shook her head, wiped her hands on her dress and turned to look at Jenna. “Yes, dear?”

Quickly, Jenna launched into her story before Aunt Zelda’s attention wandered. She made it fast and simple and soon came to the end. “So you see, Aunt Zelda, your nephews, Ern and Eddie. They so need your help.”

Aunt Zelda said nothing.

Wolf Boy prompted her, “You’ll need Drastic Drops, Urgent Unguent and your modified Vigour Volts. Won’t you, Zelda?”

Aunt Zelda sighed.

Jenna was beginning to despair when suddenly Aunt Zelda looked at her with the old, wise gaze that Jenna had missed so much. “Jenna dear. My memory is going. My powers are weakening. I know that I would not be able to bring my very silly but—by the sound of it—brave nephews back to this world.”

“Aunt Zelda, you can. *Please*.”

Aunt Zelda shook her head. “I can’t.” She turned to Wolf Boy. “But I know someone who can.”

It was Wolf Boy’s turn to shake his head. “No, Zelda. That’s a Keeper’s skill.”

“It is indeed a Keeper’s skill. Which is why, Wolf Boy—or I think I should call you Marwick now—I am giving you this.” From her pocket, Aunt Zelda took a small silver chain, made with delicate triple links. “It’s the Keeper’s chain. It got a little tight for me last year and I took it off. I knew then that my

Keeping Time was drawing to a close. But it will fit you perfectly, Marwick dear.”

Wolf Boy was shocked. “No, Zelda!”

“Yes, Marwick. Soon I will forget where the Keeper’s chain is and then I will forget even what it is. You must take the chain now, while I still understand what it is I am giving you.” Aunt Zelda smiled at Septimus and Nicko, who had come up the path to join them, leaving Spit Fyre sitting beside the Dragon Boat. “You see, now we have everyone we need for a handover. We have the Queen—well, as near as makes no difference—and the representative of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard as witnesses. All I need now is the permission of the Queen.”

Jenna knew what to say. “Keeper, I give it.”

“Your Grace, I also give it,” Aunt Zelda replied. She handed the chain to Jenna, who had to stand on tiptoe to fasten it around Wolf Boy’s rather grubby neck.

“Gosh,” said Wolf Boy. He touched the delicate chain and the echoes of all those who had worn it before ran through his fingers.

From another pocket, deep in her faded patchwork dress, Aunt Zelda took a bunch of keys, all different shapes and sizes, and handed it to Wolf Boy. “You will be a good Keeper, Marwick,” she said.

“Thank you, Zelda,” said Wolf Boy. He looked around at his friends and shook his head in disbelief. “Wow. Hey. Well, I’d better get on. Got work to do. Uncles to fix. *And fast.*”

Aunt Zelda hugged Wolf Boy hard. “And you will do it, Marwick. I know you will . . .” Her voice trembled for a moment, then she swallowed hard and said brightly, “Well, now. You don’t want me hanging around getting in the way. I shall go and talk to the Dragon Boat.”

Wolf Boy, Jenna, Nicko and Septimus watched Aunt Zelda walk away down the path to the Mott.

“Oh, dear,” said Jenna. She took out a red silk handkerchief and blew her nose.

“Yeah . . .” said Wolf Boy. He looked at his friends. “I’ll do my best, I promise. I’d better go now. Get there as quick as I can.”

“Good luck, Marwick!” Jenna called out.

Wolf Boy raised his hand in acknowledgment and disappeared into the shadows of the cottage.

Jenna, Septimus and Nicko walked slowly down the path. The Dragon Boat lay still and majestic in the water, her head dipped down to Aunt Zelda, who was stroking the dragon’s soft, velvety nose. Spit Fyre watched. He looked, thought Septimus, a trifle jealous.

Aunt Zelda gave the dragon a last affectionate pat and stepped away. “Well, dears, you had better be off. I must say the Dragon Boat looks beautiful. You

have cared for her very well.”

Jenna looked at Septimus as if to check something out with him. He nodded.

“Aunt Zelda,” Jenna said. “Would you like to come with us in the Dragon Boat?”

Aunt Zelda shook her head sadly. “I can’t leave the cottage empty. We have an awful Marsh Brownie problem at the moment. They’ll be in as soon as I’m gone. They’ll eat *everything*.” She looked regretfully at the Dragon Boat. “Oh, but I would have so loved to.”

Five minutes later a reluctant Spit Fyre was outside Keeper’s Cottage. “Spit Fyre, I declare you official Dragon Guardian of Keeper’s Cottage,” Septimus told him. “Do not let a Marsh Brownie—or any other Marsh creature—within ten yards of Keeper’s Cottage until Aunt Zelda returns. Understood?”

Spit Fyre thumped his tail crossly. He understood all right—he had been outmaneuvered. He began his first Dragon Guardian circuit of the cottage and wondered what Marsh Brownies tasted like. He intended to eat as many as he could.

In a great spray of muddy Marsh water, the Dragon Boat took off from the Mott. Septimus wheeled the Dragon Boat around the cottage to check up on Spit Fyre and then they flew out across the Marshes, heading for the dunes and the sparkling sea beyond. Aunt Zelda sat up at the prow with Jenna, her hand resting on the smooth scales of the dragon’s neck. She smiled contentedly, gazing out into a distant future that only she could see.

DEEP TROUBLE

*Down in the Deeps, behind the Cauldron, Marcellus was squashed into a Drummin burrow. The rock face of the **Fyre** Chamber was peppered with entrances that led to a hidden city—a complex system of chambers and branching tunnels shaped like a hollowed-out tree within the rock. The main trunk was a wide, winding thoroughfare, big enough for even a human to clamber up, and from this branched many smaller tunnels. These were the Drummin public spaces, lit by GloGrubs, with the larger chambers lit by tiny Globes of Everlasting **Fyre**. The smaller tunnels led to groups of private chambers (which the Drummins called nests) where they slept. These were arranged in clusters branching off a central passage, and although Drummins preferred not to share a nest, the clusters were sociable affairs and often occupied by groups of friends who had grown up together.*

Marcellus was in the largest public chamber of all, one that he could actually sit up in. Beside him squatted the compact figure of Duglius Drummin. Like all Drummins, Duglius was hard to spot unless you knew he was there. Drummins had a look of the earth about them. Their long hair was

plaited and knotted into thick ropes, which were smeared with earth. Their chalk-white skin, which had never seen daylight, was covered with a fine dust from the rock, and their broad fingers and toes—which ended in fat, squashy suckers that allowed them to swarm across both rock and Cauldron alike—were grimy with dirt. If there was one word that could be used to describe a Drummin, it was “grubby.” But from the grime and dirt two big, round black eyes, bright and questioning, took in every detail of Marcellus Pye. From the moment he had tapped his old Master on the shoulder, Duglius Drummin had not stopped smiling—so broadly that Marcellus could see the Drummin’s tiny yellow teeth.

Marcellus and Duglius were conversing in the sign language the Drummins preferred to use. Duglius was telling Marcellus, *Julius Pike, he did drag you away so roughly that we thought he would do away with you. Most sorrowful were we as we made all safe and repaired the breach that caused the Fyre and then did set all ready for when the Fyre might begin once more. Ah, Alchemist, it were terrible cold by then and we was horrible slow. But we got back to our nests in time for to catch the last bit of rock warmth—enough to make our cocoons.*”

Cocoons? signed Marcellus.

Aye. To sleep the long sleep.

I did not know.

Duglius winked at Marcellus. *We Drummins must have our secrets too, Alchemist,* he signed. *The cold is our lullaby, the warmth of the Fyre our morning sun.*

Marcellus had forgotten the lyrical lilt of Drummin talk, which spilled over into their signing so that their hands seemed to dance as the words tumbled out. He relaxed, forgetting the danger for a moment. He was back home with his family and together they could work something out.

A little later Marcellus was not so optimistic. He had crawled out of the burrow only to be confronted by a frighteningly bright red glow filling the cavern. The light sparkled off the ancient twisted metal embedded in the rock so that the vaulted roof of the cavern seemed to be covered in the shining silvery web of a giant crazed spider. The air seemed to crackle and spark as Marcellus breathed it in, and it left the taste of metal on the tip of his tongue. Suddenly another Time Slip took him back to the very beginning of the Great Alchemie Disaster. *This was how the air tasted then.*

Fighting back panic, Marcellus dropped down into the shadows below the Cauldron. The heat was oppressive; already the sweat was pouring down his brow and his woolen robes hung heavy and hot. Marcellus crept stealthily under the round belly of the Cauldron. Tortoiselike and purposeful, he moved out from the protection of the Cauldron until he saw the massive shadows of

Shamandrigger Saarn and Dramindonnor Naarn cast onto the opposite wall of the cavern. Marcellus watched them for some minutes, but they were motionless and gave no clue as to what they were doing. A slight movement behind him caught his eye and Marcellus's heart raced with fear. Very slowly he turned around only to see a line of Drummins looking up at him, their black eyes wide in the darkness, seeing far more than he could ever see. Marcellus smiled—he had forgotten the Drummins' habit of following him around. He signaled that they should stay where they were and, determined to see what was happening, he began to move slowly out from the protection of the Cauldron.

And then Marcellus saw them—high above on the Inspection Walkway, directing pencil-thin beams of red light onto the top of the **Fyre**, the intruders were walking slowly around the Cauldron, as though they were stirring a huge pot of broth. Marcellus saw the Alchemical blue flames leaping up to meet them, like fish jumping for bugs, and he knew what was happening—slowly but surely, the **Fyre** was being **Accelerated**.

Alchemical **Fyre** has many contradictions—one of these being that, unlike normal fire, the addition of coal will calm and contain it. Like a lion rendered drowsy by devouring a small antelope, Alchemical **Fyre** will be soothed by a blanket of coal.

Marcellus knew he must act fast. Hidden in the roof of the **Fyre** Chamber was a huge hopper of cannel coal, but the levers to release it were in the control room—and the only way for him to get there was in full view of the Wizards. He decided to make a run for it—but to give himself a chance first he needed to take off his shoes.

The movement caught the eye of Shamandrigger Saarn. Rapier blades of red light left the **Fyre** and swung down across the floor, searching. Marcellus froze, balancing on one leg like a stork. Methodically, the rays swept across the floor, back and forth, back and forth, getting ever closer to Marcellus. He closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable.

Therunnk. The sound of the **Fyre** hatch opening echoed through the cavern. The red beams swung upward. Marcellus opened his eyes. He saw Simon drop down, stop, and then shoot back up the ladder like a rat up a drainpipe. Simon was very nearly through the hatch when one of the beams caught his rapidly exiting boot and sliced into it. Marcellus heard a scream and then the *claaaang* of the **Fyre** hatch slamming shut.

Marcellus sank back into the shadows, shocked. *Had Simon gotten out?* More to the point, had *all* of Simon gotten out? Or was his foot still lying on the Upper Platform? No, Marcellus told himself sternly, he must not think like that. He must believe that not only had Simon gotten out, but that he was on his way to Marcia to warn her what was happening. Because now, after Duglius had told him the truth of what caused the Great Alchemie Disaster,

Marcellus wanted Marcia to know *everything*.

Simon's experience at the hands of the Ring Wizards had made Marcellus realize that he had no chance of getting to the Control Room alive. But the Drummins just might.

Back in the Drummin burrow, Marcellus sat with Duglius and his deputy, Perius.

Duglius, Marcellus signed. *I am going to get help.*

Duglius looked doubtful. He didn't see what help Marcellus could get. But it was not his job to question the Alchemist. He merely signed: *What can we do, Alchemist?*

Marcellus had it planned. *One set*—this was what working parties of Drummins called themselves—to go to the control room, where they must let down the coal to protect the **Fyre** rods. *One set each to the water inlet and to the outlet to keep the water flowing. All sets on call to replace any sets, er . . .*

Destroyed, signed Duglius, matter-of-factly.

Yes. Unfortunately that will be necessary, signed Marcellus. "And now, Duglius, I shall take the Drummin way out."

Duglius looked at his Master critically. "You won't fit," he said.

"I will have to fit," said Marcellus.

Like a blindworm, Marcellus crawled up through the main Drummin way—the large burrow that ran up inside the rock like the hollowed-out trunk of a tree. There was not much space for a six-foot-tall Alchemist who had recently been eating too many potatoes.

Marcellus saw the way winding ahead, speckled with tiny wriggling lights, the GloGrubs that had colonized the burrows thousands of years in the past. The trunk went up at a slope that was gentle for a Drummin but fiendishly steep for a human. It was hot and horribly stuffy and, like a Drummin, was coated with a fine dust. The dust made the climb even more difficult—it caused Marcellus to slip and slide and it got into his lungs, making him wheeze and gasp for breath.

But anger drove Marcellus on. Anger at what Duglius Drummin told him he had found beneath the Cauldron after Julius had shut down the **Fyre**. Anger at how he had been misled. But most of all, Marcellus was angry that, because of the deceits of Julius Pike, the Castle had once more been put at risk. And so he scrabbled and scraped his way up through the main burrow, past the tiny branching burrows that led to Drummin nests that until only a few hours ago had been filled with Drummin cocoons.

As he climbed painfully upward, Marcellus noticed that the rock was becoming cooler and he guessed that he was now moving out of the cavern, away from the **Fyre**. The branches leading to the Drummin nests had ceased,

and to Marcellus's relief the escape burrow had actually widened. The gradient had also eased and the burrow settled into a series of loops like a huge corkscrew along which Marcellus was now able to crawl rather than climb. Spirits rising by the minute, Marcellus crawled fast, no longer caring about skinning his knees or scraping his fingers or the fact that, with the GloGrubs growing sparse, he was crawling in semidarkness. He was, he was sure, very nearly at the escape hatch that would take him into the lower Ice Tunnel beneath the Great Chamber of Alchemie.

And then disaster struck. As he rounded another turn of the corkscrew, Marcellus crawled at some speed into a rockfall. With the hollow thud of a coconut hitting the ground, Marcellus's head made contact with the rock. A shower of stars exploded in his eyes, he reeled back and collapsed into the dust. And there he lay, eyes closed, blood trickling from a spreading bruise on his forehead.

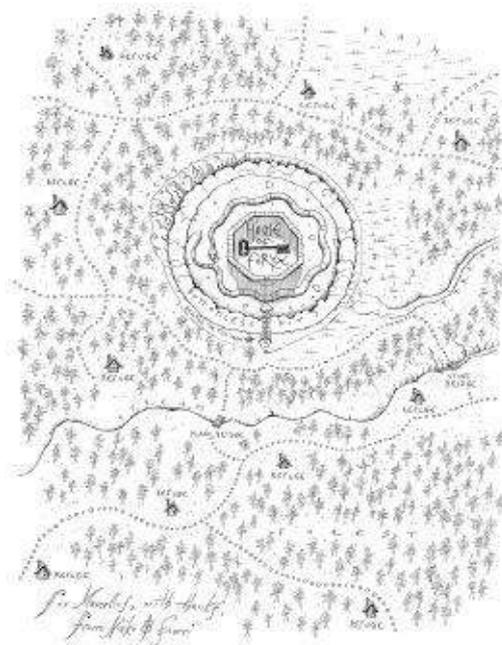
Far below in the Chamber of **Fyre**, a Drummin set—the third to try—at last reached the Control Room. They swarmed up the wall and swung the first of the bank of levers down. Seconds later, with a thunderous roar, a cascade of coal tumbled down the chute in the roof and fell through the air into the Cauldron. As the rain of soft coal hit the flames, a tremendous *hissss* filled the Deeps and a great cloud of black dust rose into the air, covering the Ring Wizards and turning their green carapaces a dusty black. Buzzing with anger, like two wasps emerging from hibernating in the ashes of the grate, the Wizards wheeled around searching for victims but found none—a Drummin in a dusty cloud is very nearly invisible. Thwarted, the Wizards swung their red light beams across the blanket of coal that now rested on top of the **Fyre**. With a great *whoomph*, the coal ignited and a sheet of flame leaped into the air. The Wizards were jubilant.

Far below in the sooty dust, the Drummins, too, were happy. As long as the coal burned, the **Fyre** was safe.

Slowly, slowly, the flames from the coal fire began to creep beneath the Castle. They spread through the Vents that Marcellus had so recently opened, warming the rock above and the floors of the older houses. People threw open their windows, complaining of the late afternoon heat, and when the evening clouds came in from the Port, the rain sizzled as it hit the pavement.

Up in **Search** and Rescue, Hildegarde saw the first flame as it licked up through the pavement in front of Terry Tarsal's shop. She raced down to the Great Hall, where Marcia had set up what she called her "command post."

"Fire!" yelled Hildegarde. "Fire, fire, *fire!*"

FORYX

*While Marcellus lay unconscious in the dark, the Dragon Boat flew into the night—across the sea, over the Isles of Syren where the CattRokk Light shone bright, and on toward the Land of the House of Foryx. Septimus, Nicko and Jenna took turns at the tiller—not to guide the dragon, who knew where she was going, but to keep her company on her journey. The night was calm and clear and the stars glittered like ice crystals spilled across the sky. Lulled by the *up-and-down-and-up-and-down* of the Dragon Boat, Nicko lay on his back staring up at the night until he began to believe he was back at sea, rolling through a storm swell riding in from the ocean.*

In the small hours of the morning Septimus saw landfall and took the Dragon Boat down low to see where they were. As they flew over a long sandspit dotted with fishermen's shacks on stilts, Septimus caught sight of a little girl gazing out of a lighted attic window. He waved and the child waved back. She watched the Dragon Boat go on her way, then fell asleep and dreamed of dragons.

The Dragon Boat flew on, above the Trading Post where a necklace of lights showed its line of harbors, across the inlet on which they lay and then over a maze of sandbanks that gave way to marshes, then miles of flatness of

drained farmlands. They were now in the Land of the House of Foryx.

While it was still dark back at the Castle—and darker still where Marcellus lay—for those on the Dragon Boat the night began to slip away. Aunt Zelda, who was sitting in the prow with Jenna, who was sleeping curled up under a quilt, saw a thin band of pale green appear on the horizon above the darkness of the nighttime fields.

“We are flying into the sun,” Aunt Zelda whispered.

Steadily, *up-and-down-and-up-and-down*, the Dragon Boat flew on. Wrapped in another of Aunt Zelda’s quilts, Nicko dozed, while Septimus drowsily held the tiller and watched the land passing below. In the encroaching dawn he saw the shapes of scattered farmhouses dark against the land and the glow of the occasional lonely light as people began to wake and go about their early-morning tasks.

The band of pale green spread slowly across the sky and washed into a dull yellow. Far below the shining band of a river wound through a patchwork of fields dusted with snow. Jenna woke and yawned. She felt stiff and cold but the sight of the lightening sky ahead, which was now taking on a delicate pink hue, revived her. She became aware of Nicko moving around the deck and turned to blearily say good morning.

Nicko was advancing with two mugs in one hand, holding on to the gunwales with the other. “Morning, sleepyhead,” he said. “Drinkies.”

He passed Jenna and Aunt Zelda mugs of hot chocolate.

“Wow, Nik, thanks.”

“You can thank Sep. He’s got some new gizmo in that bag of his.”

“A *hot-chocolate Charm*?” Jenna smiled.

“Yep. Each in its own mug. Neat, hey?”

“Thanks, Sep,” Jenna called down the boat.

“S’okay, Jen. Hey, I can see the forest now!”

Jenna looked down and saw that the landscape was changing fast. The dusting of snow had become a continuous blanket of white that showed dark lines of tracks winding through large expanses of trees. As she watched, the treetops grew closer and closer together and the tracks disappeared, hidden beneath the canopy of white.

Like the forest beneath them, the Dragon Boat’s crew fell silent. The steady *swoosh-whoosh* of the wingbeats was the only sound as the dragon flew onward until all that could be seen below was a featureless sea of snowy treetops stretching out to the wide horizon. On and on they flew, gazing down at the trees, until they lost their sense of direction and even Septimus began to wonder if the Dragon Boat was flying around in circles.

All traces of pink were gone from the sky when the crew sensed a change in the Dragon Boat’s flight. The wings began to slow to a *swoosh-oooosh-whoosh*, the dragon’s neck dipped and Jenna saw her emerald eyes scanning

ahead.

A sudden flash of sunlight from a gap in the clouds lit up a fragile silver arc strung high above the trees, making it sparkle like a giant, dew-drizzled spiderweb—and the bridge to the House of Foryx was revealed. Even Septimus, who had terrifying memories of crossing the bridge, was taken aback by how beautiful it looked. A few seconds later the sun slipped behind the clouds and the bridge was gone, blending once more into the white skies. The Dragon Boat leaned sharply into a turn and headed downward.

And then, suddenly, the House of Foryx was there. Stark-black against the snow, a great fortress of granite, it sat in solitary splendor on a pillar of rock encircled by a deep and dark abyss. Its four huge octagonal towers, which surrounded an even larger octagonal core, reared up into the white sky, and above them wheeled a murder of crows, cawing at the morning.

“Oh, dear,” whispered Aunt Zelda.

Nicko slid along the deck and came to sit next to Aunt Zelda. She put her arm around him and wrapped him in her quilt. Nicko, who did not like to be “fussed,” as he called it, did not resist. Together he, Aunt Zelda and Jenna watched the House of Foryx draw closer.

Nicko shivered. What really spooked him was not the building—it was the knowledge that inside the fortress below, where Time did not exist, there were so many people, their lives suspended while they waited to go back out once more to their own Times. Just as he and Snorri had once waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. Nicko looked down at the blind windows, covered with a shifting film like oil on water, and wondered which one it was that he and Snorri had spent what had felt like an eternity gazing out from. Suddenly he got up and made his way up the sloping deck to Septimus.

“Sep. Don’t go back in there. *Please.*”

“Hey, Nik, it’s okay,” said Septimus. He pulled the **Questing Stone** out of his pocket and turned it upside down to show Hotep-Ra’s hieroglyph underneath it, gold against the black. “See, this is my pass. It means I can come and go as I please. I can always return to my Time. It really *is* okay this time.”

Nicko shook his head. “I don’t believe it.”

“Nik, even if you don’t believe the pass will work, it is *still* okay. You and Jenna are here. Aunt Zelda is here. In our Time. If I don’t come out, you can ring the bell and ask for me, and then I can walk back out into our Time. You *know* that.”

Nicko shook his head again. “You can’t trust them.”

Septimus knew there was nothing he could say to win Nicko over. He renewed his grip on the tiller and began to guide the Dragon Boat low across the House of Foryx, toward a glass dome in the very center, invisible from below. Unlike the dead windows in the rest of the House of Foryx, a soft

yellow light spread up from the dome and glowed in the gray morning air.

Hotep-Ra had become a creature of habit. In a place where Time did not exist, the ancient Wizard had created his own rhythm of time. Every day, to the second, he did the same thing, and often he even thought the same thoughts. The last time his routine had changed had been when a young Apprentice named Septimus Heap had come to see him at the end of his **Queste**. How long ago that had been, Hotep-Ra had no idea. It could have been the previous day. It could have been hundreds of years in the past. In the House of Foryx it made no difference.

That morning, Hotep-Ra's routine and thoughts traveled their usual tracks: he lit a candle, lay back in his chair beneath the dome, gazed up into the white-snow sky and thought about his Dragon Boat. So when Hotep-Ra actually saw the brilliant gold and green of the Dragon Boat fly overhead, he was not at first surprised. It was only after her second pass that Hotep-Ra realized that his Dragon Boat actually *was* outside. In what Time she was, he did not know. But she had come for him, as he had known one day she would.

Hotep-Ra got out of his chair and said to his Apprentice, Talmar Ray Bell, "I am just going outside. I may be some time."

Talmar looked horrified. "Don't say that!"

Hotep-Ra smiled at his Apprentice. "Why ever not?"

"It's bad luck," she said. "Someone said it once and never came back."

"I'll be back," said Hotep-Ra.

"Someone said *that* once too."

The Dragon Boat was coming in to land. She knew where she was heading, but her crew did not. Septimus felt the tiller move beneath his hand as the Dragon Boat tipped forward in a steep dive. With her wings outstretched and her tail down like a brake, she dropped down toward the wide, flat marble terrace at the front of the House of Foryx.

"Sep, she can't land there!" Jenna yelled.

All, except for Aunt Zelda, closed their eyes. And so it was only Aunt Zelda who saw a ripple pass across the surface of the marble like wind over silk, and the marble become a lake of milk-white water. The Dragon Boat glided in with practiced ease—for she had landed there many times before. Then she folded her wings and settled down in front of the House of Foryx like a bird on its nest.

Septimus peered over the side—the marble looked solid once more. "It's **Thixotropic**," he said.

"It's *what*?" said Nicko.

"Solid. But goes liquid under pressure."

"Don't we all," said Nicko gloomily.

“Actually, Nik, we *don't*,” said Jenna. “And you in particular do not. Don't let this place get to you. You forget that without it you wouldn't be here with us at all.”

Nicko nodded. “Yeah. I know. I just want to keep it that way.”

“We *all* want to keep it that way, Nik. And we will.”

“Time to go,” said Septimus. He dropped the gold-and-azure boarding ladder over the side of the boat, and climbed down. Nicko followed. A minute later they were standing on the steps of the House of Foryx, where five hundred years in the past Nicko had once waited with Snorri, and not quite so long ago Septimus had stood with the **Questing Stone** in his hand. Then it had glowed a brilliant red; now it was a deep blue-black with Hotep-Ra's shining gold hieroglyph giving him safe passage back to his own Time. He hoped.

The door to the House of Foryx towered above them. It was a forbidding sight—huge planks of ebony held together with iron bars and massive rivets. The grotesque monsters and bizarre creatures carved into the doorframe stared down at Septimus and Nicko as if daring them to ring the bellpull, which emerged from the mouth of an iron dragon that thrust its head through the granite wall.

Septimus did dare. The sound of the bell clanged distantly and some minutes later, as he expected, a small batlike man wrenched the door open.

“YeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEES?” said the man.

Septimus knew how argumentative the little man could be and he got in fast. “I have come to see Hotep-Ra. I have a pass.” He showed the man the **Questing Stone**, hieroglyph side up. The doorman peered at the stone and Septimus braced himself, expecting trouble—which he got.

“I have never seen one of these before,” said the doorman suspiciously.

“You won't have,” said Septimus. “This is the only one.”

“*Weally?* You will have to show it to the Guardian.” The little man looked at Nicko. “I suppose you want to come in too,” he said, sounding annoyed.

“No way,” Nicko replied.

The shortsighted doorman peered at Nicko more closely and a flicker of recognition passed over his face. Suddenly his little wiry arm shot out and grasped Nicko around the wrist. “I wecognise you! You have Time to serve!” And with a strength unnatural for his size, he pulled Nicko across the threshold.

In the Dragon Boat, Jenna watched, horrified, as Nicko disappeared into the shadows of the House of Foryx. She saw Septimus dive in after him and the door slam. They were gone.

Jenna knew she had to get Nicko out. “Aunt Zelda,” she said, “I'm going after them.”

“Be careful, dear,” said Aunt Zelda. “It doesn't look very nice in there.”

“It’s not. Now, Aunt Zelda, this is really, *really* important. If I get pulled in too you have to come and ring the bell. But you must *not* come inside. Just keep ringing the bell until we come out. Okay?”

Aunt Zelda looked confused. “All right, dear. But why don’t I go in?”

“It’s dangerous, Aunt Zelda. You mustn’t.”

“It doesn’t seem right, dear, me staying outside when it’s dangerous in there. You might need help.”

“No, we won’t need help—well, not like that. The only help we need is for you to stay outside. Here. In this Time.”

Aunt Zelda frowned, trying to work it out. “All right, dear, I’ll wait. This time.”

With a horrible feeling she had made Aunt Zelda even more confused, Jenna climbed out of the Dragon Boat, walked across the expanse of white and went up the steps to the door. Then she took a deep breath and tugged on the bellpull.

The door opened.

To her great relief, there stood Nicko with Septimus, holding out his **Questing Stone** with a big smile. “See, it worked, Jen. It will always bring me out in my own Time. And it set Nicko free too.”

Nicko grimaced. The **Questing Stone** had indeed set him free, but not before he had been imprisoned—for how long he did not know. He quickly stepped into his own Time and enveloped Jenna in a hug.

Jenna was so shocked by Nicko’s haunted look that she did not notice the tall old man who stood in the shadows behind him. But when he stepped out of the House of Foryx—for the first time in many thousands of years—and Jenna saw the ancient ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes embroidered with **Magykal** symbols and the formal ExtraOrdinary Wizard headband around his long white hair, she knew who he was.

“Hotep-Ra!”

“Princess,” he replied in a surprisingly deep voice—and a very odd accent—and bowed his head. A few snowflakes drifted down and settled on his white hair; Hotep-Ra looked up, as if surprised by the touch of the snow. It was then that he saw the Dragon Boat waiting for him. He caught his breath and then set off across the white marble terrace, his long purple staff clicking as he went.

Jenna, Nicko and Septimus followed at a respectful distance.

“Been waiting long?” Nicko asked Jenna nonchalantly, as though she had been hanging around for the Port barge.

“Five minutes maybe,” said Jenna.

Septimus and Nicko exchanged glances. “See,” said Septimus. “I told you so.”

They stood quietly by, not wishing to disturb the reunion. They saw the

dragon turn to look at her old Master and arch her neck down to greet him. They saw Hotep-Ra put his hand on the dragon's velvety nose and a silver streak ran down from the dragon's eye. It dropped onto the ground and rolled toward Jenna. She picked it up and held it in the palm of her hand: a dragon tear of pure silver.

There was something that Septimus knew he must do. He took off his Dragon Ring and offered it to Hotep-Ra. "This belongs to you," he said.

Solemnly, Hotep-Ra took the Dragon Ring. "Thank you," he said. "But it shall be yours again before very long, I promise you." Septimus felt strange as he watched Hotep-Ra place the ring on his right index finger and he saw the emerald eye of the ring dragon glow and the ring adjust itself to fit its old Master's finger.

Hotep-Ra climbed aboard and fussed about—as someone who has not been aboard their boat for a few thousand years will do. He invited Aunt Zelda to sit beside him at the tiller and called to Jenna.

"Princess, I believe we have a **Committal** to look at."

Jenna climbed aboard. She took out her tattered copy of *The Queen Rules* and passed it to Hotep-Ra, open at the page where she had written the **Committal**.

Hotep-Ra looked shocked. "This book was beautiful once," he said.

Jenna felt responsible. "I'm really sorry."

Hotep-Ra got out his **Enlarging Glass** and peered at Jenna's handwriting. "The **Keystone** is missing," he said. "This can never work."

Jenna got her best pen out of her pocket. "If you tell me the **Keystone**, I'll write it down," she said.

"Princess," said Hotep-Ra, "let me explain. I was not one of those lazy Wizards who always used the same **Keystone**. I had a different one for every one of my twenty-one major **Incantations**." He sighed. "Unfortunately it is a long, long time ago and I cannot remember which one I used."

Jenna was aghast. "Don't you have it written down?"

"Apprentice, please explain," Hotep-Ra said to Septimus. "We must go."

While Hotep-Ra took the Dragon Boat up into the sky, Septimus told Jenna, "You see, Jen, Hotep-Ra inscribed his **Incantations** into the pyramid on top of the Wizard Tower. He wanted them to last forever and it was a way of making them incorruptible."

"But Sep, you told me that those hieroglyphs are—what was it? Gobbledygook, you said."

"They are," said Septimus. "That is the whole point—they are a blind. To call up the real ones we need to use the **Keye**."

"What key?"

"Well . . ."

Jenna sighed. "I suppose we don't have that, either."

“Um, not right now, no. The **Keye** is actually the very tip of the pyramid. When your ancestor was busy shooting those Ring Wizards, they got so mad that they sliced off the top of the pyramid and **Shrank** it.”

“Why would they do that?” asked Jenna, thinking that sometimes she did not understand Wizard behavior at all.

“Well, actually it was meant to happen to Hotep-Ra but he outwitted them.”

“So where is this top bit key-thingy?”

“Hotep-Ra gave it to the Queen.”

“So, what did *she* do with it?”

Septimus looked to Hotep-Ra for help.

“She said she would put it somewhere safe,” said Hotep-Ra.

“Oh, *no*.” Jenna groaned. Whenever Sarah lost anything it was always when she had put it “somewhere safe.”

“Princess,” said Hotep-Ra. “You must go back to the Palace and find the **Keye**.”

“But I’ve never even *seen* it.”

“Well, it must be somewhere,” said Hotep-Ra.

Jenna had heard that from Sarah too. It did not inspire confidence.

“For speed, I suggest you take the direct route back. Hold tight.” With that, Hotep-Ra wheeled his Dragon Boat around and dived into the abyss.

ROCKY TIMES

Marcellus opened his eyes and saw nothing. He tried to sit up and hit his head. Marcellus groaned. Where was he?

And then he remembered. He remembered the Ring Wizards down in his precious **Fyre** Chamber, trying to destroy his delicate, beautiful **Fyre**. He remembered his long, painful climb up through the escape burrow, and he remembered that he *had* to get to Marcia and warn her what was happening. But most of all he remembered how angry he was—and why. Spurred on by his fury, Marcellus attacked the rockfall that was blocking his way. His hands found a gap and methodically he began removing each stone and sending it rolling down the burrow behind him.

Down in the Chamber of **Fyre**, with a wall of flames roaring above and the dizzying drop below, Duglius Drummin was drumming the narrow rim of the Cauldron and keeping an anxious watch. The brilliant orange flames from the coal were shooting high into the air, dancing and whirling as they were sucked up into the Vents, feeding on the gases that were drawn up with them.

Duglius wore a grim smile. He did not like to see the flames, but he knew that they were a necessary evil. As long as the coal burned on top, the delicate blue flame of the Alchemie **Fyre** below was protected. And in the vast hoppers inside the cavern roof, Duglius knew there was still a large store of coal left.

Duglius continued along the rim—his suckered feet protected by their heat pads—drumming the metal as he went. The Cauldron was still intact but there was a duller sound to the ring of the hammer, which worried him. Something was changing. As Duglius listened yet again to the *cling* of his hammer, out of the heat haze he saw the fearful shapes of the Ring Wizards coming toward him along the Inspection Walkway. Steadfastly, the old Drummin carried on drumming. As he drew near and saw the Ring Wizards' green armor shimmering in the glare, their dark cloaks flying out in the updraft of the flames and their wild eyes shining with excitement, Duglius could not help but hold his breath in fear; but he kept going and passed by with no harm. The Ring Wizards, like all Wizards, treated Drummins as vermin and paid them no attention—although this had not stopped them from destroying two Drummin sets heading for the Control Room for the fun of it. This time, to Duglius's relief, they paid him no attention and he continued safely on his way.

Duglius found his second-in-command, Perius Drummin, waiting for him on the Viewing Station.

There's rockfall a-coming down the escape burrow, Duglius Drummin, Perius signed. *Wish you I do go to see what is to see?*

I shall go to see, Perius Drummin. You will please take over from me.

I will take over from you, Duglius Drummin.

Thank you, Perius Drummin. Please open the Cauldron Heat Vents to the Ice Tunnels. It is time.

It is time, Duglius Drummin, Perius agreed.

Duglius's climb up the escape burrow was considerably faster than Marcellus's, but it was made more difficult by the rocks that came hurtling down. It was a slightly bruised Duglius who reached Marcellus just as he was clearing the very last rock away. A soft touch on his foot told Marcellus that Duglius was there.

While Duglius was climbing up, the Dragon Boat was flying down—into the abyss. Around and around she went, spiralling down into the depths of the canyon that encircled the House of Foryx. Hotep-Ra stood at the tiller, concentrating hard on keeping the wing tips of his Dragon Boat safely away from the sheer rock of the canyon walls. It would have been a testing task for any pilot, but for one who had not flown for many thousands of years, it was a huge challenge.

No one wanted to distract Hotep-Ra. Jenna, Nicko, Septimus and Aunt Zelda had no choice but to stare silently into the mist, notice how cold it got as they went ever deeper and listen to the screams of whatever-it-was that haunted the abyss. They hoped that Hotep-Ra had a good reason for what he was doing.

At last the Dragon Boat landed with a *swoooooosh* and a plume of ice-cold water sprayed into the boat. She settled into the pool of dank water that lay on the floor of the abyss, folded her wings and fastidiously arched her tail out of the water. The emerald green of the dragon's eyes shone through the dusky gloom as she turned her head and looked at Hotep-Ra as if to ask what he thought he was doing coming to such a forsaken place.

Hotep-Ra enlightened neither his dragon nor his crew. He took a pinch of **Sprite Sand** from his pocket and held it in his fist. Then, as though sowing seed, he threw his arm out and a cluster of tiny lights flew up from his hand. The **Sprites** swirled into the air and gathered around Hotep-Ra like a swarm of bees, bathing him in a bright light. Septimus was entranced. He had read about ancient **Lighting Sprites**, whose **Magyk** had been lost long ago. He had thought what a lovely idea they were—little personal spheres of light that followed you around, and he had heard that some **Guiding Sprites** even showed you the way.

Hotep-Ra bowed to Aunt Zelda. “Madam Keeper,” he said, waving away Aunt Zelda's protests that she was no longer Keeper. “Excuse me for a few minutes while I assist these young travelers in their return to the Castle. I trust that you and I will then have a more pleasant journey in the Dragon Boat.”

Septimus, Nicko and Jenna frowned at one another. This didn't sound good. Aunt Zelda looked concerned. “But how are they getting to the Castle?” she asked.

“I will explain when I return. I will not be long.”

Aunt Zelda gave Jenna, Septimus and Nicko a worried wave as they followed Hotep-Ra and his **Sprites** down the embarking ladder and away into the darkness. The light from the **Sprites** and the splash of their footsteps soon faded and Aunt Zelda was left alone in the gloom. She eased herself up from beside the tiller and felt her way along to the prow. The dragon lowered her head to greet her and Aunt Zelda sat, stroking the dragon's velvety nose, whispering calming sounds—as much for her benefit as the Dragon Boat's.

Out of sight of Aunt Zelda, the **Guiding Sprites** led the way, dancing through the mist. Hotep-Ra and his crew followed them, stumbling through puddles and over the uneven ground. The floor of the abyss was not a pleasant place to be. The mist swirled around, cold and clammy, and when Septimus turned to look back at the Dragon Boat he could no longer see her; a pall of gloom hung between them. They struggled on, following the **Sprites**, and soon the dark rock face reared up in front of them and Septimus saw that

Hotep-Ra was heading for a small, rusty iron door set deep in the rock.

Suddenly Septimus felt a cold grip fasten around his neck and the livid face of the Toll Man whom he had once pushed into the abyss materialized in front of him, its eyes glittering with hate. A malevolent voice hissed in his ear. "See, now I have my revenge."

"**BeGone**, fiend!" Hotep-Ra's staff came down between the Toll Man and Septimus and the wraith disappeared.

"Thank you," Septimus muttered with relief.

Hotep-Ra smiled. "I too have enemies in the abyss," he said. "And in the abyss is where they stay. Aha, here we are!" He tapped his staff on the iron door, it swung open and the **Sprites** flew inside like an excited swarm of bees.

Septimus followed Jenna, Nicko and Hotep-Ra into an ice-cold chamber hollowed from the rock. The **Sprites** led them across to another door, which Hotep-Ra opened to reveal something that they had all seen before.

Cradled between two metal lattice platforms lay a purple-colored tube with rounded ends, about fifteen feet long. There were four hatches ranged in a line along the roof, the front one being the larger. Along the side of the tube was a line of tiny green glass windows and below it were runners that rested on two parallel metal rails, which sloped steeply down into the dark mouth of a tunnel.

"It's the *Red Tube*!" gasped Septimus.

"Only purple," said Jenna.

Hotep-Ra looked very surprised. "It is indeed a *Tube*. But I did not expect you to recognize it."

"Once I helped to get one just like that back to CattRokk Light," said Septimus, smiling at the memory. He had loved piloting the *Tube* under the sea, seeing the fish swimming by and the feeling of being in another world.

"So you understand how it works?"

"Sort of. I wasn't in it for long."

Hotep-Ra smiled. "Even so, this is good news. You will be off to the Castle in no time."

"In *that*?"

"Of course."

"But how? There is no water here."

"But there is ice. Ice or water, it is all the same to a *Tube*."

Nicko shivered. He'd refused a ride in the *Tube* before, and the thought of having to go into its coffinlike space now was terrifying.

Hotep-Ra pushed the end of his staff onto a rubbery black button in front of the oval hatch. With a faint whirr, the hatch flipped open, a dull purple light switched on inside the *Tube* and a smell of old leather and iron wafted out. Nicko felt sick.

Septimus peered down. Inside he saw the high-backed bench seat for the

pilot, a simple set of dials and the thick green windshield that wrapped around the front of the *Tube*. It was even more cramped inside than he remembered. He knew Nicko would hate it.

“Okay, Nik?” he said.

Nicko did not answer.

Jenna decided it was time to be a bit Princessy. She turned to Hotep-Ra and said, “Hotep-Ra, Septimus and I will go in the *Tube*, but I would like Nicko to help with the Dragon Boat. It’s a long way to the Castle and some of your journey will be through the night.”

To Jenna’s surprise it wasn’t only Nicko who looked relieved. Hotep-Ra did too. Jenna guessed that the frail old Wizard had not been looking forward to the long flight on the Dragon Boat with only Aunt Zelda as crew.

Nicko flashed Jenna a thank-you smile and watched anxiously as she and Septimus dropped down through the front hatch into the red glow below. He saw the tops of their heads, fair hair and dark, as they both settled into the pilot seat. Hotep-Ra peered down.

“Do you remember the controls?” he asked.

“I think so,” Septimus replied.

Hotep-Ra ran through the controls and then described what he called the “launch protocol” ending with, “and the power pedal is at your right foot, the brake at your left. Steer with the little wheel, although you will hardly need to; it is a straight run from here to the Castle.”

Nicko looked amazed. He thought of the long journey that he and Snorri had once taken across the sea, marshland and frozen forest to get there, when all the time there was what Hotep-Ra called a straight run. Hotep-Ra saw Nicko’s bemused expression and smiled at him. “This is why, Nickolas Heap, I built my House of Foryx here. But like you I have a fear of enclosed spaces. I have only traveled that way once—and once was enough, believe me.” He turned back to the *Purple Tube*. “Ready?” he called down.

“Um. Yes. Ready.” Jenna and Septimus’s voices echoed hollowly up through the open hatch.

Nicko noticed that Hotep-Ra looked as nervous as the voices below sounded.

“When you release the *Tube*,” said Hotep-Ra, “you will drop steeply down the approach tunnel and enter the Ice Tunnel. You understand?”

Jenna and Septimus exchanged glances. “Yes,” they replied.

“Now, please put your seat belts on.”

Nervously, Jenna and Septimus fumbled with the stiff old leather belts and managed to clip the buckles tight.

“Good luck,” said Hotep-Ra. “Now you may begin the launch sequence.”

Along the curved metal dashboard were seven numbered brass dials. Jenna now turned the first one until it clicked into position. The top hatch closed

above them with a *hissss* and all went dark.

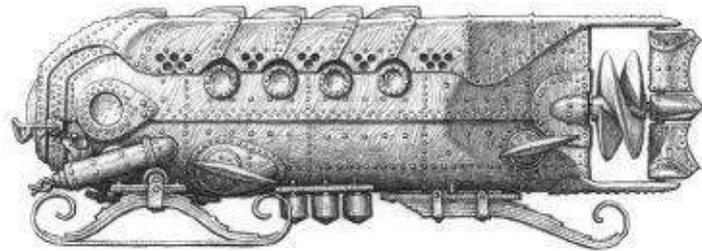
“This is *scary*,” Jenna whispered. Septimus swallowed. His mouth felt dry. Jenna’s fingers found the second dial, she turned it to the click and a line of tiny red lights lit the dashboard. The third made the headrest move down to fit them; the fourth dial sent a whoosh of air, which smelled of the sea, rushing into the capsule. Now Septimus took over. He turned the fifth dial, which switched on a brilliant white headlight and lit the way in front of them. This was not particularly encouraging—it showed a pair of glistening silver rails plunging down a steep drop into the circular black mouth of a tunnel. The sixth loosened a tether. Before he turned the seventh dial, Septimus looked at Jenna, his face eerily purple in the light.

“Okay?” he asked.

Jenna nodded. “Okay.”

They both guessed what would happen when Septimus turned the last dial. They were right: as the dial clicked into place, the *Tube* tipped forward and the next moment they were hurtling down the rails toward the gaping black O.

Nicko watched the *Purple Tube* shoot into the circle of darkness—and then it was gone. It felt to him like it was gone forever.

SOMEWHERE

Far below the snowy Forest, the *Purple Tube* hurtled along the longest, straightest Ice Tunnel that Septimus had ever seen. Its runners glided smoothly over the ice and its headlight picked out the glittering frost that swept past them in a blur of white.

“This is *fast!*” Jenna gasped.

Septimus stared out of the thick glass of the windscreen, transfixed by the black circle of darkness that always stayed the same distance ahead. “Don’t you think it feels like *we’re* staying still and the tunnel is moving?” he said.

“Sep—don’t say that!” Jenna put her hands over her eyes. “That is too weird.” She peered through a gap between her fingers. “Now that’s what *I* see—the *tunnel* moving.”

“Sorry, Jen.”

They fell silent for a while, listening to the constant rumble of the runners of the *Tube* traveling over the ice. After a while Septimus said, “I wonder where we are now—I mean I wonder what’s above us right now?”

Jenna shivered. “I don’t want to even think about all the stuff above us, thanks very much.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“That’s all right. Just remind me not to travel in one of these with you again. Or at all, actually.” She smiled at him. “Horrible boy.”

Septimus stuck his tongue out at Jenna and carried on staring at the white blur outside the window. It was mesmerizing.

The *Tube* sped on and they lost track of time. It was about an hour after they had started when Jenna, sounding worried, said, “Sep. It’s gone kind of wobbly. Do you think something’s broken?”

Septimus had noticed too. The smooth run had changed to an unpleasant

shake that came up from the runners and was giving a bone-jarring ride. The low background rumble had become so loud that Septimus had to raise his voice to be heard.

“Perhaps we had better slow down,” he said. “If something is wrong and we crash at this speed . . .”

“I’m going to put the brake on,” said Jenna, moving her left foot across to the broad plate that came up from the floor on her side.

“Yep. Good idea.”

Cautiously, Jenna pressed her foot down on the brake. The *Tube* slowed to a crawl, but the shaking became even more pronounced.

“Something’s wrong!” said Jenna, snatching her foot off the brake.

Suddenly, Septimus realized what it was. “It’s the jinn, Jen!”

“Oh, do stop saying silly rhymes, Sep. This is not nice. Oh!” The *Tube* gave a particularly big lurch and Jenna fell sideways.

Septimus caught her. “It’s okay, Jen. I know where we are. And I know what’s happened. It’s the ice. It’s really churned up—look, you can see it in the headlight. This must be where the warrior jinn marched to the Castle, which means that we must be under the Isles of Syren now.”

Jenna peered through the glass. “Hey—you’re right!”

“No need to sound so surprised,” said Septimus, grinning.

Jenna thought about what Septimus had said. “So we are under the sea now, right?”

“Yes. I suppose we are.”

Jenna shivered. “All that water above us, Sep. It’s so . . . scary.”

Septimus didn’t want to think about it. “I’ll speed up and get us out of here.”

“Not too fast, okay?”

Septimus pressed the pedal on his side of the floor; the *Tube* picked up speed and settled into a gentle bumping along the rutted ice.

After some minutes Jenna said, “Is there an Ice Tunnel hatch below the Palace, Sep?”

“I suppose there must be. I’ve never seen it though.”

Jenna sighed. “I wish Beetle were here. He’d know.” She turned to Septimus. “Everything feels kind of right when Beetle’s around, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps you ought to tell him that sometime,” said Septimus, giving Jenna what Sarah Heap would have called a meaningful look.

Jenna went pink. “Shut up, Sep,” she said.

“Okeydokey. Now I’ve been thinking. There’s a sign to the Wizard Tower in the Ice Tunnel below, so I bet there’s a sign to the Palace too.”

“So how near do you think we are?” Jenna asked.

“We can’t be too far,” said Septimus. “It didn’t take very long from the

House of Foryx to the Isles of Syren, did it? And the Castle is much closer.”

“Perhaps we ought to slow down,” said Jenna anxiously. “We don’t want to miss the sign and get lost under the Castle.” The *Tube* hit a particularly deep rut and shook alarmingly. “*Slowly, Sep!*”

“Don’t panic, Jen.”

“I am *not* panicking. You are going way too fast.”

Irritated, Septimus slowed the *Tube* to an uncomfortable bump while Jenna stared out of the thick green glass screen, searching for a sign to the Palace.

After some minutes, Jenna said, “How big did Hotep-Ra say this pyramid was? I mean, is it like head-size or more kind of nose-size?”

“Nose-size,” said Septimus. “He said it would sit comfortably on your hand.”

“That’s really small,” said Jenna gloomily.

“And the Palace is really big,” Septimus said equally gloomily.

“The only thing I can hope for is that my mother, the Queen, will tell me where it is.”

Septimus looked at Jenna. “Do you think she will?”

“No,” said Jenna. “*Sep, look out!*”

Septimus snatched his foot off the power pedal. “Jen—brake, brake, *brake!*”

In the bright beam of light of the *Tube*, Jenna and Septimus saw the most bizarre sight. Poking up from the floor of the Ice Tunnel were the head and shoulders of a man. He was staring at the oncoming *Tube* in utter horror. Jenna slammed her foot on the brake and the *Purple Tube* skidded to a halt just in time. The head-and-shoulders stayed where it was and continued to stare, its mouth opening and closing like a goldfish thrown out of its bowl.

“Jeez. It’s *Marcellus*.” Septimus reached over to the hatch dial and clicked it up, the pilot hatch swung open and in seconds he was up and out into the chill of the Ice Tunnel, clambering down the ladder and running and sliding across the ice toward Marcellus, closely followed by Jenna.

Blinded by the headlight, Marcellus was convinced that he was about to be run down. He heard Septimus’s voice but thought he was imagining it. It was only when Septimus shook his shoulder that Marcellus realized he was not—just then, anyway—going to die.

Jenna slid to a halt beside them, shocked at what she saw. Marcellus was in a terrible state. He was covered in dirt and streaked with dried blood that ran down from a huge bump on his forehead. “Marcellus!” she gasped. “Your head! *What has happened?*”

It was too much for Marcellus to explain right then. “Stuck,” he replied.

“Okay. Let’s get you out,” said Septimus.

Jenna grasped one shoulder and Septimus the other. “One, two, three—*pull!*”

“Ouch!” Marcellus yelled as he was wrenched from the tiny escape hatch and pulled out onto the ice—which felt, Septimus thought, unusually soft. As Marcellus lay groaning on the ice, Septimus briefly caught sight of a small, dusty face with squashy, broad features and a pair of large, round, black eyes staring at them from the ice. But before he could say anything, the little eyes were gone.

“Marcia . . .” Marcellus said feebly. “See Marcia. Got to tell her.”

Septimus was beyond being surprised by anything—if Marcellus suddenly wanted to tell all to Marcia, that was fine by him. “Okay. Now, Marcellus, can you stand?”

Marcellus nodded and then groaned once more. His head hurt badly. He allowed Jenna and Septimus to help him to his feet and walked unsteadily between them to the *Purple Tube*.

Unseen, Duglius popped his head out of the hatch once more to make sure his Master was safe. He saw Marcellus being helped to climb up the rungs on the side of the *Tube* and deposited with some difficulty through the hatch. He saw the Apprentice and the Princess clamber in after him and when the *Tube* hatch hissed closed, Duglius dropped back down the Drummin burrow escape hatch and pulled it shut too. Then he took a shiny mat—known as a slider—from a stack just below the hatch and sat down. With one push Duglius was away, hurtling down the escape burrow, GloGrubs jumping out of his way, dust kicking up into his face. It was something he had not done since he was a young Drummin, so very, very long ago, and once again Duglius felt the sheer joy of being alive. And as he headed down, Duglius was determined that he, his Drummins and his **Fyre** were going to stay that way.

Inside the *Purple Tube*, Marcellus was slumped on the bench seat behind the pilot’s. Jenna sat with him. “Marcellus,” she said, “we have to get to the Palace Ice Hatch. It’s really important. Can you tell us the way?”

“Not Palace,” mumbled Marcellus. “Marcia.”

“Palace first, then Marcia,” said Septimus firmly. Marcellus’s eyes were beginning to close. “Jen, keep him awake.”

“Marcellus—*Marcellus!*” Jenna gently patted Marcellus’s bloodstained cheeks to keep him awake. “Please. *Marcellus*. This is very important. We have to get to the Palace Hatch. *Marcellus*. The Palace Ice Hatch. *Which way?*”

The urgency in Jenna’s voice at last got through and Marcellus dragged himself back from the comforting sleep that beckoned to him. Marcellus knew every inch of the Ice Tunnels and even in his confused state he was able to direct them to a signpost that read TO THE PALACE.

Septimus took the turn and coasted to a halt beneath the Palace Ice Hatch. He took his Alchemie **Keye**—a round gold disc—from around his neck and

handed it to Jenna, saying, “Press it into the dip in the middle.”

Septimus opened the passenger hatch and Jenna scrambled out. Water dripped on her head as she stood on top of the *Tube* and pressed the gold **Keye** into the indentation in the silver hatch above. “It’s open!” she called down. “I’ll be as quick as I can!” With that she was gone.

Septimus stared through the greenish glass at the ice outside. Something was wrong; the ice looked different. And then he realized what it was—it had lost the frosty sparkle that he had always loved. Septimus opened the pilot hatch. “Marcellus, I’ll be back in a minute,” he said, and swung himself up and out of the hatch and down onto the ice. Septimus was shocked. It was *slush*.

He looked up at the curved roof of the tunnel high above and a splat of water landed on his face. Rubbing his eyes, Septimus clambered back into the *Tube*. Now he knew for sure—the *Ice Tunnels were melting*.

Jenna pushed open the trapdoor at the top of the flight of steps that led up from the Ice Tunnel. She threw aside a heavy (and horribly dusty) rug and found herself in the coat cupboard just off the Palace entrance hall. Coughing and sneezing, she threw open the door, rushed out and ran straight into Sam.

“Jen!” Sam gasped.

“Sam. No time to explain. Small gold pyramid. Very, very important. We have to find it. It’s somewhere in the Palace.”

“Where in the Palace?”

“Sam, if I knew that I wouldn’t be looking for it, would I?”

Sam looked at his little sister. “It’s really important, isn’t it?” he said.

The enormity of the search almost overwhelmed Jenna. “Oh, Sam . . . yes, it is. I don’t know how I’m going to find it. I really don’t.”

“I’ll get the boys. We’ll find it.”

“I gotta go and check somewhere out first, Sam. I’ll be back here in ten minutes, okay?” Jenna rushed off.

In the Queen’s Room Jenna and the ghost of her mother had another confrontation.

“Ah, the little gold pyramid. So heavy for something so small,” said Queen Cerys.

“Where is it?” Jenna asked.

“Where is it *what?*”

Jenna took a deep breath and counted to ten. “Where is it, *please.*”

“Where is it, please *what?*”

Another count to ten. “Where is it please, *Mama.*”

“Daughter, you cannot have everything at once. This mystical treasure is for Queens only. You must wait until you are crowned.”

With great difficulty Jenna subdued the urge to jump up and down screaming.

“Mama. This is not for me. It is for the Castle. If we do not have it now, then there may not *be* a Castle by the time I am crowned.”

“Daughter, do not exaggerate.”

Jenna took yet another very deep breath and said in a barely controlled voice, “I am not exaggerating. Mama. Please. Do you know where the little gold pyramid is?”

“I know where I left it,” said Queen Cerys. “But given the *disgusting* mess, I could not say where it is now.”

“So where did you leave it?” asked Jenna.

“I shall tell you where when you are Queen. And not before.”

Desperately, Jenna tried another tack. “Is Grandmamma here?”

“No, she is not. You will have your little pyramid when you are crowned and I shall say no more on the subject until then. Now, daughter, go and calm yourself.”

Jenna gave up the struggle. “*Aaaaaaaargh!*” she yelled at the top of her voice and rushed, screaming, out through the wall.

Sam had rounded up Sarah and the boys, and they were waiting for Jenna in the entrance hall.

“No luck?” Sam asked, although Jenna’s face already told him the answer.

“Nope.”

“Oh, dear,” said Sarah. “If Queen Cerys doesn’t know where it is, I don’t know what we can do. It could be anywhere.”

Jenna sighed. “It could be anywhere” was another of Sarah’s phrases when she was looking for something—but a much less hopeful one than “it must be somewhere.”

“Oh, but she *does* know where it is,” Jenna said angrily.

Sarah brightened. “Well, that’s wonderful.”

“But she wouldn’t tell me.”

“*She wouldn’t tell you?*”

“Not until I’m Queen.”

Sarah was appalled. “Even though you told her how important it was?”

“Yup. She said that she knows where *she* left it, but given the disgusting mess everywhere, she could not say where it is now.”

“Well, that’s it!” said Sam. “She’s told you where it is.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jenna.

“Think about it—where is the one place that Cerys has seen that is a disgusting mess?”

“Oh, wow! Sam you are just brilliant! It must be in—”

“Mum’s room!” chorused Jenna, Sam, Edd, Erik and Jo-Jo.

Sarah Heap looked offended. “I know it’s a bit lived-in, but I think calling my little sitting room a disgusting mess is going too far.”

Some minutes later, Sarah’s little sitting room was even more of a disgusting mess. The efforts of four heavy-footed Forest Heaps plus a frantic Jenna and an embarrassed Sarah (who was trying to clear up little dried mounds of duck poo as they went) had reduced what fragile order there had been to a massive pile of what Jenna called “stuff” in the middle of the room. And on top of the stuff sat Ethel the duck, roosting like a wild turkey on its nest.

Jenna looked around the unusually empty room in despair. “It’s not here,” she said. “Mum, are you *sure* you’ve never seen it?”

“Never,” declared Sarah. “And I know I would have remembered a little golden pyramid. It sounds so cute.”

“Maybe my mother didn’t mean this room after all,” said Jenna disconsolately. “After all, the whole Palace is a mess, really.”

“But the Queen hasn’t seen the rest of the Palace,” said Sam. He kicked the fluffy rabbit doorstep in frustration.

“Hey,” said Jenna. “It didn’t move.”

“It’s a doorstep,” said Sam. “That’s the whole point.”

In a flash, Jenna was on the floor trying to pick up the rabbit. “It’s so *heavy!*” she gasped. “Mum—scissors!”

Sarah looked at the pile of stuff in panic. “They must be somewhere . . .”

Suddenly four sharp Forest knives were unsheathed.

“No!” cried Sarah. “Not Pookie!” But it was too late—the fluffy pink rabbit lay eviscerated on the floor and a small pyramid-shaped lump of leather fell out from its stuffing with a *clunk*.

“Poor Pookie,” said Sarah, picking up the limp rabbit.

Sam retrieved the leather pyramid and held it up triumphantly.

“That old thing?” said Sarah dismissively. “Very dull. I found it on the shelf when we moved in. It was nice and heavy, so I sewed it into Pookie to make a doorstep.”

“Sam’s right, Mum,” said Jenna. “I reckon this is it.”

“I *know* it is,” Sam said, excited. He sat down on the unusually empty sofa and, biting his lip in concentration, Sam carefully cut through the tightly stitched thread. As the seams opened out, Jenna was thrilled to see the shine of gold beneath. A few moments later, a small gold pyramid tumbled out onto Sam’s lap and fell onto the floor with a heavy *thud*. Sam picked it up and held it out to Jenna. “There you are, Jens. Just for you.”

“I’ve got it!” yelled Jenna, triumphant. Clutching the pink rabbit—which had seemed the safest place to keep the slippery and remarkably heavy little pyramid—Jenna jumped into the *Purple Tube* and took her seat next to

Septimus. "Let's go!"

"Why have you got Pookie?" asked Septimus as Jenna plonked the eviscerated rabbit—which Sarah had quickly stitched closed—down between them.

"Pyramid," said Jenna, still breathless. "Pyramid in Pookie."

"Oh. Right." Septimus shook his head in bemusement.

Guided by Marcellus, Jenna and Septimus piloted the *Tube* through the Ice Tunnels, heading toward the Wizard Tower. The *Tube*'s runners bumped along the slush, scraping the brick below, and the thuds of chunks of ice falling from the roof and hitting the metal *Tube* reverberated inside. The headlight illuminated the brick-lined walls of the old Ice Tunnels and the pools of water that gathered in the dips of the tunnels. More than once they had to take the *Tube* down into water-filled dips of the tunnels, some of which Septimus remembered sledding through with Beetle not so very long ago.

Jenna and Septimus glanced anxiously at each other but Marcellus was surprisingly jolly. "Back to normal, at last," he said.

Septimus said nothing. Marcellus had always been disapproving about the Ice Tunnels and he didn't want to get into an argument right then. But he knew how thick the ice was in some of the narrower tunnels and Septimus could not help but ask himself, *Where was it going to go?*

Some minutes later, Jenna said sharply, "Did you hear that?"

Septimus nodded. He could hear a deep rumble behind them. Automatically he glanced back over his shoulder, forgetting that the *Tube* had no back window. All he saw was Marcellus sitting bolt upright, and, despite the bruise spreading across his right eye, looking very perky indeed. Smug, even, thought Septimus.

The *Tube* began to shake and behind them they heard a thunderous roar as though an army of horses was galloping toward them.

Jenna gasped. "Something's coming," she said. She, too, swung around in her seat, forgetting there was no back window. Marcellus no longer looked smug.

Suddenly the roar enveloped them. A wall of water picked up the *Tube* and at once they too became part of the noise, the rush, the dust, the grit, and the surge of the flood that was rushing through the now ex-Ice Tunnels. Terrifyingly fast and out of control, they were swept along with the flood. Septimus struggled to keep hold of the wheel that steered the *Tube* while Jenna stared wide-eyed through the swash of the water, desperate not to miss the turn to the Wizard Tower. At last through the spray, Jenna picked out the initials "WT," with a large purple hand painted onto the wall that pointed to a wide tunnel branching off to the left.

"Left!" she yelled. "*Left!*" Together she and Septimus fought the wheel around to the left and felt the *Tube* reluctantly turn. The nose stuck briefly in

the mouth of the tunnel, but then it was swung around by the floodwater and sent hurtling on past the turn, buffeted from side to side, crashing along with the flood.

“It’s a circuit!” yelled Septimus. “We’ll go around and try again!”

“Okay, Sep! We can do it!”

On the backseat Marcellus looked green. He was beginning to think that maybe the Ice Tunnels weren’t such a bad idea, all things considered.

FLOOD

Marcia UnLocked the door to the Stranger Chamber and peered inside. Alther greeted her wearily. Although ghosts do not tire physically, they can still become mentally tired, and after spending more than twenty-four hours in close proximity to Nursie and Merrin, Alther was feeling like a wet rag. Nursie was snoring in the Stranger Chair, while Merrin was sprawled on the sofa kicking the table legs and watching the water jug wobble.

“Good morning, Merrin,” said Marcia.

Merrin stared at Marcia. “Morning,” he said suspiciously.

Nursie opened her eyes. At the sight of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Nursie came straight to the point. “You keeping us prisoner?” she asked.

“Midwife Meredith, as I am sure Mr. Mella has explained, you and your son are here for your own safety.”

“Leave that lever alone!” shouted Alther.

Merrin had begun aiming desultory kicks at the lever beside the fire. “I didn’t touch it,” he said sulkily.

“I would advise you *not* to,” said Alther. “Marcia, a word, please.”

“Quickly, Alther,” said Marcia.

“Do I *have* to stay in here?” whispered Alther. “They are, as Septimus would say, doing my head in.”

“I’m sorry, Alther, but there’s no one else around right now who is Stranger Chamber-trained. Or, frankly, who I can trust not to throttle Merrin.”

“That boy is a total nightmare,” said Alther.

“Exactly. And only you can handle it, Alther. Now, I really must go.” With that Marcia closed the door, leaving Alther alone with his charges.

Unable to bear the ghost of Jillie Djinn, who had taken to shouting “Fire, fire!” every few seconds, Marcia had set up her headquarters in the Great Hall. A large round table had been taken from the canteen, which Marcia had **Primed** and then **Projected** onto it a permanent map of the Castle. The watchers in the **LookOuts** were sending down messengers every fifteen minutes with reports on the spread of the fires, which were now springing up all over the Castle. It was Rose’s job to indicate these on the table by placing a **Fire Tablet** where the reported fire was. If it hadn’t been for what the **Fire Tablets** represented, Rose would have really enjoyed her work. She had a leather bag of thick red discs that, when pressed down onto the **Primed** table, burst into flame and kept burning until **Quenched**. So far Marcia had not **Quenched** any and, after a message from the West **LookOut**, Rose had just placed a line of four more **Fire Tablets** in a particularly old part of the Castle. The fires were now spreading from house to house.

On a separate table safely away from the **Fire Tablets** lay *The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath*, which Simon—with a heavily bandaged foot propped up on a chair—was watching intently, reporting on a strange shadow that he had first picked up hovering above the Chamber of **Fyre**. Simon had then tracked it to the Palace, where it had stopped for some time. Both he and Marcia were convinced that this was the Ring Wizards. The shadow was now moving through the tunnels toward the Wizard Tower and causing Marcia some concern.

The doors to the Wizard Tower swung open and Beetle hurried in. One glance at his expression told Marcia it was yet more bad news.

“The Ice Tunnels are in flood,” said Beetle.

A collective gasp came from everyone in the Hall. Marcia stared at Beetle in disbelief. “They can’t be,” she said.

“They are. The tunnel below the Manuscriptorium is a torrent of water. How Romilly got out I do not know.”

“*Romilly was down there?*”

“She was monitoring the melt,” said Beetle. “She was quite a way into the system when she noticed that it was suddenly speeding up—chunks of ice were falling from the roof and the runners of the sled were hitting brick. She headed back but as she got to the long straight below the Manuscriptorium

she heard a roar. Poor Romilly, she knew exactly what it was. A wall of water picked the sled up and she was carried along—she only escaped by grabbing on to the rung just below the Ice Hatch.”

“But she’s all right?” asked Marcia.

“Shocked. Bruised. But okay.”

Julius Pike wafted over from the table where he had been staring at the fires. “ExtraOrdinary, you must act now. You cannot allow the **Fyre** to rage out of control.”

“Thank you, Julius,” Marcia snapped. “However, I am not prepared to risk anyone’s life until we have a chance of success. We shall wait for the **Committal**.”

“I hope you will not wait in vain,” said the ghost.

“I have faith in my Apprentice,” said Marcia.

“Marcia!” Simon called out. “The shadow—it’s just turned into the Tower tunnel. The Ring Wizards—they’re heading this way!”

The *Tube* was indeed heading that way—although with some difficulty. Jenna and Septimus had just fought to stop it from sweeping off down a wide tunnel that Septimus knew led to Beetle’s once-favorite sledding slope and they were now careering down the tunnel that led to the Wizard Tower. The *Tube* pitched from side to side as it rocketed along, banging against the walls. The dark, swirling water came almost to the top of the thick green glass of the cockpit window, and what was left of the window was spattered with spray. Septimus peered through, wondering how they were going to be able to see the little archway that led to the Wizard Tower.

“Coming up!” Jenna yelled.

In the light of the headlamp Septimus saw the rapidly approaching sign: TO THE WIZARD TOWER.

“Stop!” shouted Jenna.

“It won’t!” yelled Septimus. “The brake doesn’t work in water!”

“Anchor out!” Jenna yelled.

“What anchor?”

“There!” Jenna pressed a red button on Septimus’s side of the cockpit. They felt something shoot out from beneath the *Tube* and it slewed to a jarring halt. The nose of the *Tube* banged violently against the wall and sent them sprawling.

“Phew,” Septimus breathed. “That was close.”

“Very close,” said Jenna. “Right by the steps, in fact.”

The *Purple Tube* had stopped beside the small archway that led to the Wizard Tower steps. Septimus opened the hatches and looked out. The roar from the water shocked him and a rush of spray hit him in the face and splashed down through the open hatches.

“Aargh!” came a yell from Jenna, inside. “Cold!”

The steps leading up to the Wizard Tower were above water, but between the *Tube* and the safety of the bottom step rushed a narrow but turbulent stream of water. “We’re going to have to jump for it!” Septimus shouted.

“Marcellus, time to get out,” said Jenna.

Getting out seemed like a very good idea to Marcellus. With Septimus and Jenna’s help, he pulled himself up through the hatch, slithered down the side of the *Tube* and made a remarkably agile leap across the flood onto the step.

“Pookie!” yelled Septimus.

“Like I’d forget!” Jenna shouted, grabbing the pink rabbit from the seat and clutching it firmly around its middle. Inside she could feel the sharp corners of the pyramid digging through the fabric.

The ice-cold spray and the roar of the water had brought Marcellus to his senses. He held out his hands to Jenna and Septimus and they leaped over the gap and grasped hold. Marcellus pulled them up and together they hurried up the steps to a shining purple door on the left-hand side at the top.

Septimus stared at the purple in dismay. “It’s **Sealed**,” he said.

“But you can **UnSeal** it, can’t you, Sep?”

Septimus shook his head. “Not from this side. It is **Sealed** against us.”

On the other side of the **Seal**, Marcia said to Beetle, “I’ve **Armed** the **Seal**.” She sighed. “I’ve never done that before. It’s unethical, in my opinion. But needs must.”

“Unethical—why?” Beetle asked.

“The **Arming** can kill anyone who touches it, but there is no apparent difference to the layperson from a normal **Seal**. Most Wizards will notice it, of course, although there are some that probably wouldn’t.” She sighed. “But it should keep the most powerful of **Darke** Wizards at bay for a while. Let’s hope it lasts until Jenna gets back.”

Beetle did not reply. The thought of Jenna at the House of Foryx upset him; he wished now that he had gone with her when she had asked him.

Only a few inches away from Beetle, Jenna put out her hand to touch the **Seal**. Septimus grabbed her hand and pulled it away. “Don’t touch!” he whispered. “It’s **Armed**.”

“**Armed?**”

“*Shh*. Yes, can you hear it buzzing?”

“Why are you whispering?” hissed Jenna.

“Because Marcia doesn’t use **Armed Seals**. She thinks they are wrong.”

Jenna looked at Septimus, scared. “You don’t think the Ring Wizards are . . . *in there*, do you?”

“I can guarantee they are not,” Marcellus said. “Duglius would not allow

it.”

“*Duglius?*” Jenna and Septimus exchanged worried glances. Marcellus’s mind was clearly wandering.

“My head Drummin,” said Marcellus.

“I’m not surprised your head hurts, Marcellus,” said Jenna soothingly. “You have a huge lump on it.” A wave splashed up and she looked down to see that the water was now covering the lower two steps. “*Sep,*” she whispered, “*the water’s rising.*”

As Jenna was speaking, a huge surge of water ran through the tunnel, sending the *Purple Tube* bucking like a frightened horse. The anchor broke free and the *Tube* was dragged into the current—and then it was gone, merrily bouncing and banging along the roof of the tunnel.

Jenna, Septimus and Marcellus watched the light from the headlamp rapidly fade, plunging them into darkness. Septimus waited for his Dragon Ring to begin to glow, until he remembered that it was now back on Hotep-Ra’s finger.

They were on their own.

They stood in the dark, feeling the chill of the water lapping around their ankles. Something bumped up against Septimus’s boot and he looked down. It was his beautiful Wizard Tower sledge that he had left tied there after his last run through the Ice Tunnels with Beetle to celebrate him becoming Chief Hermetic Scribe. Septimus untied the sled’s azure-blue rope and, feeling as though he had found a friend, held on to it tightly.

Meanwhile, Jenna clutched the sodden and increasingly heavy pink rabbit to her. She was beginning to wonder if all they had gone through to get the **Committal** was going to come to nothing.

A wave swashed over them, taking the water up to their knees. “Apprentice,” said Marcellus, “you could try the old-fashioned way of finding out who is on the other side. You could shout.”

Another wave, which washed water up to their waists, convinced Septimus that he had nothing to lose. “Marcia!” he called out, his voice echoing in the domed, watery space. “It’s me—Septimus!”

There was no reply.

On the other side of the **Armed Seal**, a whispered conference was in progress.

“It is a trick,” said Julius. “Your Apprentice cannot possibly be back yet.”

“It is not a trick,” said Marcia. “It is Septimus. I can **Feel** it.”

Milo joined Marcia. “You should go with what you feel,” he said.

“**Feelings!**” said Julius. “Huh! That old mumbo jumbo.”

A wave pushed the water up to their chests. Marcellus raised his arm to check how much headroom they had left. Enough for two more waves, he reckoned.

That was all.

“Let your rabbit go,” he told Jenna. “You will need both hands soon.”

“But it’s got the *pyramid* in it,” said Jenna. And then, seeing Marcellus’s puzzled look, she said, “It has the **Keye** to the **Committal** in it—the words that will put the Wizards back in the ring.”

Marcellus remembered. “Then give it to me. I will not let go of it, I promise you.”

Jenna gave the heavy, sodden pink rabbit to Marcellus. He took it by the ears and very nearly dropped it in surprise at its weight. But Marcellus was no stranger to carrying lumps of gold and he quickly stuffed it into the large leather pouch that he wore hidden under his cloak, where Pookie the rabbit joined a collection of gold coins and nuggets.

Released from her burden, Jenna put all her energy into yelling, “Marcia! Let us in!”

On the other side of the **Shield**, Milo gasped. “I can hear Jenna!”

“So can I,” said Beetle.

“It’s an old **Darke** trick,” the ghost of Julius Pike told them. “You hear the people you long for. That’s how a **Darke Domaine** begins.”

Beetle hesitated. The ghost was right—he knew that well enough.

Marcia also faltered. She looked at Milo. “He’s right,” she said.

“No, he’s not,” said Milo. “That’s my Jenna out there. And your Septimus. Let them in.”

Another surge of water had left Marcellus the one only able to stand and keep his head above water. Septimus had regretfully let go of his sled and now both he and Jenna were clinging to Marcellus, their heads bumping up and down against the brick roof of the stairwell. They knew the next wave would be their last.

“*Mar . . . ceeee . . . aaaaaah!*” they yelled.

Jenna’s and Septimus’s cries echoed out of the little broom cupboard and into the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower. A crowd of concerned Wizards gathered at the cupboard door.

“Marcia’s not there,” said Septimus despairingly. “She would let us in if she was. It must be the Ring Wizards.”

Another—mercifully small—wave washed up to their mouths and set them coughing and spluttering.

“Marcia! Let us in, for pity’s sake!” yelled Marcellus. “*We are drowning!*”

“That settles it,” said Julius. “It *is* the Ring Wizards. They have Marcellus

hostage.”

Jenna, Septimus and Marcellus clutched one another. In a moment they would be gone—washed down the Ice Tunnels to begin an endless circuit in the currents like three Ice Wraiths.

Jenna gave one last desperate scream. “*Heeeeeelp!*”

“Marcia,” said Milo. “That was Jenna. I know my child.”

“And I know mine,” said Marcia. “I mean—I know Septimus. Be *quiet*, Julius.” With that she **UnSealed** the door.

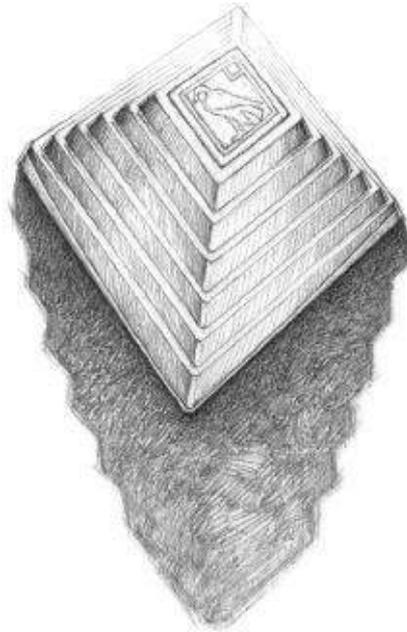
A great wave of freezing water swept through the **Seal**, bringing with it three half-drowned people and Septimus’s Wizard Tower sledge, which **Passed Through** the ghost of Julius Pike like a blade of cold steel. The wave surged out of the broom cupboard and deposited Jenna, Septimus and Marcellus like stranded fish on the floor of the Great Hall. On and on the water came, until the combined efforts of Marcia and as many Wizards who could fit into the broom cupboard managed to **Stop** it. Then, while the water lay gently swashing to and fro, a dripping wet Marcia rapidly repaired the **Seal**.

Shattered, Septimus, Jenna and Marcellus could do nothing more than collapse onto the padded bench outside the Stranger Chamber and watch the Wizards **Sweep** the water out from the Great Hall, sending it cascading down the marble steps into the Courtyard, where it slowly drained away.

Dripping wet, wringing her cloak out as she splashed across the Wizard Tower floor, Marcia came hurrying toward them, relief that they were safe written across her face. She kneeled down beside Jenna and Septimus and grasped their hands, shocked how icy cold they were. “You did your best,” she said, consolingly. “And that is all you can do.”

Septimus knew that Marcia thought they had never made it to Hotep-Ra, but neither he nor Jenna had the energy to explain. Septimus nudged Marcellus. “Rabbit,” he said.

Too exhausted to speak, Marcellus nodded. He pulled the dripping pink rabbit from his pouch and wordlessly he handed it to Marcia.

SHOWDOWN

Dark columns of smoke were rising into the sky, each one a family's home or livelihood going up in flames. In the very center stood the Alchemie Chimney with a massive plume of black smoke belching from it, like a Witch Mother on a midnight moot conducting her acolytes as they danced around her.

The breeze blowing at the top of the Wizard Tower brought with it the acrid smell of smoke but up there, Septimus had other things on his mind. With the **Flyte Charm** clutched tightly in one hand and the **Reduced** top of the pyramid in the other, he was lying facedown, hovering at arm's length above the flat silver platform of the pyramid roof, on which the decoy hieroglyphs were incised. He must not—Hotep-Ra had impressed this upon him—make contact with the silver. If he did, the **Keye** would not work.

Hotep-Ra had told Septimus that he had stored his twenty-one **Incantations** inside the pyramid roof of the Wizard Tower. They were filed in order of use, with—he thought—the most recently used one at the top, so the **Committal** should be the very first one to **Appear**. If it didn't, then that meant he had stored them back to front and it would be the very last to **Appear**. Septimus must then scroll through by lifting the little pyramid **Keye** off its indentation and replacing it. Every time he did this, another **Incantation** would **Appear**.

Very carefully, Septimus dropped the little gold pyramid into the **Lock**—the square indentation in the center of the hieroglyphs that had puzzled him and so many generations of Wizards and Apprentices before him. The little pyramid fitted the **Lock** exactly—just as a **Keye** should. Immediately, a symbol appeared on the blank silver square on top of the **Keye**, and Septimus felt heat rising from the silver platform. As he backed away, Septimus watched in awe as the meaningless hieroglyphs below began to dissolve and become words that he could understand: *A **Riddance** for the Smell of Pig.*

Septimus read the words and his heart sank—the **Incantations** were in reverse order. Pushing to one side the question as to why the first **Incantation** Hotep-Ra ever did in the Castle was for getting rid of pig smells, Septimus lifted up the pyramid **Keye**. The jumbled hieroglyphs returned and the top of the **Keye** became blank once more. He dropped the **Keye** back into the **Lock** and up came another symbol on its top and on the platform, the next **Incantation**: *A **Healing** for the Young.*

With the heat from the intense **Magyk** blazing in his face and the wind that always blew at the top of the Wizard Tower buffeting him to and fro, Septimus laboriously counted his way through the **Incantations**, dropping and picking up the **Keye**, until at last he reached the twenty-first. Holding his breath in suspense, Septimus dropped the **Keye** into the **Lock** for what he desperately hoped was the last time. A symbol appeared on top of the **Keye** that Septimus recognized: *Hathor.* And for the twenty-first time, the hieroglyphs dissolved into words. This time they read: *A **Committal** to Gold.*

“Yay!” yelled Septimus. Taking great care not to make contact with the silver platform (he could not bear the thought of having to scroll through everything again), Septimus took out his stylus and recording **Tablet** and meticulously wrote down the words to the **Committal**. He checked them three times—stopped himself from checking a fourth because he *knew* he had copied them right—took the **Keye** from the **Lock** and watched the words change into meaningless hieroglyphs once again.

Septimus put his **Tablet** safely into his secure pocket, stood up and stretched out his aching arms. He looked down to where Rose was watching anxiously from the little library hatch below and his happy wave told Rose all she needed to know.

“Hooray!” she called up. And then, “Are you coming down now?”

There was nothing Septimus wanted to do more. Even with the security of the **Flyte Charm**, heights still made him feel hollow inside. With the **Keye** safely joining the **Tablet** in his pocket, he slowly descended through the smoky air.

In the Wizard Tower below, Marcellus Pye saw the ghostly figure of Julius Pike sidling toward the spiral stairs. Marcellus thought he was seeing things.

He closed his eyes but when he opened them, Julius was still there.

“Can you see that ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghost?” Marcellus whispered to Jenna.

“Yes,” said Jenna. “He’s a pain in the neck.”

“So it *is* him.” Marcellus got to his feet and wobbled.

“Marcellus, sit down,” said Marcia sternly. “You ought to be in the Sick Bay.”

“Huh!” said Marcellus. “Excuse me, Marcia, Princess, there is something I have to do.” He gave an old-fashioned bow and headed off unsteadily.

The ghost of Julius Pike watched Marcellus approaching with dismay. The Alchemist—hair plastered to his head, a livid bruise spreading around his right eye, his robes tattered and torn—looked as though he had been in a fight and was wanting another.

Marcellus stepped in front of the ghost. “Julius.”

“Marcellus,” said Julius, sounding somewhat unenthusiastic. “Um, how are you?”

Marcellus smiled. “Alive,” he said tersely.

A group of nearby Wizards who were cleaning up gasped at Marcellus’s rudeness. It was extremely bad manners to draw attention to one’s Living status when talking to a ghost. However, right then, manners were the last thing on Marcellus’s mind.

“Julius, you *snake*. It has taken me nearly five hundred years to figure this out, but now at last I know what caused the Great Alchemie Disaster.”

“Jolly good,” said Julius somewhat impatiently.

“Indeed, I know not only *what* caused it, but *who*—you!”

“*Me?*” Julius sounded shocked.

“Yes, *you*, you lying toad. You arrogant old f—”

“Marcellus!” Marcia had hurried over to intervene. “I realize you have had a severe blow to the head, but I must ask you to abide by the Wizard Tower code of conduct. ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghosts are our guests and are to be treated with courtesy and respect.”

“I am sorry, Marcia,” said Marcellus, seething. “But I must have my say. I have waited long enough.”

“You may have your say, Marcellus, but you may not insult our guest.”

“Thank you, ExtraOrdinary,” said Julius. “I must be off now.”

“Not so fast, Julius!” said Marcellus. “Perhaps you will do me the courtesy of hearing what I have to say.”

“It is late, Marcellus. Some other time. Excuse me.”

“I will *not* excuse you. And neither would Marcia if she knew the truth about what you did.”

“Marcellus, what is this about?” asked Marcia.

Marcellus spoke slowly, all the while looking Julius Pike in the eye. “*This*

is about how a man—who for years I counted as my best friend and my confidant—how he destroyed my life’s work, and the work of all the Alchemists who went before me. And, as if that were not enough for him, how he then deliberately destroyed my reputation.”

“How so, Marcellus?” asked Marcia.

“How so? I will tell you how so. This”—Marcellus made a huge effort to control himself—“*person* here, in order to impress some tin-pot Wizard from I-don’t-know-where, not only invaded my Chamber of **Fyre**—*yes, Marcia, as you have already guessed, it does exist and I apologize for keeping it from you*—he then deceitfully, deviously and recklessly threw the most dangerous thing possible into the **Fyre** Cauldron—the Two-Faced Ring!”

Marcia looked confused. “What is wrong with that? Surely, that is what we are going to do after the **Committal**.”

Julius Pike sensed an ally. “Quite, ExtraOrdinary. This is purely a fuss about protocol. I admit I did not ask your permission, Marcellus, for which I apologize. But this has nothing to do with the Great Alchemie Disaster, which happened *weeks* later.”

“Julius, it had *everything* to do with it. If you want to **DeNature** something in the **Fyre** you don’t just chuck it in like an old candy wrapper. The **Fyre** Cauldron is not a dustbin. **DeNaturing** by **Fyre** is a delicate task. You must keep the object suspended in the very center of the **Fyre** for many days and whatever you do, *you must not let it touch the side of the Cauldron*.”

Julius Pike began to **Disappear**. This did not go down well with Marcia.

“Mr. Pike. Pray do us the courtesy of remaining visible.”

“Thank you, Marcia,” said Marcellus. “So, Julius, when you threw the Two-Faced Ring into the **Fyre** it sank down through the **Fyre** rods and sat on the bottom of the Cauldron where, over the next three weeks, it **Migrated**. And the moment it made the hole, the Cauldron cracked, the water rushed out and the **Fyre** rods began to heat up, which they do when they lose water suddenly. My Drummins contained the **Fyre** by dousing it with our special cannel coal, as they are doing at this very moment—do not interrupt, Julius; this is the Alchemie Way and it *works*. But you, Julius, would not trust us to do our job. You would not listen to me when I explained. You panicked. You shut off our water. You shut off our air and just to make sure, you forced me to ice up our beautiful cooling system that kept the whole Castle warm in the winter. It was *you*, Julius, who caused the Great Alchemie Disaster.”

“Rubbish!” spluttered the ghost.

“Julius, it is the truth. I know this because after you **Sealed** my **Fyre** Chamber, my Drummins found the Two-Faced Ring on the ground. They knew what it was and they threw it into the drainage system to get rid of it. But they could not tell me, because by then you had dragged me away, and had left my faithful Drummins—more loyal to me than *you* ever were—to

die.”

“Drummins?” asked Marcia.

“False creations,” said Julius Pike. “Alchemical abominations.”

“They are living, breathing, sentient beings, however they may have been created,” retorted Marcellus. “But leaving the Drummins to die was not enough for you. You had to make sure that Alchemie died too.”

“For the good of the Castle, Marcellus,” Julius protested. “Which Alchemie had so very nearly destroyed.”

“No, Julius. Which *you* had so very nearly destroyed, by your deceit. And it did not stop there, did it? You falsified records, you obliterated ancient knowledge and you instilled a deep suspicion of Alchemie into all Wizards, so much so that to this day all new Wizards swear to ‘abjure all things Alchemical,’ do they not? And yet in the past, Wizards and Alchemists did great things together. They worked as one. And in order to finally rid ourselves of this ring, we shall have to do so again. There is no other way.”

Marcellus became aware that a large crowd of Ordinary Wizards had gathered and were listening in shocked silence. When they realized that he had finally finished all he had to say, a few began to clap in approval. The ripple spread and soon the Great Hall was ringing with the sound of applause.

Rose and Septimus were spinning down through the floors on Emergency setting when they heard the sound of the ovation rising to meet them.

“They know you’ve done it, Septimus,” said Rose. They jumped off the stairs to find it was not they who were the center of attention but Marcia and Marcellus, arm in arm.

“Crumbs,” Rose whispered to Septimus. “It looks like they’re going to get married or something.”

“No way!” said Septimus.

Marcia caught sight of Septimus. She saw the horrified expression on his face and her heart sank. “It didn’t work, did it?”

“Yes, it did. Perfectly. I’ve got the **Committal** here.”

A huge smile spread across Marcia’s weary features and her green eyes sparkled for the first time in days. “Septimus, that is wonderful. I should have known it would be you who would finally **DeCypher** the top of the Pyramid. Congratulations! I think I can safely say that you have passed your **DeCyphering** module with distinction. And then some.”

Septimus looked at Marcia and Marcellus, who were still arm in arm. “So, um . . . do I need to congratulate *you*?” he asked.

“You can if you like,” said Marcia. “From today we have a new partnership!”

“Oh.”

“Septimus, I am surprised you are not more excited. A partnership between

Alchemie and **Magyk** is what you have wanted for a long time. No more secrets.”

“So you’re going to move in together?”

Marcia looked at Septimus uncomprehendingly for some seconds. Then a flash of understanding, swiftly followed by dismay, crossed her face and she dropped Marcellus’s arm like a hot potato. “Goodness, no! Oh, horrors. Perish the thought. This is a *business* relationship.”

Erk Erk Erk . . . Erk Erk Erk . . . !

The Stranger Chamber **Alarm** chose that moment to save Marcia from any more embarrassment. With almost a feeling of relief, Marcia raced over and threw open the blue door. Inside she met a very agitated ghost.

“He pulled the lever!” yelled Alther. “Stupid, *stupid* boy!”

Marcia stared at the gaping hole in the floor where the Stranger Chair should have been. A damp and not very pleasant smell drifted up from it.

“Which setting?” she asked anxiously.

“Moat. It’s on Moat.”

Marcia felt relieved. At least it was possible to get people out of the Moat. “Idiot!” she said.

“I know. Marcia, I am so sorry. I took my eye off him for *one* second. That was all, I promise you—”

“Oh, Alther, I didn’t mean *you* were the idiot. I meant Merrin. *You’ve* been wonderful. Don’t worry, we’ll get some Wizards down to the Moat right away. Merrin must come straight back here. I do *not* want those Ring Wizards being drawn out into the Castle.”

As Marcia hurried off, something occurred to her. “Alther, who was sitting on the Chair?”

“Oh, Nursie, of course.”

“So how come Merrin’s gone too?”

“He jumped in after her. He actually seemed very upset; I don’t think he meant to do it.” Alther shook his head. “He’s a funny lad. You can’t help but feel sorry for him.”

Marcia nodded. “You know, Alther, I think this is the first time that Merrin has cared about anyone but himself. Maybe there’s hope for him yet.”

“Maybe. I’ll take some Wizards down to the Moat, pronto.”

“Thank you, Alther.”

“Oh, anytime. Well, no, *not* anytime. Actually, to be frank, *never again*.”

Marcia smiled ruefully. “Indeed, Alther. Never again.”



The little pyramid Keye was on the map table, sitting on the footprint of the Wizard Tower—which it fitted perfectly. Watched by Milo, Marcia, Septimus and Marcellus, Jenna was sitting at Marcia’s command table writing the complete **Committal** into *The Queen Rules* in her most careful handwriting.

“Septimus, would you fetch Julius, please,” said Marcia. “I would like him to check this before we go.”

Septimus found Julius with some difficulty—the ghost had become very nearly transparent. But as requested, and with great care, Julius checked through the **Committal**. “Yes . . . yes, I believe it to be correct. Hathor, see there, is the **Keystone**,” he said, his long finger pointing to a bird symbol in a square.

“Thank you, Julius,” said Marcia. “We do value your knowledge.”

“You are very welcome,” the ghost replied somewhat stiffly.

“Julius,” Marcia continued.

“Yes?”

“Do you not have something to say to Marcellus?”

“Oh!” Julius made an odd, ghostly coughing sound. “Marcellus. I am. Um. Sorry. I . . . I apologize.”

“It is those who lost their lives in the disaster to whom you should apologize,” said Marcellus.

“Yes. I . . . I realize that.”

“Not to mention all succeeding ExtraOrdinary Wizards who were denied essential knowledge of the Castle. And access to the skills of Alchemie for nearly five hundred years.”

“Yes . . . well.”

“And to my Drummins, whom you knowingly left to die.”

“Apologize to *Drummins*?” Julius was aghast.

“I leave it you to consider your actions, Julius. I can say no more.” With that Marcellus turned on his heel and walked away.

Jenna watched Marcellus go with a good deal of sympathy. She closed *The Queen Rules* and got to her feet. “Okay,” she said. “I’m ready to do the **Committal**.”

“Not on your own,” said Milo. “I am coming with you.”

“Jenna will not be going alone,” said Marcia. “You can be sure of that, Milo.” She got to her feet. “Excuse me a moment.”

Marcia quickly returned with Marcellus. “Our Castle Alchemist has a suggestion,” she said.

Marcellus smiled happily. He knew what it meant for Marcia to freely use his old title. “It is extremely dangerous approaching from the **Fyre** hatch,” he said, “as Simon here will attest.” Simon nodded. “I suggest we go to the **Fyre** Chamber through the Covert Way.”

“Covert Way? *Another* secret, Marcellus?” Marcia asked with a wry smile.

This was still a sensitive subject for Marcellus. “It is not *my* secret, Marcia,” he retorted.

“It is mine, ExtraOrdinary,” admitted Julius. “The Covert Way is the direct connection between here and the **Fyre** Chamber and emerges on the Chamber floor, behind the Cauldron. I **Concealed** it after the Great Alchemie Disaster. It lies beneath the spiral stairs. I will show you.”

In the cramped and dusty inspection space beneath the spiral stairs, Milo, Marcia, Septimus, Jenna, Beetle, Marcellus and the ghost of Julius Pike were gathered, looking at a roughly plastered, blank wall.

“There is an ExtraOrdinary **Conceal** here.”

“*Not* noted in the **Concealed** Register,” said Marcia tartly.

“No,” admitted Julius.

ExtraOrdinary **Conceals** were undetectable and used only by

ExtraOrdinary Wizards within the confines of the Wizard Tower. A condition of their use was that they should be entered in the **Concealed** Register so that every ExtraOrdinary Wizard would know what was **Concealed** where in the Wizard Tower.

“So what have you been **Concealing** here, Mr. Pike?” asked Marcia.

“A moving chamber that will take us to the Chamber of **Fyre**.”

“Really? Well, I suggest you **Reveal** it right away.” Septimus could tell that Marcia was furious.

Julius obeyed and a smooth and shiny black door in the wall was **Revealed**: Marcia gave Septimus and Marcellus a quizzical look. “*That* looks familiar.”

“Yes, I know,” Septimus said guiltily.

“Was that what you were doing on that terrible day—traveling to the **Fyre** Chamber?” Marcia asked.

Septimus felt really bad. “Yes, it was.”

“Goodness!” said Marcia, shaking her head.

“I so wanted to tell you,” said Septimus. “But I had promised not to.”

“A promise very reluctantly given,” said Marcellus. “But it was necessary, Marcia. I needed his help. You do understand?”

“I do understand,” she said. “And it will never be necessary again.” She turned to Julius. “Is this safe?” she asked.

“Yes. When I **Concealed** it I left it **Charging**,” said Julius. “I always believed that maintenance of the moving chamber was important. Unlike the Alchemists who left theirs to look after itself.”

“Huh,” harrumphed Marcellus.

Up until then Septimus had found little to agree upon with Julius Pike, but he had to admit that the ghost had a point about maintenance.

“Very well, Julius,” said Marcia. “Take us through the Covert Way.”

Julius Pike placed the palm of his ghostly hand onto a worn patch to the right-hand side of the door—then snatched it away. “I forget that I am a ghost,” he said despairingly. “It must have a Living hand.”

Septimus considered that he had some experience in the matter. “I’ll do it,” he offered.

The ghost shook his head. “It will not recognize you,” he said. “This Covert Way would open only for the **Identity** palm prints of the then-ExtraOrdinary Wizard—who was myself—my Senior Apprentice and the Castle Alchemist.”

“Well then, Marcellus can do it,” said Marcia.

“It will not recognize me,” said Marcellus. “Julius removed my **Identity** from everything.”

“I could smash it open,” Milo offered eagerly.

“It doesn’t work like that,” said Marcellus snappily.

“Then I shall just have to climb through the hatch like everyone else,” said

Jenna. “It will be all right.”

“No,” said Marcellus. “It will *not* be all right.”

“Syrah!” said Septimus suddenly. “Julius, she was your Senior Apprentice! Will it recognize her palm?”

Julius heaved a hollow ghostly sigh that gave everyone goose bumps. “If she were alive, indeed it would,” he said mournfully. “After Syrah vanished on the **Queste**, I did not have the heart to remove her **Identity**. However, Apprentice, she is *not* alive. I do not know why you say such foolish things.”

“I thought you were going to tell him,” Septimus said to Marcia.

Marcia looked tetchy. “It’s been just a little bit busy here, Septimus. I’ve had more important things to think about.”

“Yes, of course. Sorry. So, shall I take Mr. Pike up to the Sick Bay?” asked Septimus.

“Yes,” said Marcia. “Don’t be long, will you?”

Ten minutes later, a wobbly, emotional Syrah Syara, supported by Rose—who had been nominated as nurse by Dandra Draa—and an equally wobbly Julius Pike joined the party beneath the Wizard Tower spiral stairs. Still trembling from the shock of having just met the ghost of her much-loved Julius, Syrah placed her thin, translucently pale hand onto the smooth black material of the entrance to the Covert Way.

Septimus watched, trying not to remember his last experience in the identical moving chamber on Alchemie Quay. But unlike him, Syrah did not have to push all her weight against the concealed opening plate. The lightest touch of her palm caused a bright green light to shine beneath. Then the oval door slid noiselessly open and the blue light inside the chamber came on.

Jenna, Marcellus, Milo and Marcia looked at one another in surprise—they had never seen anything like it.

“What *is* this?” asked Marcia, peering into the featureless chamber. “I can’t feel any **Magyk** here.”

“It depends what you call **Magyk**,” said Marcellus obscurely.

With some trepidation, Septimus followed Marcellus, Marcia, Milo, Jenna, Beetle, Syrah—supported by Rose—and Julius into the chamber. It was a tight squash. Syrah now placed her hand on the inside wall and a bright red light glowed beneath it. The door closed silently. No one said a word. The blue light gave everyone an unearthly pallor and made the whites of their eyes oddly prominent. Septimus noticed that Marcia was trying hard not to look scared—and not entirely succeeding. Milo, who was used to confined quarters in ships, was more robust. He grasped Marcia’s hand encouragingly, and to Septimus’s surprise Marcia did not object.

A small orange arrow now appeared beside the door. It pointed, Septimus was interested to see, not vertically downward, but diagonally. Syrah swiped

her hand across the arrow and everyone—even Septimus and Marcellus, who were expecting it—gasped. They felt the stomach-churning sensation of the chamber falling, but with the added strangeness of it taking a diagonal path. Jenna, who was stuck in the middle, began to feel queasy.

The journey took less than a minute, but by the time the chamber finally shuddered to a halt, Jenna felt sick. She suspected it was not because of the ride but the thought of what awaited her outside. Everyone exchanged nervous glances in the blue light. Milo put his arm around Jenna. “We’ll be with you every step of the way,” he said.

Jenna nodded. Then, putting on her best Princess voice, she said, “Syrah. Would you open the door, please?”

The door opened and heat and a tremendous roar, as if from a huge waterfall, hit them. One by one, they stepped out into the shadows, shocked by the fierce red glow and the great curved wall of the black Cauldron that rose in front of them.

The exit from the moving chamber was a few steps up from the earthen floor of the cavern, behind one of the thick, riveted legs that supported the Cauldron. There was no view of the **Fyre** Chamber at all from the exit and in the old times this had annoyed Marcellus, particularly when he had visitors from the Wizard Tower whom he wanted to impress. But now he was thankful for the cover. Marcellus checked all was safe, then beckoned to everyone to follow. Jenna went to step down and then stopped.

“Oh!” she gasped. *The floor was alive.*

A sea of small, squashy, dusty faces were gazing up at her, their dark eyes shining. Jenna looked down at their unblinking gaze and for a moment she knew what it was like to be a Queen in front of a vast crowd.

“What *are* they?” Jenna whispered to Marcellus.

“Drummins,” said Marcellus. “Do not worry; they will make a path for you. Drummins do not like to be trodden on. Ah, here is Duglius.”

Duglius scrambled up the wall like a lizard and offered Jenna his hand—warm, callused and gritty with dust. Jenna took it and his suckered fingertips stuck delicately to her hand. “Welcome, Princess, to the Chamber of **Fyre**.”

“Thank you,” said Jenna. She felt the little suckers unstick themselves and very carefully she stepped down into the shadows.

Marcia turned to Syrah, who was leaning against the wall of the chamber, deathly pale against the shiny black surface. “Syrah, you must remain here,” she said.

Syrah swayed dizzily and Rose helped her down to the floor. “You’ll be okay,” Rose said. “I’ll stay with you.”

“So shall I,” said Julius, glad of an excuse not to venture into the Chamber of **Fyre**.

“Thank you, Rose,” said Marcia. She looked out into the unknown that lay

in front of her. “Rose. If anything, er . . . happens, you must close the door immediately and take the chamber back to the Wizard Tower. Get a Senior Wizard to put an anti-**Darke** on it *at once*. You understand?”

Rose nodded somberly. “Yes,” she said. “I understand.”

Marcia took a deep breath and stepped out into the Chamber of **Fyre**.

“Welcome, ExtraOrdinary Wizard with snakes upon her feet,” said Duglius. “Welcome to the Chamber of **Fyre**.”

Marcia smiled graciously and with the words “Thank you, Duglius Drummin. It is an honor to be here,” she wiped away the lingering mistrust between Drummin and Wizard.

When Marcellus, Milo, Septimus, and Beetle had left the moving chamber, Duglius jumped down from the wall. “Follow me,” he said. “We will make a path for you.”

And they did. The Drummin crowd parted like water as, in single file, they followed Duglius beneath the round belly of the Cauldron. Beetle was last. He looked back and saw the path closing behind him and a multitude of little dark eyes staring up at him. He quickly turned around and followed Septimus through the crowd.

Jenna and Marcia were the first to emerge from beneath the Cauldron. They stopped, amazed at the sudden, searing brilliance of the light and the soaring height of the Chamber of **Fyre**—the glitter of the webs of silver shining in the roof far, far above and the massive black roundness of the Cauldron bellying out above them. They waited while everyone gathered together, silent and subdued. What struck every single person was the sense of the presence of evil.

“Where are they?” Jenna whispered to Marcellus.

Marcellus pointed up to the Inspection Circle around the top of the Cauldron, some thirty feet above their heads. Jenna squinted upward but could see nothing—the glare of the flames dazzled her; it was like looking at the sun. Duglius led them around the base of the Cauldron, heading toward the metal steps that would take them up to the Viewing Station and onto the Inspection Circle. As they drew near, two shadows fell across them—everyone froze. They waited for the Ring Wizards to pass overhead like a dark storm cloud, then set off once more until they came within sight of the steps and the Viewing Station above.

Duglius held up his hand and the party stopped. “Here is safe to wait,” he said.

“Thank you, Duglius,” said Marcia. “I will go first, then Jenna.”

“Then me.” Beetle and Milo spoke together.

“And me,” said Septimus.

“No,” said Marcia. “The more of us who go, the more dangerous it becomes.”

“Marcia. I am coming with Jen,” said Septimus. “Whatever you say.”

“We are *all* coming,” said Marcellus. “We cannot leave you to do this alone.”

Jenna remembered what her grandmother had said one evening as they had sat watching the water. “Sometimes, dear, you just have to be what I call *Queeny*. It may seem strange at first but it always works.”

And so that is what Jenna did. “*I* am doing the **Committal**; I shall choose. The fewer people who are in danger, the better. Marcia and I will go. No one else.” She looked at Marcia. “And *I* shall go first.”

Marcia bowed her head. “Very well,” she said.

From her ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt, Marcia drew out what remained of the Two-Faced Ring and handed it to Jenna. Jenna noticed that Marcia’s hand was shaking—and Marcia noticed the Jenna’s hand was shaking. Neither said a word while Jenna looked down at the twisted band of gold, which lay in her palm so lightly that she could hardly feel it. It was time to go—but before she went, there was something Jenna wanted to say.

“Beetle,” she said.

“Yes.” Beetle gulped.

“I just wanted to say that I am really sorry that when you were in the **Sealed** Hermetic Chamber . . . you know . . . after the **Darke Domaine** . . . that I didn’t stay to see if you were all right. Well, not properly all right. I so wish I had. I did really care about how you were, even though I know it didn’t look like it.”

It took Beetle some seconds to reply. “Oh. Gosh. Well, thank you.” He reached out for Jenna’s hand and took it. “Be careful up there, hey?”

Jenna nodded and held Beetle’s hand tightly.

“Time to go,” said Marcia briskly.

Marcia and Jenna walked toward the foot of the steps, Marcia spoke urgently in a low voice. “Jenna. Remember I will be right behind you all the time. When we near the top I will put a **SafeShield** around us. When we are close enough to”—she glanced upward—“*them* . . . and you are ready, tell me. I will let the **Shield** go. You must then begin the **Committal** at once. I will protect you. You must not concern yourself about *anything else*. Concentrate only on the words of the **Committal**. When you say the **Keystone** word, there will be a flash of light. Throw the ring into the light but do not stop speaking. Be sure to finish.”

Jenna and Marcia reached the steps. They glanced upward at the flimsy metal lattice that would its way up around the black belly of the Cauldron into the searing light far above, and exchanged nervous smiles. Then Jenna put her foot on the first step and Marcia followed. Slowly, stealthily, they began the long and lonely climb up out of the protection of the shadows and into the glare and heat of the fire.

As they disappeared from sight, Milo put his arm around Beetle's shoulders. "All right?" he asked.

"No. Not really," said Beetle.

"Me neither," said Milo.

Jenna and Marcia headed up toward the heat and the roar of the fire. As they neared the top of the steps Marcia tapped Jenna on the shoulder. **Shield** now, she mouthed. Jenna nodded. An opalescent blanket of **Magyk** fell around Jenna and Marcia, cutting the roar of the fire to a distant murmur, turning the scorching heat down to merely hot and making the Ring Wizards—who were so very near—feel oddly distant. With the sensation of walking underwater Jenna stepped up onto the Viewing Station. Despite the raging fire in front of her, the loudest sound she heard was the *tip-tap* of pointy python shoes as Marcia followed her.

Inside the **Shield** Marcia's voice rang clear. "They are on the Inspection Circle going counterclockwise. I can see the **Darkeness** behind the flames. To give us the advantage of surprise, I suggest we creep up from behind. If we get onto the Circle now, they won't even see us."

Jenna had planned very carefully what to do, but no amount of planning could prepare her for how scared she now felt. "Okay," she said, "let's go." She stepped down onto the surprisingly shaky walkway and felt Marcia follow. They set off in a counterclockwise direction. Unnerved by not being able to grab hold of the handrails because of the **Shield**, but insulated from the horror of the wall of fire on her left and the dizzying drop to her right, Jenna moved along the Inspection Circle as carefully as any **FootFollowing** witch.

There was a sudden intake of breath from Marcia, and Jenna stopped dead. Two figures, too tall to be human, clothed in **Darke** light, their long, straggly hair streaming in the rush of air that was swirling in to fuel the flames, were no more than a few feet in front of them.

"That's them," said Marcia—rather unnecessarily, Jenna thought. "Tell me when you're ready."

All Jenna wanted was to get it over with. "Now," she said.

"Sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure. Take the **Shield** away."

Marcia let go of the **Shield**. "We're out!" It was like stepping into an oven where a thunderstorm was raging. The Ring Wizards swung around and at once Marcia threw on a **Restrain**, but not before the red rays of light from their eyes had seared across Jenna's cloak, sending up wisps of smoke.

Clutching the ring in her hand, Jenna began to speak the **Committal**. "By our Power, at this hour, we do you . . ."

The Wizards sprang forward, their hands like the claws of a pouncing tiger,

their long curved nails heading for Jenna's neck, pushing with all their strength against the **Restrain**. But Jenna remembered what Hotep-Ra had told her. *Stand firm. Look them in the eye. Say the words.*

And so she did.

Steadily, Jenna made her way through the **Committal**, determined not to rush and to speak each word clearly. As she stood defiantly on the walkway, the almost unbearable heat from the fire scorching her cloak, Jenna was unaware that behind her Marcia was struggling. Marcia didn't know if it was the terrible heat, or the combined power of the Wizards, but the **Restrain** kept slipping and every time it did, the Ring Wizards moved a little closer.

But Jenna did not flinch.

Desperately, Marcia listened for the **Keystone**. She watched, powerless, as the ten-foot-tall beings pushed against her **Magyk**, inching toward Jenna. And then, at last, there came a soft word, almost drowned by the roar of the flames: *Hathor*. There was a flash of dazzling purple light, and Jenna threw the ring into it. There was a scream and the Ring Wizards began to melt like candlewax. Concentrating hard, Jenna moved smoothly through the last seven words, and at the final word, "**Commit**," darkness fell.

Within the Chamber of **Fyre**, Time was suspended.

Now, from deep inside the void of Time, the Ring Wizards finally understood what their fate was to be. Two blood-chilling howls of fury and despair filled the Chamber of **Fyre** and set everyone's hairs on the back of their necks tingling. Seven timeless seconds passed while the Ring Wizards were **Subsumed** into the gold of the ring and as Time kicked back in, a vortex of wind swirled through the Chamber of **Fyre**, throwing everyone to the ground.

Jenna and Marcia clung to the guardrail of the Inspection Circle as the whirlwind spun above the Cauldron, taking the flames with it, spiraling them up through the Alchemie Chimney and sending them bursting out into the evening sky.

A shocked silence fell in the Chamber of **Fyre**. No one moved. All that could be heard was the soft *fuff-fuff-fuff* of the tiny blue flames of the Alchemical **Fyre** and a *cling* as a gold ring with two screaming green faces imprisoned in it hit the lattice walkway and dropped through one of the holes.

"The ring!" yelled Marcia. "*Get the ring!*"

Milo caught it.

A QUEEN

Marcellus was smiling from ear to ear as he slowly lowered the Two-Faced Ring, suspended on a golden chain, toward the beautiful, blue Alchemical **Fyre**. Marcia very nearly told him to get a move on. But she didn't. Marcellus was, she thought, allowed to savor the moment. He deserved it.

Marcellus was as happy as he could remember being for a very long time. He was back in his **Fyre** Chamber by right and about to **DeNature** the very thing that had destroyed his life so very long ago. He watched the faces of those he had gathered around him for this moment, transfixed by the ring as it dangled above the tiny blue flames that flickered gently across the top of the **Fyre** Cauldron. Here were people that Marcellus had grown to care about—the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, the Chief Hermetic Scribe and the Queen-to-be, not to mention his old Apprentice, Septimus, and his new Apprentice, Simon, who had come along with the accomplished chimney architect, Lucy Heap. There was Alther Mella, and also the very first ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Hotep-Ra, of whom Marcellus was quite in awe. And as the ghost of Julius Pike, escorted by Duglius Drummin, joined them, Marcellus felt rather outnumbered by ExtraOrdinary Wizards.

The Two-Faced Ring was now dangling just a few feet above the **Fyre**, and the tips of the delicate Alchemie flames leaped up to meet it, like fish jumping for insects on the surface of a stream. The pure light of the **Fyre** illuminated the evil green faces trapped in the ring for the very last time. They flashed in anger and as Marcellus lowered them into the **Fyre**, clapping and cheering

erupted from the assembled watchers.

Marcellus turned to his audience. “It is done,” he said. “The Two-Faced Ring will stay in the center of the **Fyre** for twenty-one days. Then the ExtraOrdinary Wizard—I mean Madam Marcia Overstrand, although naturally, all ExtraOrdinary Wizards here are welcome to attend—and I will retrieve the ring, which by then will be no more than a lead band. As we transmute lead to gold, so we transmute gold to lead. It is the Alchemie way.”

Marcia had bitten her tongue for long enough. “Oh, give it a rest, Marcellus,” she said. “Come and have some lunch.”

Three weeks later, all the Drummins had gathered beneath the Cauldron. Duglius glared at the late arrivals—young teens who rarely emerged from their burrows before midday.

“We are all here, we are?” Duglius inquired.

A singsong murmur of assent spread through the dusty crowd.

“Good Drummins. There is a ghostly person who has a thing to say to all of us all.”

A murmuring spread through the crowd as the ghost of Julius Pike **Appeared**, glowing bright in the gloom.

“Drummins,” Julius began nervously. “I, um, have come to apologize. Many hundred years ago I did all Drummins a great wrong. I did not listen to your wisdom. I left you all to die. I did not care. For this I am truly, truly sorry.”

A murmur of surprise spread through the Drummins. Duglius signed for them to be quiet. “Do we Drummins all accept this sorry, do we?” he asked.

Another murmur began and this time Duglius did not interrupt. It continued for so long that Julius was beginning to think they would not accept his “sorry.” He felt sad at the thought. Over the previous weeks, the ghost had, at Marcia’s suggestion, accompanied her on a series of visits to the Drummins in order to get to know and understand them. Like Marcia, Julius had grown to like and respect them. He was surprised to find how much it now mattered to him that the Drummins felt the same about him. Julius waited anxiously while the Drummin crowd was clearly discussing him, illustrating their discussion by pointing their suckered fingers at him.

At last the discussion subsided and Duglius signed to the crowd. They made a sign back to him, which looked to Julius like a refusal. Duglius turned to the ghost and Julius felt nervous.

“We, Drummins,” said Duglius. He paused. “We do accept your sorry, we do.”

“Oh!” Julius sounded surprised and pleased. “Thank you, Duglius. And thank you, Drummins, all.” He bowed and floated up the ladder to join the group on the Viewing Station above.

Julius was just in time to see Marcellus present Marcia with the **DeNatured** ring. “It is done,” said Marcellus.

Marcia looked at the plain lead band resting on her palm. “It is done,” she agreed. “Thank you.”

Marcellus bowed. “It was, I can truly say, my pleasure.”

Marcia smiled and handed the lead band to Hotep-Ra, who inspected it closely. He sighed. “It is for the best. But who would have thought that it was once a beautiful gold ring,” he said, giving it back to Marcia.

Marcia had an idea. “Can you turn this back to gold?” she asked Marcellus. “To how it was when Hotep-Ra gave it to the Queen?”

“Indeed I can,” said Marcellus. “And I shall do so with great pleasure.”

Preparations now began for Jenna to be crowned Queen.

Hotep-Ra decided to stay for the Coronation and he continued as the honored guest of the Wizard Tower. Everyone, even Marcia, was a little overawed to have the founding ExtraOrdinary Wizard take up residence in the Tower, but Hotep-Ra was used to a quiet life in the House of Foryx and preferred to spend most of his time in the Pyramid Library with Septimus and Rose. One morning, during a visit to the Sick Bay to see Jim Knee and Edmund and Ernold Heap, Marcia confided in Dandra Draa that she was worried that Hotep-Ra did not like her.

“It not *you* he not like, Marcia. It that nasty little ghost on your sofa.”

Marcia felt relieved, but she made her way back to her rooms with a heavy heart. How she would love to have cozy evenings sitting by the fire with Hotep-Ra, Septimus and Rose discussing **Magyk**. Trust the wretched Jillie Djinn to ruin a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. She opened the door and Jillie Djinn welcomed her with what had become her usual greeting: “Fire!”

Marcia stomped up to the Library, where Hotep-Ra was sitting at the table, explaining an Arcane **Transformation** to an enthralled Septimus and Rose. “Excuse me for interrupting,” she said apologetically.

Hotep-Ra smiled. “Come in, Marcia, my dear. It is always good to see you.” Encouraged, Marcia joined them. “Hotep-Ra, I have a question,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Is there any way of removing a ghost from their place of entering ghosthood during the first year and a day?”

Hotep-Ra shook his head. “Generally, it is not possible. But if, like your friend on the sofa downstairs—”

“My *friend!*” Marcia was shocked.

“Is she not?”

“No! No, no, *no!* I can’t stand the woman—I mean the ghost. That is why I am asking. Is there any way of getting rid of her?”

Hotep-Ra smiled. “Ah. I see. Well, you are fortunate. She has short legs, does she not?”

Marcia was bemused. “Yes, she does. Short, fat little legs, actually.”

Hotep-Ra smiled. “Then it is an easy matter.”

That evening Marcia **Lit** the fire in her sitting room and sat around it with Hotep-Ra, Septimus, Rose, Simon, Lucy and Marcellus talking quietly about **Magyk** and Alchemie. A feeling of contentment stole over her—this was how it was meant to be.

Outside, in the wide corridor that led to the stairs, sat the sofa. And on the sofa sat the ghost of Jillie Djinn. Her little legs had never touched the ground.

MidSummer Day—the traditional day for a Coronation—drew near. Jenna decided, despite Queen Cerys’s disapproval, that she wanted it to take place beside the river.

Sarah Heap began to panic. “What if it rains?” she said.

“It won’t,” declared Jenna.

Jenna’s grandmother thought it was a wonderful idea. “I wanted to have mine outside too, dear,” she said, “but I let my mother talk me out of it. Remember, today you can do what you want and, take it from me, it won’t always be like that. I would make the most of it.”

And so preparations went ahead, and the Palace and its gardens once more became the busy hub of the Castle. The four Forest Heaps stayed to help Sarah and Silas get things ready, and everyone lent a hand—except for Milo, who once again had disappeared.

On Coronation Morning Marcia was up early. Milo, to Marcia’s annoyance, had insisted on a 7:00 A.M. appointment at the Palace to “check everything is tiketty-boo, if that’s all right with you, Marcia.” Marcia arrived as the Clockmaker’s clock was striking seven. She knocked on the Palace doors and yawned. She would be glad when the Coronation was over and Hotep-Ra—lovely though he was—had gone home, so that she and Septimus could get back to normal.

The doors were flung open. “Good morning, Marcia,” said Milo chirpily.

Embarrassed, Marcia stopped in midyawn. “Oh! Morning, Milo.”

“Good morning, Madam Marcia.” A familiar voice came from behind Milo.

“Hildegarde!” said Marcia.

Milo turned and clasped Hildegarde’s hands in both of his. “Thank you so much, Hildegarde,” he said. “It’s been a long night. You have been wonderful.”

Hildegarde blushed. “It was my pleasure,” she said as she squeezed out of the door past Marcia.

Marcia watched Hildegarde hurry off down the Palace drive. “*Well!*” she

said.

It was a distinctly frosty Marcia whom Milo escorted through the Palace entrance hall. At the entrance to the Long Walk, Milo stopped. “Close your eyes,” he said.

“Milo, I do not have time to play silly games,” Marcia snapped.

“Please,” Milo said. He gave Marcia the slightly lopsided smile that she had liked so much, so very long ago.

Marcia sighed. “Oh, all right.”

Milo took Marcia’s hand and led her into the Long Walk—she knew where she was by the chill of the old stone passageway. “You can open your eyes now,” said Milo with a smile in his voice.

Marcia was lost for words. After some moments she managed, “It’s *beautiful!*”

Stretching as far as Marcia could see down the Long Walk, the ancient Palace gold candleholders were back in their places. Tall and elegant, in each burned a fat beeswax candle, filling the normally musty Walk with the subtle scent of honey. The light from the candles illuminated treasures that Marcia dimly remembered from before the Bad Old Days: Ancient portraits of the Queens, beautiful painted statues settled back into their niches, polished wooden chests, little gilded tables and chairs, and, covering the old threadbare carpet, intricately patterned rugs in soft blues and reds.

Milo began to speak. “When I first came back to the Palace and saw what DomDaniel’s thugs had taken, I swore that by the time my Jenna was Queen I would have returned everything to its rightful place. But it was not until I met Hildegarde that I was able to do this.”

Marcia said nothing. But she was beginning to understand.

Hildegarde had once been part of the Sales Force who had, under instructions from DomDaniel, sold off all the Palace treasures—mainly to fund DomDaniel’s lavish banquets. Hildegarde had joined the Wizard Tower as part of Marcia’s Second-Chance Scheme and had always wanted to make amends for her part in ransacking the Palace. And so when Milo asked her to help him track down as many of the old treasures as possible, Hildegarde had jumped at the chance. She had kept a note of every sale and with her help, Milo was able to buy back most of the long-lost treasures. He had spent the last weeks touring the Farmlands with a cart, picking up the more distant finds and hiding them in the locked rooms at the end of the Long Walk. On Coronation Eve, Milo and Hildegarde worked through the night, and by the morning the Long Walk was transformed into the wonderful place that Marcia now saw.

“So why didn’t you tell me?” asked Marcia.

“Well, at first I thought you would object to me using the valuable time of a Wizard for non-**Magykal** purposes. But after those unfortunate

misunderstandings, I did try to tell you. But you wouldn't listen. So I wrote you a letter explaining."

"Oh," said Marcia a little sheepishly.

"Which I could tell you hadn't read," said Milo. He smiled. "I reckoned you were still in such a temper that you probably threw it in the fire or something. So I figured the only way was to show you."

"It's wonderful," said Marcia. "A new start for the Palace. Has Jenna seen it?"

"No," said Milo. "I wanted it to be a surprise for her Coronation Day. I am about to show her. But I wanted to show you first."

It was a most **Magykal** day. The sun shone—as Jenna had known it would—and the entire Castle turned out to see her.

In the morning, accompanied by Sir Hereward, Milo showed Jenna the Long Walk. Buzzing with excitement, Jenna wandered through the Palace gardens, glad of some time to be alone and think about what her future might hold. The gardens were decorated with the multitude of Coronation offerings that had caused Sarah Heap so much trouble. Metallic red and gold Coronation Bunting hung from the trees and glittered in the sunlight, the lawns were strewn with the huge assortment of Coronation Rugs, and Coronation Cushions were scattered underneath the brightly colored Coronation Sunshades. Jenna thought they looked wonderful. As she wandered down toward the river, Jenna came to a sudden halt. Running the length of the lawn was the longest table (the Coronation Table) covered with the longest, whitest cloth (the Coronation Cloth) that she had ever seen. The table gave her a strange feeling when she saw it. At first she was not sure why—and then she remembered. It was a much, *much* bigger version of the table that Sarah had once laid ready for breakfast on her tenth birthday—the day when her life had changed and she had discovered that one day she would be the Castle Queen.

In the afternoon the Palace Gates were thrown open and the Castle inhabitants began to drift in and enjoy the gardens and the Coronation Tea, which was now laid out on the long table. The table was piled high with the Coronation Plates, Coronation Candelabra, Coronation Biscuit Tins, Coronation Cups and Coronation Cutlery that had been brought to the Palace. To the plinky-plonky sounds of the Coronation Pianola, 1,006 Coronation Cupcakes, 2,027 Coronation Biscuits and 7,063 Coronation Sandwiches were consumed that afternoon. Along with—inadvertently—twenty-three caterpillars, fourteen slugs and a baby spider.

By the end of the afternoon, Jenna was convinced that she had talked to absolutely everyone who lived in the Castle at least twice. As the daylight began to fade, a respectful silence fell and Jenna began to feel a little nervous.

Beetle, Septimus, Milo, Marcia, Sarah and Silas joined her as she walked down toward the riverbank, where she had decided the Coronation itself would take place.

And as Jenna stood on the threadbare Coronation Carpet surrounded by Sarah and Silas Heap and her seven brothers, the ghost of Queen Cerys looked at the Heaps with undisguised horror. Like Theodora Gringe, she wished they would just *keep to the back*. But another ghost, Queen Matthilda, stood chatting happily to Alther Mella and his partner, Alice Nettles. She was smiling broadly. Queen Matthilda thought the Heaps were “a breath of fresh air,” she told Alther with a smile.

As the light of the setting sun turned the river a deep orange and sent glints of green glancing off the Dragon Boat, which lay bobbing quietly beside the landing stage, Hotep-Ra picked up the simple, True Crown that he remembered so well, and placed it on Jenna’s head, saying, “Jenna. I name you Queen. All will be well in the best of all possible worlds. So be it.”

A ripple of polite applause ran through the crowd—Castle people did not believe in making a great fuss of their Queens. But as the new Queen wandered around the Palace lawns, she was surprised and touched to find how popular she was. People flocked to her to offer their congratulations and tiny gifts—tiny because tradition dictated that a Coronation gift must be able to be held in one hand. (This was something that had passed Milo by.)

Marcia gave Jenna the **Transmuted** ring that had once belonged to Hotep-Ra’s Queen. Hotep-Ra **Magykally** rebound *The Queen Rules* in soft red leather with an imprint of the Dragon Boat stamped upon the front, and furnished it with a pure gold clasp and corners—the first to be made in the **Fyre**—courtesy of Marcellus. Wolf Boy—who now called himself Marwick—had come with Aunt Zelda and arrived only just in time. Aunt Zelda had not only gotten stuck in the cupboard door coming out of the Queen’s Way, but she had insisted on bringing the rather large Storm Petrel with her, which she had told Marwick had followed her home on the Dragon Boat. Relieved to see Jenna at last, Marwick thrust a grubby leather drawstring bag into her hand and smiled.

“Ooh, pebbles!” said Jenna, opening the bag excitedly. By then she had been given so much gold and so many jewels that she was genuinely happy to see a bag of perfectly round, plain pebbles.

“Yeah. But not all the time,” said Marwick cryptically.

Jenna took out the largest pebble and held it in the palm of her hand. It felt oddly familiar.

Suddenly, Jenna felt the pebble move. A small head emerged and then four short, stumpy legs. “Petroc Trelawney!” she cried. The pebble paid no attention; it raised itself up on its little legs and walked a few steps over to where a small cupcake crumb was stuck on Jenna’s finger.

“He’s got kids,” said Marwick. “They’re *everywhere*. We wondered why we kept finding pebbles in the kitchen until Zelda saw them walk in one morning.”

“So she remembered?” asked Jenna.

Marwick smiled. “Yeah. She figured out who it was at once.”

Jenna loved having Petroc Trelawney back, but the gift she treasured most was the one Beetle gave her: a small gold heart with the True Crown engraved on it. “I found it in the Saturday market,” he said. “It’s really old. I think it belonged to a Queen a long time ago. I hope you don’t mind. That it’s a heart, I mean.”

Jenna smiled. “Oh, Beetle, I don’t mind at all.”

AN EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD



After the Coronation, Hotep-Ra decided to return to the House of Foryx. Very early, one warm morning in early July, Jenna, Beetle and Septimus stood on the Palace landing stage beside the Dragon Boat, which glinted with brilliant flashes of gold and azure blue in the early-morning sun. Standing at the tiller of the Dragon Boat was Hotep-Ra.

It reminded Hotep-Ra so much of the time long ago when another Queen had said a tearful farewell, that he looked around to check there was not a pair of **Darke** Wizards swooping down upon them. Hotep-Ra smiled. Of course there wasn't. At last the two evil beings that had destroyed his own family, his wife and children, and then pursued him three times around the world were gone forever.

Hotep-Ra regarded Jenna pensively. She looked so much like his own dear Queen from long ago, with her gold circlet shining in the sunlight, her long, dark hair blowing in the breeze and concern in her eyes. She would be a good Queen, thought Hotep-Ra—not one of the crazy ones, not one of the silly ones and definitely not one of the nasty ones, although she might possibly be one of the more determined ones.

Jenna was clutching her beautiful new binding of *The Queen Rules*. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for *everything*.”

Hotep-Ra bowed. “I merely showed you how. *You* were brave enough to actually do it.”

“Bye, Jen. See you later,” said Septimus, as casually as if he were just going down the road.

Jenna sighed. She hated the thought of Septimus going back to the House of Foryx. “Bye, Sep. Come back soon. Promise?”

Septimus jumped onboard and joined Hotep-Ra at the tiller. “I promise, Jen. Bye, Beetle. See you.”

“Safe journey, Sep.”

“Thanks. Time to go. *Byeeeeee.*”

Jenna and Beetle watched the Dragon Boat sail out into the middle of the river and turn so that she was facing into the wind. Septimus took down the sail and the mast. Then the Dragon Boat raised her green wings high and brought them down with a *swoosh*, sending waves rippling out, splashing up against the landing stage. They watched her take off, rise up into the sky and fly out across the Farmlands, heading for the open sea beyond the Port. They waited until the Dragon Boat was no more than a little speck in the sky and then turned and walked slowly back together toward the Palace.

It was midnight when the Dragon Boat landed in her usual place outside the House of Foryx. Hotep-Ra insisted that Septimus spend the night there. “You cannot fly back tired, Apprentice. It is dangerous. Sleep here and return tomorrow.” And so, trusting his **Questing Stone** to bring him out into his own Time, as it had done before, Septimus went into the House of Foryx once more. But before he did, just to be certain that he was back in his own Time when he came out, he wrote the date in the snow: 4TH JULY, 12,004.

It was the next morning—or so Septimus hoped—and Hotep-Ra was escorting him down from his rooms, when something very strange happened. They had reached the balustraded landing, which looked out over the huge entrance hall, and Septimus stopped for a moment to look down at the crowded scene below, misty with candle smoke. Suddenly, the doors to the outside lobby flew open and a young man strode in. He was wearing ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes.

“Simon!” gasped Septimus. “It’s *Simon!*” He turned to Hotep-Ra in panic. “Something has happened to Marcia! And not Simon, *no*—he can’t be ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He *can’t*.”

Hotep-Ra smiled. “Well that settles a little bet I had with your Alchemist,” he said. “Your heart is with **Magyk**.” Septimus did not reply—he was staring in utter dismay at the young ExtraOrdinary Wizard, who was now pushing his way through the crowd and glancing nervously up at the landing. “Which is a good thing,” Hotep-Ra continued, “because that young ExtraOrdinary Wizard is not Simon Heap. He is Septimus Heap.”

“*Me?*” gasped Septimus. Dumbstruck, he watched himself coming up the stairs.

“Good-bye, Apprentice.” Hotep-Ra held out his hand and Septimus shook it, aware that *he* was getting nearer. “We will meet again,” said Hotep-Ra. “As you can see.”

Septimus managed a strangled “G’bye” and turned to go. Two steps down he met himself coming up. He looked at his older self, who put his hands up as if to stop him. “Whoa, don’t speak. Bit dangerous, Timewise, apparently. I wondered when we’d meet—if it might be this time.”

Septimus didn’t think he could speak if he tried.

“Marcia’s fine,” said his older self. “And that is all you want to know right now.”

It was true; that was all Septimus wanted to know.

Outside the House of Foryx, Septimus stared at the Dragon Ring that was now safely back on his finger, and shook his head in amazement. Then he checked that he was indeed back in his own Time—sure enough there was the date, still fresh, scrawled in the snow. Dazed, Septimus and the Dragon Boat headed off home, back to the Castle where one day he would be its 777th ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

Which, he now knew, was exactly what he wanted to be—Septimus Heap, ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law:
Any sufficiently advanced technology
*is indistinguishable from **Magyk**.*

ENDINGS

SICK BAY BULLETIN: POSTED BY DR. DANDRA DRAA

MR. JIM KNEE

Mr. Knee has regained enough strength to **TransForm** to his current jinnee status. We are treating the injuries to his hands and we hope for a good recovery.

SCRIBE BARNABY EWE

Doing well.

MESSRS. ERNOLD AND EDMUND HEAP

In deep **DisEnchantment**. Critical.

MISS SYRAH SYARA

Is now in the convalescent room. She is making good progress but please note that visitors are not permitted to stay for longer than *half an hour*.

MATRON MIDWIFE MEREDITH AND MERRIN MEREDITH

Discharged. *Good riddance*.

QUEEN JENNA

Jenna took her job as Queen very seriously. She opened up the Throne Room and held informal meetings there once a week for any Castle inhabitants who wished to discuss a problem. Jenna soon found herself acting as judge in various petty disputes and this led her to set up an informal court system that was, unusually, run by a ghost—Alice Nettles.

Jenna was helped in day-to-day affairs by the ghost of her grandmother, Queen Matthilda. Her mother, Queen Cerys, occasionally ventured out from the Queen's Room, but it was unfortunate that every time she did so, she

bumped into Sarah Heap and the terrifying duck-with-the-prickles that had once **Passed Through** her. Jenna found her mother's disapproval a big disappointment, but it did bring her closer to Milo.

BEETLE

Beetle was soon considered by all in the Castle—and Marcia in particular—to be the best Chief Hermetic Scribe there had ever been. The only downside was that Beetle's mother became extremely boring about her son—"He's the Chief Hermetic Scribe, you know"—and lost a good few friends on account of this. But everything else for Beetle was good, and when Jenna invited him to dinner one night at the Palace, things got even better.

MARCIA

The next few years were comparatively uneventful for Marcia in contrast to the early years of Septimus's Apprenticeship. But Marcia liked a challenge, and she did begin to find things a little tame after a while. After a surprise visit from Sam Heap and Marwick, she began researching the Ancient Ways. It was a fascinating study, and a feeling of restlessness at being fixed in the Wizard Tower slowly crept up on her. But Marcia had her priorities right. She stayed put and guided Septimus steadily through the last years of his Apprenticeship—and occasionally consented to go to the Little Theatre in the Ramblings with Milo Banda.

AUNT ZELDA

On her journey back from the House of Foryx with Hotep-Ra, the Dragon Boat had encountered the tail end of a storm—and a large Storm Petrel. Aunt Zelda and the bird recognized each other at once. The Storm Petrel was none other than Aunt Zelda's brother, Theo Heap. Theo had Shape-Shifted into a Storm Petrel many years earlier, and Aunt Zelda had always known that one day a storm would blow him back to her. And now it had.

The arrival of Theo told Aunt Zelda that her Time Had Come. After Jenna's Coronation, she asked Theo to take her into the Forest where their brother, Benjamin Heap, also a Shape-Shifter, now lived as a tree. Theo had been in the habit of visiting Benjamin Heap and knew where to find him. Silas begged to come with them—he longed to see his father once again but because of a **Forget Spell** cast by Morwenna Mould, he could not remember how to find him. Sam was concerned about Silas finding his way home again and offered to come too.

The four Heaps set off on one of those bright Forest mornings when the sunlight filtered down through the leaves and danced across the Forest floor

like reflections on water. The Storm Petrel sat on Aunt Zelda's shoulder and directed her ever deeper into the Forest until they reached the quiet, green dimness of the Hidden Glades. There, Theo left Aunt Zelda, Silas and Sam beneath the spreading branches of Benjamin Heap and flew up to the very top of the tree, where he quietly told Benjamin that their sister had come to the Hidden Glades in order to enter ghosthood. Benjamin Heap's leaves rustled as he nodded slowly. He understood—his sister was old now and it was Time.

As the sun began to sink in the sky, Silas and Sam said a tearful farewell to Aunt Zelda. Their last glimpse was of her leaning quietly against Benjamin Heap, surrounded by a pool of sunlight. Aunt Zelda smiled at them and then she seemed to fade away, her worn old patchwork dress blending into the dappled shadows of the glade.

MAXIE

When the Forest Heaps came to the Castle for Simon's wedding, they had—at Sarah's insistence—stayed with Sarah and Silas in their old room in the Ramblings. On their first night there, Jenna, Nicko, Septimus and Simon came over and everyone spent a wonderful evening together. It was past midnight when Maxie lay down beside the fire with the Heap boys, just as he used to do. He was, Nicko remarked, wearing a typical Maxie smile as he fell asleep. The old wolfhound never woke up: he died surrounded by all the people who loved him.

MARWICK

As soon as Wolf Boy became Keeper he knew he had outgrown his old name. Now he truly was Marwick. His first act as Keeper was to successfully use Aunt Zelda's potion, and all she had taught him, to bring Edmund and Ernold back from the brink of death. From then on, all his doubts about whether he had the skills to be Keeper were stilled.

After Jenna's Coronation, Marwick returned alone to Keeper's Cottage. Although he missed Aunt Zelda very much, he enjoyed his own company and was content with only the Boggart and Bert for company—plus a few pet rocks that had evaded capture. However, with the Dragon Boat now permanently based at the Castle, Marwick did begin to wonder what the purpose of being Keeper was. It was not until much later when a visit from Sam—a visit that surprised not only Marwick but Sam, too—made him understand that he was also Keeper of one of the most Ancient Ways. After that Marwick embarked on an incredible voyage of discovery. The entire world, he realized, was at his feet.

MERRIN AND NURSIE

Merrin and Nursie were successfully fished out of the Moat, but both were very shocked and bruised, and Nursie had a broken arm. They spent some time in the Sick Bay recovering, then returned to the Doll House and resumed their chaotic lives. But things were subtly improved. Their neighbors, the Port Witch Coven, now treated them with respect, and all the petty **Spells** and **Bothers** that had regularly come flying over the backyard fence stopped, and Nursie relaxed.

To Merrin's surprise, Nursie never reproached him for pulling the lever and sending her hurtling down the terrifying dark slide into the Moat, and for the first time in his life, Merrin actually felt remorse for something he had done. He began to understand that his mother really did care for him no matter what he did, and he, too, began to relax. Merrin made a big effort to be nice to his mother—he was not always successful—but Nursie appreciated the effort. Merrin's first genuine smile was a big occasion for Nursie. She knew then that one day her Merrin would be a good boy—with any luck.

SYRAH SYARA

Syrah remained weak and confused for many months after she woke. Marcia gave Julius Pike leave to stay in the Wizard Tower, and the ghost spent much of the time talking to Syrah about the old days. Eventually Dandra Draa decided that this was not doing Syrah any good and suggested that Julius go back to his old haunts. To Marcia's surprise, Syrah seemed relieved to see Julius leave, and from then on she began to grow stronger.

Syrah moved to some rooms at the top of the Ramblings and spent most of her time tending her rooftop garden. She remembered little **Magyk** and had no recollection of her time on the Isles of Syren, although seeing Septimus always made her feel uneasy.

THE FOREST HEAPS

SAM

Sam seriously considered taking up Silas's suggestion of an Ordinary Apprenticeship at the Wizard Tower, but after his walk into the Forest with Silas and Aunt Zelda, things changed for Sam. He realized that he belonged outdoors—the inside world of the Wizard Tower was not for him. And so, after telling a disappointed Silas that he had decided against an Apprenticeship, Sam accompanied Marwick back to Draggen Island and helped him get settled.

In the autumn Sam returned to Camp Heap in the Forest and was shocked

to discover that it was now occupied by a wolverine pack. He narrowly escaped attack and spent an uncomfortable Big Freeze up in the trees with Galen the Physik woman. By the time of the Big Thaw, Sam had had enough. He returned to the Castle, and it did not take much persuading to get the other three Forest Heaps to head out to the Marshes with him that summer. (Luckily for Edd and Erik, Marcia had decreed that all Apprentices were now allowed a month's vacation.) The Forest Heaps spent a happy month in the sunshine of the Marram Marshes and the company of Marwick, reliving their Camp Heap times together. Summer in the Marram Marshes became a fixture for the Forest Heaps for many years to come.

EDD AND ERIK

It was Edd and Erik who eventually took up Apprenticeships at the Wizard Tower, so once again the Wizard Tower was host to twin Heaps—but this time it was a much more successful relationship. Edd and Erik joined the Apprentice Rotation Scheme and settled in happily, living in the Apprentice Dorm in the old Sick Bay on the first floor of the Wizard Tower. They learned fast and were, as Silas said to Sarah many times, a credit to the Heap name.

JO-JO

To Sarah's dismay, Jo-Jo Heap moved out of the Palace into a small room at the less-scary end of Dagger Dan's Dive and got a job in Gothyk Grotto in order to be close to his ex-girlfriend, Marissa. With Matt and Marcus Marwick already working there, this did not make for a harmonious atmosphere in "the Grot," as it was known to its fans. There were many occasions when Igor, the owner of Gothyk Grotto, was tempted to fire the entire staff and begin again, but the truth was that the four teens were a charismatic bunch and brought in a lot of customs. Jo-Jo in particular—being the son of a Wizard and fluent in basic **Magyk**—was a great asset. So Igor retreated to his room at the back of the shop, learned some new riffs on his nose flute and left them to it.

OTHER HEAPS

NICKO

Nicko finished his Apprenticeship with Jannit and became a partner at the boatyard, allowing Jannit to take six months off each year and do hibernation in a big way. Two summers later, a letter from Snorri mentioning a tall, young fisherman unsettled Nicko more than he had expected, and he began to make plans. Wisely he decided not to mention them to his mother. Not just yet.

SIMON AND LUCY

Simon continued as Apprentice to Marcellus. He enjoyed most aspects of the job—apart from the guided tours of the Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik. But Simon had learned enough about life to understand that nothing is perfect, and when Marcia asked him to be the liaison between the Great Chamber and the Wizard Tower, Simon accepted with great pleasure. Now at last he had a reason to come and go as he pleased at the Wizard Tower—something that he had never thought possible.

After the completion of the Alchemie Chimney, a craze for fancy turrets swept the Castle and Lucy found that she was much in demand. She quickly had many projects under way—which was good because the knitted-curtains business never quite took off. And soon Lucy’s comments to Simon about baby feet made perfect sense—Sarah was thrilled to discover that the first Heap grandchild was expected on MidWinter Feast Day.

SILAS AND SARAH

Silas went back to working at the Wizard Tower, where he kept an anxious watch on Ernold and Edmund and a proud eye on Edd and Erik. Silas was very touched when Marcia, apologizing for doubting him and keeping him in the Stranger Chamber, gave him the Counter-Feet **Charm** that she had discovered in the Pyramid Library during her reinstatement of the Alchemie files. Silas immediately began creating new Counter-Feet sets and arranging a tournament. Sarah settled into a happy round of spending time with Jenna at the Palace, checking up on Jo-Jo (and really annoying him) and visiting Edd and Erik (and, at times, annoying them, too). Lucy also saw more of her mother-in-law than she would have liked but she appreciated Sarah’s attempts to help her get the house sorted out in time for the new arrival.

SEPTIMUS

Now that Septimus knew in his heart that **Magyk** was what he truly wanted to do, his Apprenticeship settled into an uneventful course. Both he and Marcia enjoyed the last years of his Apprenticeship—the first not to be blighted by the specter of the **Draw** for the **Queste** hanging over it. Septimus and Rose spent more and more time together, much to Marcia’s disapproval, but that is another story.

THE LITTLE GIRL IN THE FISHERMAN’S SHACK

Alice TodHunter Moon was the name of the little girl who waved to Septimus the night he flew the Dragon Boat to the House of Foryx. Alice—who

answered only to the name of Tod—never forgot her sight of the Dragon Boat that night. It sustained her through many difficult times. She knew that one day she, too, would fly in the Dragon Boat and meet the great Wizard who waved to her from the stars. Alice was right, and her story is soon to be told in the TodHunter Moon series.

THANK YOU

There are some special people I really want to thank for being part of Septimus, without whom the series would not be the same—or quite possibly would not have happened at all.

So . . . a big, big thank-you to my agent and friend, Eunice McMullen, who was the first to see the beginning of *Magyk* and love it. Eunice, thanks for all your support over the years and for making sure that Septimus & Co. got a great home with HarperCollins in the USA and then with Bloomsbury in the UK.

An equally massive thank-you to my editor and friend at HarperCollins, Katherine Tegen, from whom I have learned so much about writing and without whom I know the Septimus Heap series would not have grown to be what it is.

And to Mark Zug, whose beautiful and atmospheric pictures for Septimus Heap never fail to amaze and delight and are always so just right. I don't know how Mark does it, but he seems to have a direct line to what Septimus is about. Thank you, Mark.

Thank you to my husband, Rhodri, who has patiently read each book many times in their various drafts and still insists that he really *does* enjoy them—and who listens with great attention while I try to explain the myriad twists of plot and get my thoughts straight for the umpteenth time. *And* does the VAT.

To my lovely Laurie, whose quick-fire ideas have been an inspiration and such *fun*.

To my equally lovely Lois, who once had to read the first four chapters of the initial draft of *Magyk* before she was allowed any pizza—and then tell me what she thought.

To Dave Johnson, without whom Nicko would not have had an attack of the giggles at the Wendron Witch Summer Circle.

To Karen and Peter Collins, who helped us keep going when times got tough when I was writing *Physik*.

To all the copy editors, particularly Brenna, who so patiently and graciously read through the final drafts of all the books and from whom I have learned a whole ton of stuff about writing nitty-gritty—particularly echo and repetition and repetition and echo.

And thank you to all the translators who do such amazing work in **Transcribing** the Septimus Heap series into other languages, and especially to the ones—hello, Merlin—who ask the most amazingly detailed questions

in order to make sure everything is as good as it can be.

Thank you, too, to all the wonderful foreign publishers who have put so much into the series, particularly to the great people I have met over the years: Albin Michel in France, Hanser in Germany, Querido in Holland, Wahlströms/Forma Books in Sweden, WSOY in Finland, Pegasus in Estonia, Ursula at the British Council in Tallinn, and g'day to all at Allen & Unwin in Sydney.

And last but definitely not least, thank you to all at Bloomsbury Publishing here in the UK, especially my editor, Ele Fountain.

You've all been **Magyk!**

[About the Author and Illustrator](#)

ANGIE SAGE was born in London and grew up in the Thames Valley, London, and Kent. She now lives in Somerset in a very old house that has a secret tunnel below it. The first six books in the Septimus Heap series are international bestsellers. She is also the author of the Araminta Spookie series. Visit her online at www.septimusheap.com or follow her on Twitter @AngieSageAuthor.

MARK ZUG has loved fantasy novels since he was a teenager. He has illustrated many collectible card games, including *Magic: The Gathering* and *Dune*, as well as books and magazines. He lives in Pennsylvania. You can visit him online at www.markzug.com.

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins authors.

ALSO BY ANGIE SAGE

Septimus Heap, Book One: **Magyk**

Septimus Heap, Book Two: **Flyte**

Septimus Heap, Book Three: **Physik**

Septimus Heap, Book Four: **Queste**

Septimus Heap, Book Five: **Syren**

Septimus Heap, Book Six: **Darke**

Septimus Heap: **The Magykal Papers**

Araminta Spookie: **My Haunted House**

Araminta Spookie: **The Sword in the Grotto**

Araminta Spookie: **Frognapped**

Araminta Spookie: **Vampire Brat**

Araminta Spookie: **Ghostsitters**

PRAISE FOR SEPTIMUS HEAP



Book One: MAGYK

“A quick-reading, stand-alone, deliciously spellbinding series opener.”—
Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“Fun, mystery, and rollicking characters.”—*VOYA* (starred review)

Book Two: FLYTE

“Terrifically entertaining. Fans of the first book will be delighted with this sequel to Septimus’s story.”—*VOYA* (starred review)

Book Three: PHYSIK

“Few fans of the bestselling Septimus Heap series will be disappointed by this excellent third adventure.”—*ALA Booklist*

Book Four: QUESTE

“Vibrant storytelling and inventive flourishes.”—*ALA Booklist*

Book Five: SYREN

“SYREN is Sage at her best.”—*School Library Journal*

Book Six: DARKE

“As usual, the danger and the spellcasting alike seem vividly real and credible. A memorable, edge-of-the-seat escapade that will enthrall confirmed fans and newbies alike.”—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Sage proves again that she has an inventive feel for fantasy adventure.”—
ALA Booklist

“Sage has skillfully spun the most suspenseful installment yet in her series: Again she manages to combine lovable, creepy, and comic characters in a story that will leave her audience gasping in worry, then laughing at characters’ antics. Sep’s fans most certainly will not be disappointed with this heftiest volume yet.”

—*VOYA* (starred review)

Credits

Cover art © 2013 by Mark Zug

Cover design by Joel Tippie

Septimus Heap is a trademark of HarperCollins Publishers.

Back Ad



UNLOCK
THE
TREASURE!

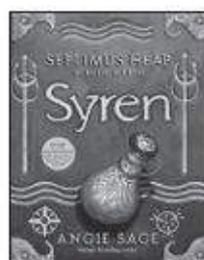
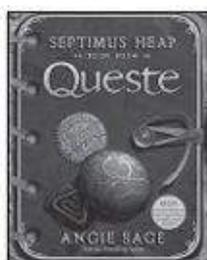
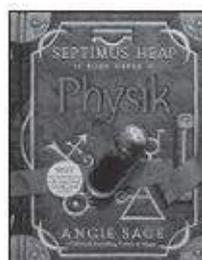


VISIT
www.septimusheap.com
and discover the world of Septimus!

* Play games to earn the most points and win prizes *



Read the other books in the Septimus Heap series



Copyright

Katherine Tegen Books is an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.
Septimus Heap is a registered trademark of HarperCollins Publishers.

Septimus Heap Book Seven: Fyre
Text copyright © 2013 by Angie Sage
Illustrations copyright © 2013 by Mark Zug

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse-engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins ebooks.

www.harpercollinschildrens.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.
ISBN 978-0-06-124245-8 (trade bdg.) — ISBN 978-0-06-124246-5 (lib. bdg.)
ISBN 978-0-06-224697-4 (international edition)
Epub Edition © MARCH 2013 ISBN 9780062219879

13 14 15 16 17 CG/RRDH 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

♦
First Edition

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
<http://www.harpercollins.com.au>

Canada

HarperCollins Canada
2 Bloor Street East - 20th Floor
Toronto, ON, M4W, 1A8, Canada
<http://www.harpercollins.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollins.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollins.co.uk>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollins.com>

SEPTIMUS HEAP

The Magykal
papers



ANGIE SAGE

National Bestselling Author

SEPTIMUS HEAP

The Magykal
papers

ANGIE SAGE
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK ZUG

KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS
An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

To my uncle and aunt, Charles and Anna, with love
—A.S.

For Janelle
—M.Z.

Contents

Papers from The Castle

[A History of the Castle](#)

[Rupert Gringe's Around-the-Castle Boat Tour](#)

[The Egg-on-Toast Restaurant Guide: Eating in the Castle](#)

[The Ramblings](#)

[A Ramble through the Ramblings Walking Tour, as Narrated by Our Guide
Silas Heap](#)

[Points of Interest in the Ramblings](#)

[Sarah and Silas Heap](#)

[Septimus Heap's Map of Castle Tunnels](#)

[The Supreme Custodian](#)

[From the Files of the Supreme Custodian](#)

[Linda Lane's Sketch of the Heap Family Home](#)

[Report of Senior Sanitary and House Clearance](#)

[Little Theater's Winter Schedule](#)

[Letter from Alther Mella](#)

[Sarah Heap's Recipe for Sautéed Frogs](#)

[Letter from Miss Match](#)

[Wanted Posters](#)

[The Heap Family Tree](#)

[The Supreme Custodian's Journal](#)

[Linda Lane](#)

[A Message from Madam Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard](#)

Papers from The Wizard Tower

[The Wizard Tower](#)

[The Wizard Tower: A Pamphlet by Silas Heap](#)

[Notable ExtraOrdinary Wizards throughout History](#)

[Marcia Overstrand](#)

[A Guide to How to Behave When Visiting the Wizard Tower, by Madam](#)

[Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard](#)
[Extracts from the Journal of Marcia Overstrand](#)
[Alther Mella](#)
[Alther Mella's Guide to Being Dead: Ten Handy Rules for New Ghosts](#)
[Septimus Heap](#)
[Extracts from Septimus Heap's Apprentice Diary](#)

[Papers from](#)
[The Palace](#)

[The Palace](#)
[So You Want to Visit the Palace: a Pamphlet by Silas Heap](#)
[A MidWinter Feast Greeting](#)
[Jenna Heap](#)
[Jenna's Palace Diary](#)
[Wizard Way](#)
[The Shops and Services of Wizard Way](#)
[Chief Hermetic Scribes, Past and Present](#)
[Some Employees of the Manuscriptorium](#)
[How the Chief Hermetic Scribe Is Picked](#)
[From the Daily Appointment Diary of Jillie Djinn, Chief Hermetic Scribe](#)
[Beetle's Inspection Clerk Daybook](#)

[Papers from](#)
[Around the Castle](#)

[Mr. and Mrs. Gringe of the North Gate Gatehouse](#)
[The North Gate](#)
[The Absolutely Top-Secret Seven-Year Diary of Lucy Gringe](#)
[The Message Rat Office](#)
[Excerpt from Stanley: My Life—A Rat's Ramblings](#)
[The Rat Office Rules](#)
[Dispatches from the Old Message Rat Office](#)
[The Egg-on-Toast Restaurant Guide: Eating Outside the Castle](#)

[Searchable Terms](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Back Ad](#)

[About the Author and Illustrator](#)

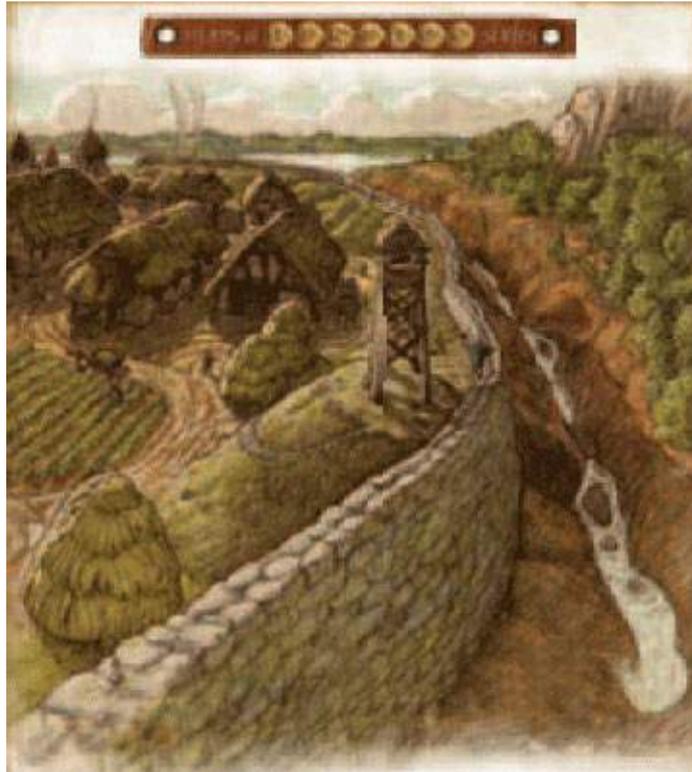
[Books by Angie Sage](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

PAPERS FROM THE CASTLE



A HISTORY OF THE CASTLE

LONG, LONG AGO, BEFORE THE TIME OF HOTEF-RA, before even the first Queen arrived on her Royal Barge, a small village was nestled beside a river bend.

The village had begun its life as a place of refuge for those escaping from the nearby Forest, which was a **Darke** and dangerous place. The villagers were quiet people and wanted no trouble. They dug a ditch between themselves and the Forest and put up a long, low dry-stone wall beside it; they tended their crops and their livestock and kept to themselves. The village traded with the Port and with the Farmlands; it prospered and grew, and the ditch and the wall crept out toward the Forest.

But the prosperity of the village came to the attention of the Forest creatures, who wanted some of the rich pickings to be found there. At night the villagers would lock their doors and listen fearfully as werewolves, witches and all manner of **Darke Things** came in from the Forest, creeping and rustling, snuffling and snarling through the lanes. The creatures took their chickens and goats, **Blighted** the crops, **Fouled** the wells, and one stifling summer's night, they stole a baby from her crib as she lay by an open window.

The night after the baby was taken, the villagers began the Wall. For months they worked, building a strong, high wall on their side of the ditch, sealing the gaps in the stones with lime, taking it higher than anyone thought

it was possible for a wall to be. It was thick too—as thick as a man was tall—and along the top ran a broad path for the newly formed Forest Night Patrol to tread. They worked through three summers and four freezing winters until at last the Wall surrounded the village and the Castle was born.

Now the villagers began to feel safe.

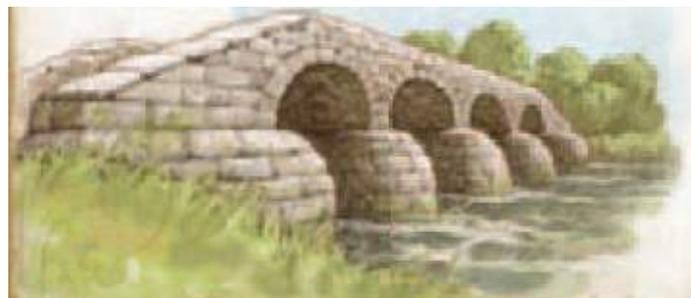
But *still* the occasional **Darke** Forest creatures ventured in. Climbing **Things** with suckered feet and razor-sharp teeth would creep over at night, and the occasional scream would pierce the night air as an unwary villager was caught in the light of a full moon.

The next spring, undeterred, the Castle-dwellers dug their ditch deeper and deeper. Once more they worked into the winter, stopping for the Big Freeze, starting again in the spring. Deeper and deeper they dug until brown river water began to seep in. An air of expectation filled the village.

MidSummer Day was a sacred day for the villagers, as that was the one day of the year when no Forest tree shadows fell upon their land. And so, on that particular MidSummer Day, the villagers divided into two halves—one half to each end of the ditch. At the sound of a trumpet blown from the top of the Wall they breached the banks between the ditch and the river. The water roared in, a great cheer went up and their ditch became the Moat. A MidSummer Day Feast was held and all the villagers slept well in their beds that night.

The North Gate gatehouse and drawbridge were built some years later, when the old wooden bridge across the river to the Farmlands collapsed in a fast and high spring tide with the loss of many lives. It was decided for safety to build two new stone bridges (one-way traffic on each) where the span was less, but the only place for this was a little way upriver, outside the Wall. The Castle-dwellers had no intention of letting any Forest creatures back into their lives and decided on a drawbridge that would be raised at sunset and lowered at dawn.

In the end only one stone bridge was built. Castle jokers called it the One Way Bridge, and the name stuck.



ONE WAY BRIDGE

The summer before the Moat was completed, a strange thing happened. On a hot midsummer's day, under a sky of brilliant blue, a beautiful, ornately gilded barge bedecked with fluttering red canopies came up the river. It had gathered quite a crowd by the time it tied up on the long, low riverbank some way up past Raven's Rock.

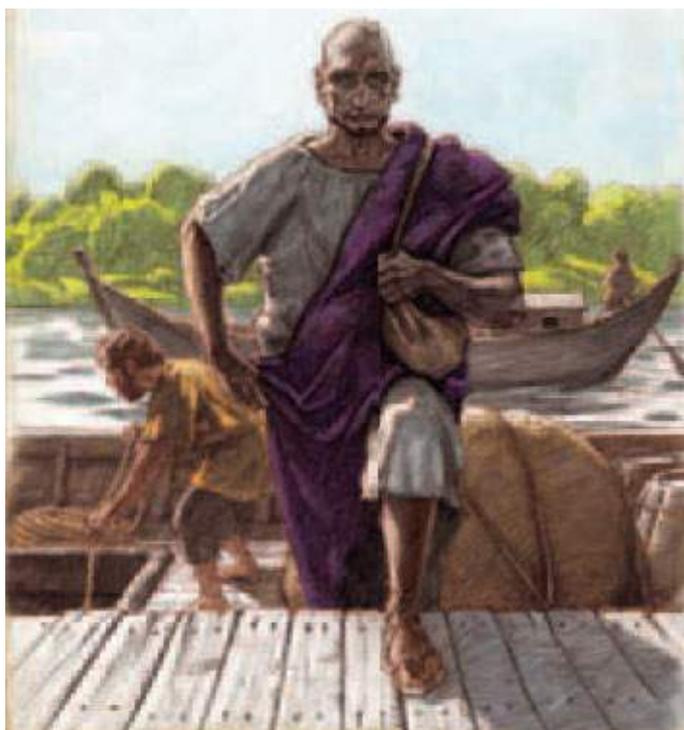
The occupants of the barge were a beautiful dark-haired young woman with deep violet eyes and her three dark-haired tiny daughters. The young woman spoke a strange language that no one in the Castle had ever heard before, and she was dressed in rich red velvet edged with thick gold ribbons and—to the fascination of the crowd—she wore a *crown*.

At this time, the Castle inhabitants were still simple folk without much learning. They dressed in plain clothes woven from flax grown in the Farmlands and they knew little of gold or finery. The young Queen—for this was what they took her to be—made a huge impression. And it seemed that the Castle folk made a pretty good impression on the young Queen, for she showed no signs of wanting to leave. She and her daughters spent the long, hot summer living on their barge—as they had done for many years—and when the chill winds of autumn blew up the river the Castle folk gave her the best house in the Castle to live in.

This house was on the site of what was soon to become the Palace. It was built from the same yellow sandstone that all the Castle houses were built from in those days. Over the years the house was added to and improved upon until it grew to become the Palace—a beautiful long, low building with a turret at either end and wide lawns sweeping down to the river and the Palace Landing Stage where the Royal Barge first drew up.

The young Queen soon learned the language of the Castle and the surrounding areas, and her three daughters all grew up speaking it as their mother tongue. The Queen never did say where she came from or why she had left, and somehow no one in the Castle ever quite liked to ask her. What did it matter after all? They had their Queen, and the Queen had her Castle. It was an arrangement that suited everyone.

Many years later, when that Queen's great-great-great-great—and then some—granddaughter was Queen, another momentous arrival occurred—one that was to change the Castle forever. Hotep-Ra, the very first ExtraOrdinary Wizard, arrived.



HOTEP-RA

Hotep-Ra did not, however, arrive in quite the same style as the Queen had once done. He came, bedraggled and tired, and not a little dispirited, on the night Port barge. The weather was atrocious and Hotep-Ra had spent an uncomfortable night in the hold with some crates of overripe cheese, six terrified and very noisy piglets and some aggressive Port barge rats. He felt quite sick as he disembarked at the Quay and made his way into the Castle, which—with its slowly tolling bells and miserable-looking inhabitants—seemed to him a blighted and gloomy place.

Hotep-Ra soon found out the reason for the gloom—the adored eldest daughter of the Queen was dangerously ill. She was not expected to live to see another day. It had been a long time since Hotep-Ra had used his amazing combination of **Magyk** and **Physik** skills (he had been too much concerned with boat repairs for many years), but it was not long before he had talked his way into the Palace and was at the bedside of the Queen's daughter.

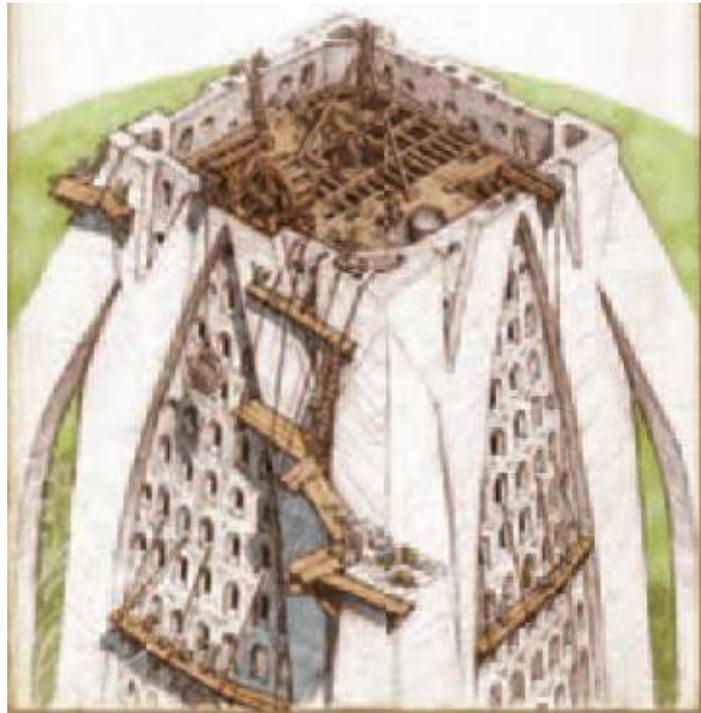
The Queen was not impressed with this stranger who professed to be able to cure her daughter. He was soaking wet, he wore a filthy old purple cloak and he smelled of pigs, but the Queen was wise enough to know that the most wonderful talent may be hidden in the oddest wrappings—and besides, she was desperate.

The Queen watched while Hotep-Ra stood very still and gazed for many long minutes at the Princess, who lay as white as the fine linen sheets that swathed her and as still as the great oak bedposts that rose all the way to the

ceiling far above. And then, very slowly, Hotep-Ra leaned forward, took a deep breath in and breathed out. His breath came tumbling out in a long stream of pink mist, on and on it came, seemingly endless, enveloping the Princess. The Queen had never seen anything like it—how could anyone breathe out like that for so *long*?

And then it stopped. Hotep-Ra stepped back, exhausted. Suddenly the Princess opened her eyes, smiled and sat up. Five minutes later the Princess was eating a cheese sandwich, and Hotep-Ra was a hero.

The Queen offered Hotep-Ra anything that he wanted. All he asked for was a small plot of land in the middle of the Castle and help to build a tower. The middle of the Castle was already taken by a couple of Alchemists who refused to move, so Hotep-Ra settled for a very desirable spot at the end of a long, wide avenue known as the Way and within sight of the Palace. Here, to the amazement of the Castle inhabitants, he built the Wizard Tower and became the very first ExtraOrdinary Wizard.



THE BUILDING OF THE WIZARD TOWER



The wonders of the Wizard Tower drew many people to the Castle, and soon the Ramblings was begun to provide the new residents with somewhere decent to live. The Ramblings was not planned—it just grew. People who needed a roof over their heads would help out until a few rooms were finished; then they would move in and others would take over. And so a huge warren of rooms and walkways began to grow along the river on the east side of the Castle. The Ramblings was soon stuffed with families and became a busy, noisy place with hundreds of little windows looking out over the river, a myriad of tiny roof gardens, theaters, shops, small factories and workshops, nurseries and schools. It was a wonderful place to live.

RUPERT GRINGE'S AROUND-THE-CASTLE BOAT TOUR

TAKE A RIDE ON RUPERT GRINGE'S AROUND-THE-CASTLE BOAT TOUR!

Starts high tide every Saturday at Jannit Maarten's boatyard.

Early booking advisable.

Now, for the first time ever, tours of the Moat are available in Rupert Gringe's revolutionary new twin-hull boat.

Learn about the fascinating history of our Castle from on-board local historian and Moat enthusiast Sirius Weazal. **Feel** the wind in our sails as we skim the river waves. **See** the hidden nooks and crannies of the Castle Wall and the Ramblings. **Hear** stories of daring and dastardly deeds through the ages.

This amazing journey is fully endorsed by the Castle Protection Trust and the Wizard Way Conservation Society.

Take your litter home.

TOUR HIGHLIGHTS INCLUDE:

The Moat

Hear the history of our ancient waterway. See the haunted Outside Path. Listen to tales of the mysterious Moat Fire, the ghostly wanderings of ancient smugglers and drowned lovers.

East Gate Lookout Tower

Hear the strange story of Queen Datchet III.

Snake Slipway

Home of the Rupert pedal boats. Reputedly haunted by an ancient Alchemist. Site of recent sightings of Moat Fire.



We will tie up at the swimming platform for those who wish to use the local facilities.

The Palace Landing Stage

See the haunted Pavilion erected by our Princess at the very spot where the Chief Customs Officer of the Port saved her life.



The Palace

Marvel at one of the oldest buildings in the Castle. See its beautiful lawns and gardens.

The New Dragon Field

See the all-new dragon kennel. Marvel at the sight of the Apprentice's Dragon. *Dragon sighting not guaranteed.*



The Ramblings

See them as you have never seen them before. Hear tales of how they were built from our Ramblings resident Sirius Weazal. There will be a competition for children under ten to count the clotheslines.



Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House

We will stop here for ale and barley cake, price included. Sally herself will tell us the terrifying tale of the night of the fire that burned the Tea and Ale House to the ground.

The Municipal Rubbish Dump

We will pass quickly by.

The South Gate

Gateway to the Traders' Market. Hear the secrets only Traders know!

Haunted Landing Stage

See the tiny stone quay at the mouth of a tunnel, reputed to be where Queen Etheldredda tried to drown her daughter, Esmeralda.



North Gate Gatehouse

Marvel as, by kind permission of Mr. Augustus Gringe, the drawbridge is raised especially for us to pass beneath.

Dragon House

See the gold plaque and the burns from Dragon's Fyre.

DON'T MISS THIS ONE-OF-A-KIND TOUR!

Lifebelts provided.

SIRIUS WEAZAL would like to draw your attention to a proposed "Ask Sirius" Walking Tour of the Castle and the Ramblings: a guided walk through the highways and byways of the Castle and the Ramblings where you can ask Sirius anything about the Castle. Money back **guaranteed** if Sirius cannot answer your Castle question!

FIND OUT:

☞ Why Queen Datchet III moved the East Lookout Tower to the West

- ⚡ If there are tunnels running beneath the Castle (and if some of them are full of ice)
- ⚡ What really goes on in the Manuscriptorium
- ⚡ How many miles of corridors there are in the Ramblings
- ⚡ How many pairs of shoes the ExtraOrdinary Wizard owns
- ⚡ The weight of the lapis lazuli in the Great Arch
- ⚡ How many Mussmancers there are in the Castle
- ⚡ The secret of the Draper Clock
- ⚡ And much, much more!

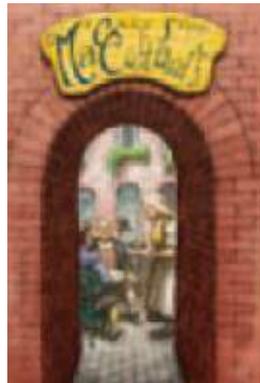
*Bookings taken now.
Sturdy shoes recommended.
Umbrellas provided if wet.*



THE EGG-ON-TOAST RESTAURANT GUIDE

by G. M. Coast

EATING IN THE CASTLE



Ma Custard's Cake Stop

PROPRIETOR: Ma Custard.

LOCATION: In the parlor behind the All-Day-All-Night Sweet Shop.

SERVICE: Slow but worth waiting for.

SPECIALTIES: Raisin custard pie.

MENU: A variety of cakes and pies all made by Ma Custard.

WE ATE: Raisin custard pie, banana toffee cake, custard cream buns, licorice flapjacks, custard fancies, strawberry cupcakes and a small—very small, honestly—chocolate twist.

COMMENTS: Delicious. Open hours only between four and six in the afternoon. Get there early to be sure of a seat. A well-kept secret.

The Meat Pie & Sausage Cart

PROPRIETOR: Not surprisingly, he wishes to remain anonymous. However, THE EGG-ON-TOAST RESTAURANT GUIDE can reveal that he is the ex-dishwasher boy from Sally Mullin's café.

LOCATION: A mobile facility to be found in the less salubrious areas. Has recently been banned from Wizard Way.

SERVICE: Surly.

SPECIALTIES: Sausage-of-the-day. (My brave assistant tried one and got a cat's claw stuck between her teeth.)

MENU: Meat pies and sausages.

WE ATE: Sausage-of-the-day. My assistant ate nothing else for the following three days.

COMMENTS: Disgusting.

Café la Gringe

JUST OPENED

PROPRIETOR: Mrs. Theodora Gringe.

LOCATION: Small, drafty lean-to at the side of the North Gate gatehouse.

SERVICE: Serve yourself. Three pots of stew kept warm (just) over a small fire.

SPECIALTIES: Stew.

MENU: Brown stew, dark brown stew and very dark brown stew.

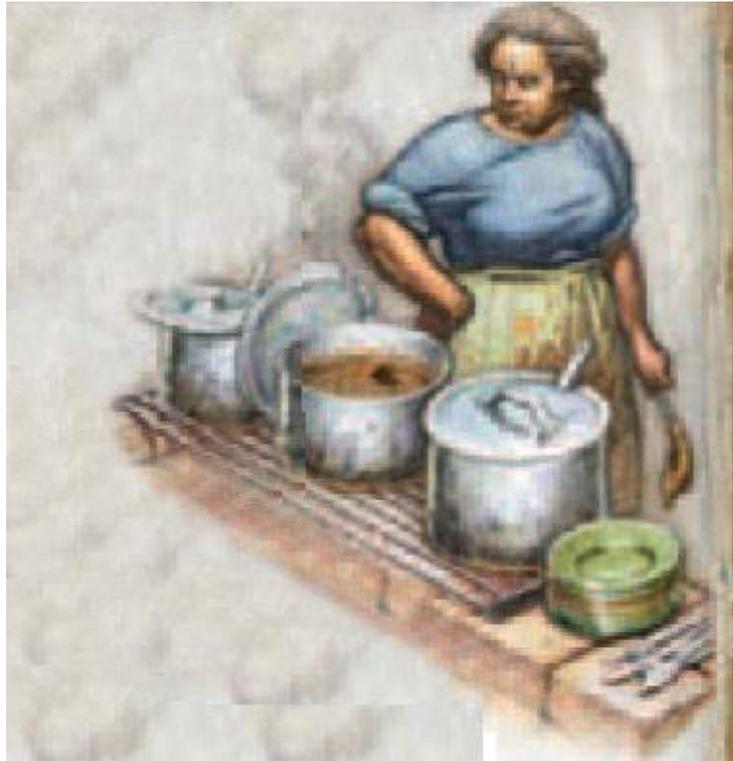
WE ATE: Stew.

COMMENTS: Sharp knives are provided to cut up the stew. You will need them.

Wizard Sandwiches

PROPRIETOR: We were unable to ascertain this. THE EGG-ON-TOAST RESTAURANT GUIDE was informed that "Wizard Sandwiches does not believe in ownership."

LOCATION: First Floor, Number 44 Wizard Way. Green door with flowers next to the Perfect Pamphlet Printers.



SERVICE: Friendly but sometimes a little confused. Used to run a cart service but is now take-out only, although will deliver. They will accept orders by Message Rat and have regular clients all along Wizard Way.

SPECIALTIES: Whole loaf sandwiches to share with a friend. Homemade ketchup.

MENU: We couldn't find one. When THE EGG-ON-TOAST RESTAURANT GUIDE asked, we were told, "Our menu is infinite, but there's no ham today."

WE ATE: Cheese and salad rolls with apple chutney. A Manuscriptorium scribe was buying a sausage sandwich, which looked very good, but my assistant refused to go near it.

COMMENTS: Good.

THE Ramblings

HOW TO GET THERE:

BY BOAT: Take the Ramblings shuttle from the South Gate to the Ramblings Piers numbers one, two or three.

BY FOOT: Signs can be found on most streets and alleys.

BY HORSE: Not advisable. There are no stable facilities at the Ramblings.

WHO LIVES THERE: All kinds: Families, Wizards, tradespeople, gardeners, frog-farmers, fortune-tellers, actors, acrobats, spies and runaways. It is full, as Queen Etheldreda would say, of all kinds of riffraff.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND THERE: Rooms, schools, factories, workshops, theaters, a small hospital, Ramblings Chapel, nurseries, shops, bakeries, in fact pretty much everything you could possibly need.

WHY YOU'D GO THERE: If you need somewhere to live, it's the best bet in the Castle; there are generally a few rooms vacant. For a visit, it's fun, full of interesting people and there are some good lodging houses and delightful roof gardens. Interesting experimental plays are performed by the Ramblings Players and the Knights on the Tiles theatrical group. Of course there are some rundown, shadier parts of the Ramblings, but why you would want to go there is your own business and the Guide would not dream of asking.

WHY YOU WOULDN'T: Best avoided at rush hour, when the passageways can be very congested.

A Ramble through the Ramblings

WALKING TOUR

AS NARRATED BY OUR GUIDE SILAS HEAP

SET DOWN VERBATIM BY MIRIAM BING, AS PRACTICE FOR HER
MANUSCRIPTORIUM SPEEDWRITING EXAMINATION

GOOD AFTERNOON, EVERYONE. All here? Yes? Good. Ah, hello, madam, yes we are just about to go. Better late than never, ha ha. Well, now that we *are* all here I would like to draw your attention to the fact that this is the *original* Ramble through the Ramblings Walking Tour. Beware recent inferior expeditions by a certain Sirius Weazal.

It is my pleasure to introduce you to the Ramblings. The Ramblings has been built over hundreds of years to house all the people who have come to live in our lovely Castle. It may seem a little squished to any farmers among you, but those of us who live—or used to live—here love it.

So let's get started, shall we? Gather around. Yes, around *me*, madam. Thank you. No, madam, I am not the cleaner. I am a Wizard. That's what the blue robes are. Well, I don't know what you think a Wizard is *supposed* to look like, but I can assure you that I am indeed a Wizard.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, we begin our tour here at the North Entrance to the Ramblings. This entrance, beside the North Gate, takes you straight into the Ramblings. Follow me, please.

The noise, madam? That is the Ramblings Orange Elementary School. We have seven elementary schools in the Ramblings, each named after a color of the rainbow. My own children went to the Purple School, which has a high proportion of children from **Magykal** families. Of course you all know how **Magyk** was banned under that awful regime of the Supreme Custard Tart—ho ho, just my little joke; we can laugh about it now, but it was no fun at the time.

Now we pass through this large hall, which is where the children play after school. The swings and slides are all provided by the Ramblings Play Association. Excuse me, young man, will you come down from there, please? You'll break it swinging around like that.

We shall now exit through this passageway—single file, please, as it

narrows at the steps—and enter into the residential part of the Ramblings. Be careful of the rushlights, *please*. Look, boy, if you touch one of *course* it will be hot .

May we continue? Along the passageway you will see a series of doors of all shapes, size and colors. These are the rooms where the families of the Ramblings live.

We shall now ascend the steps—please take care—to the upper corridor that overlooks the river. This has been measured at very nearly three miles in length. To your right is the bright red door where my family used to live. All my children were born here, including the Apprentice to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Septimus Heap. Yes, that's correct, madam, the boy with the dragon. Oh really? Well I'm very sorry, but I don't think my son has much control over the dragon poo. Yes, I'm sure it was extremely distressing.

Yes, young man, of course you may ask a question. Yes, this is where the Princess lived. She left on her tenth birthday. Bit of a shock, actually. Can we have a look? Well, I don't see why not. I've got a key somewhere. Kept it as a memento...see, fits the lock perfectly...oh this door always did have a mind of its own...open, you stupid door...Oof!

Yes, madam, it does indeed look rather small for a large family. Yes, six boys and a girl. Well, the girl slept in that little cupboard here. Yes, it is cute. Oh my gosh, it still has the curtains Sarah made. Oh dear. Oh. I had quite forgotten. Time to move on now, oh dear, oh dear...

We shall now turn down here, no down here, madam, and take this winding passageway—take care, it slopes down rather sharply. It's a bit of a walk, but it will take us to the upper market hall, which usually has some interesting produce. No running please, young man. You don't know who you'll bump into. There could be the ExtraOrdinary Wizard around the next bend. But we hope not, ho ho!

Right, here we are. Yes, madam, the market hall always smells like this. I think it's the cheese. Now you may look around at your leisure. We'll meet at the Home Brew Ale Stall in ten minutes. No rush.

Everyone found a bargain? Good. Now we set off for the Knight on the Tiles Little Theater, taking in Mrs. Tenderfoot's delightful roof garden on the way. Follow me, please, down this corridor. No, young man, this one. We don't want you getting lost, do we? Well, possibly we do...ahem, er, you're his father, are you? Well, I suggest you keep an eye on your son, sir. Everyone, keep left please. Left, madam. The workshops will soon be closing and there will be a bit of a rush.

Right, now we go through this little door here. May I suggest you take a deep breath in, madam, that usually does it. Oh. Can anyone give a push? One, two, three—good. Now we take the high walkway to the roof terrace. Please keep to the middle, as some of the fences are not to be trusted. Yes, it

is a long way down, madam. Yes, it's the river down there. It does indeed look very small come back from the edge! Oh heavens. Would you kindly keep hold of your son, sir, if you wish him to survive another day?

If those of you with a head for heights would care to stop and turn around for a moment, this is a wonderful place to see the Wizard Tower. And the golden Pyramid at the top is looking very stunning today, with the sun glinting off it. The **Magykal** lights, very blue today. They are often purple too, but it does depend on the kind of **Magyk** happening in the Tower. And for those of you who are early risers, this is a wonderful place to see the sun rise over the Farmlands.

Now, we have reached the common communal roof terrace, a gem of green hidden from the rest of the world. Only the birds can see it. Yes, and dragons, madam. If you will follow me, please, we will walk through the gardens. Please don't pick the flowers.

Our last port of call is the Theater. Just follow me down the winding steps this way and through this green door here. Everyone here? Good. We are now inside the Knights on the Tiles Little Theater. Yes, it is dark after being outside. No, madam, I don't know why the rushlights are not lit. I wouldn't call it a disgrace, exactly, more of an inconvenience. Your eyes will soon get used to it; there is no need whatsoever to panic. Ouch! Oof! What the—

Oh my goodness, it's you, Larry! Well, how was I to know you were doing a performance? Couldn't see a thing. What, that was the idea? No, we don't want to buy tickets. Well, I am very sorry you don't have an audience, but to tell you the truth I am not surprised. Follow me now, everyone, we are very nearly at the end of our tether. No, madam, I said tour. To *Tour*.

Here Miriam Bing ran out of paper.

POINTS OF INTEREST IN THE RAMBLINGS

Bertha's Banana Bookshop

✳ *No. 3 About Turn*

Bertha's shop specializes in books with yellow covers. Recently she has branched out into books with orange covers, but stock of these is still low.



The Gothyk Grotto

✳ *13 Little Creep Cut*

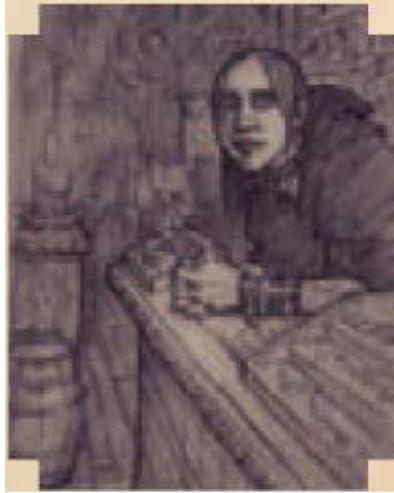
A long, narrow shop stuffed with all manner of Gothyk delights. Mainly cheap trinkets and jokes, but you can also find good copies of Darke rings and Charms if you are prepared to spend a few hours in semidarkness listening to the shopkeeper—"call me Igor"—play his bizarre version of a Darke noseflute. If you want to blend in, wear black.



The Big Bloomer Flower Shop

✳ *3-7 Windy Way*

All the best flowers from the rooftop gardens can be found here. Cecil and Siegfried will tell you the history of each flower—in some detail. Be sure to leave enough time for your visit.





SARAH AND SILAS HEAP

SILAS GREW UP IN THE RAMBLINGS. His mother was the once-lovely Jenna Crackle, and his father was a talented Wizard named Benjamin Heap. Benjamin Heap was a shape-shifter—a rare and much respected talent among Wizards.

Silas was a late baby in the family and was born the seventh son, much to everyone's delight, but when Silas turned eighteen, his father bade his family a sad farewell and went into the Forest. He wanted to take his final shape: a tree. He was loath to leave Silas, who was still young, but Benjamin knew that to become a tree he needed all his strength. He dared not wait any longer. And so he wandered through the Forest until he came to the **Hidden** Ancient Glades and began his slow transformation.

Silas was very upset. At the time, he was Apprentice to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard Alther Mella and struggling with his studies. He felt upset that his father had left without telling him where he was going—even though Silas knew that the Ancient Glades were a well-guarded secret. Not liking to see his Apprentice so distraught, Alther gave Silas a seven-month leave to look for his father. Silas spent six of those months wandering through the Forest, but he never found the way to the Ancient Glades, where Benjamin Heap was slowly taking root. On the last day of his leave Silas returned to the Castle with the young Sarah Willow on his arm. Sarah had been studying Herbs and Healing with Galen, the Forest **Physik** Woman, but when she met Silas she decided she had learned quite enough and it was time to return to the Castle.

Silas and Sarah made their home in a large room in the Ramblings, and Silas went back to his Apprenticeship—but not for long.

As the children began to arrive, Silas found it harder and harder to tear himself away from family life to spend his days among the dry and dusty books in the Wizard Tower. He hated having to leave Sarah to do all the work—even though she never complained—and one day when he came home to discover he had missed both Erik and Edd's first smiles and Sam's first steps, Silas asked Alther to release him from his Apprenticeship.

Alther agreed—and not too reluctantly. He liked Silas very much; in fact, that was one of the reasons why he had chosen him to be his Apprentice, but he knew that Silas was struggling with the more advanced **Magyk** and he thought that Silas had made the right decision.

Sarah and Silas had seven sons in all, but—as everyone knows—the youngest, Septimus, was declared dead by the Midwife and carried away. On that same night, Silas found a baby girl in the snow outside the North Gate—and now everyone knows who she is too.

The day of the baby-in-the-snow's tenth birthday, the lives of the Heap family were changed forever. Sarah's children were scattered far and wide, and although she was at last reunited with her youngest son, she lost her oldest son to the **Darke** and her next four sons to the Forest.

Sarah and Silas moved into the vast, virtually empty Palace, and not long after that she lost Nicko to his Apprenticeship with Jannit Maarten. Sarah's newfound Septimus was living at the Wizard Tower under the thumb of Marcia Overstrand, and all that was left to Sarah was her much-loved adopted daughter, Jenna. Sarah felt bereft. At night she would sometimes dream that all her lost sons were with her once more. But in the morning when she awoke to the sound of Silas snoring, Sarah would gaze mournfully up at the dusty old bed canopy and would know that it was all a dream—and a hopeless one at that.

She comforted herself with the thought that at least it could not get worse—until one day it did. Nicko disappeared from the face of the earth.

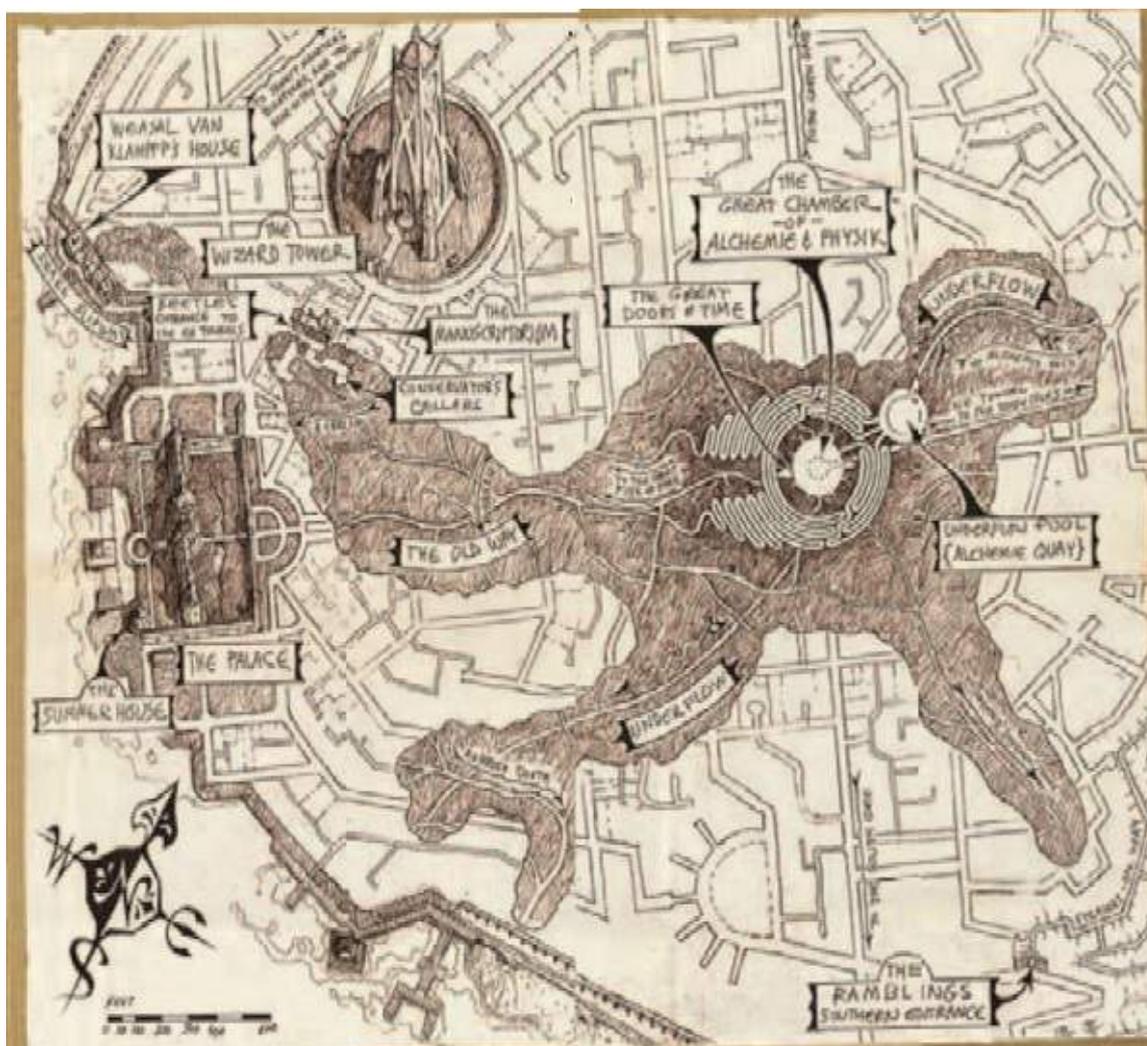
And what was even worse were the rumors flying around the Castle—that Nicko was lost in Time. It was, thought Sarah, a wicked thing to say to a mother and, obviously, totally impossible. But as the months went by and Nicko did indeed seem to have vanished, Sarah began to wonder. Those were Silas and Sarah’s darkest days.

Things are a little better now, as Sarah has once again seen her second-youngest son, but she still dreams of the day when all her children will be with her at the Palace. Silas tells her not to count her chickens, but Sarah likes her chickens and she counts them every day.



BENJAMIN HEAP

SEPTIMUS HEAP'S MAP OF CASTLE TUNNELS





THE SUPREME CUSTODIAN

AFTER THE ASSASSINATION of the Queen, the Supreme Custodian ruled over the Castle. He was a vicious, nasty little man, and even his mother thought he was arrogant. He was vain, much given to preening and liked wearing delicate, embroidered slippers. His hobby was lurking and listening at doors, but he never did hear anything good about himself.

His job was to find the baby Princess and get rid of her. Only then could his Master, DomDaniel, safely resume what he considered to be his rightful place at the top of the Wizard Tower as ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

The Supreme Custodian knew that once he found the Princess, his job would be at an end, so he did not try too hard—he liked the trappings of office and he particularly liked his banquets. Periodically he was summoned to see DomDaniel in the Badlands, and he would return from these visits

white-faced and with a temporarily renewed vigor for the search. It was after a particularly frightening visit, where DomDaniel threatened to have him **Consumed**, that the Supreme Custodian put in a spy, Linda Lane, to check on a possible lead in Room 16, Corridor 223, East Side—a Wizard enclave in the Ramblings.

Linda Lane reported to the Supreme Custodian that the Princess—or the Queenling, as he preferred to call her—was living among the Wizards in what the house-proud Linda described as “a disgusting state of squalor.” And so, on the evening of Jenna Heap’s tenth birthday, the Supreme Custodian gave an Assassin her orders. But as we know, all did not go his way.

FILES OF THE SUPREME CUSTODIAN



Found in the Supreme Custodian's rooms in a file marked HEAP

**SKETCH OF THE HEAP FAMILY HOME ROOM
16, CORRIDOR 223, EAST SIDE**



••••REPORT OF•••• SENIOR SANITARY AND HOUSE CLEARANCE



Location: Room 16, Corridor 223, East Side

Name of former residents: Heap

Value of possessions: Nil

Condition of possessions: Poor

Quantity of possessions: Seven times average amount

Books to be removed: Yes

Operative's comments: A large quantity of banned **Magyk** books were observed. Due to pressure of work I left helper to stack these outside for removal by the Book Squad. Checked later to find books had indeed been removed. Request clean uniform due to dust saturation. Book Squad later informed me that no books had been collected. Suggest investigation.

See below for list of dangerous books unaccounted for:

- Basyk **Magyk** for the Young
- Magykal** Tales for Small Boys and Girls
- So You Think You Want to Be a Wizard?
- 101 Charms for Cleaning Houses (unused)
- Physik** Is Bunk
- Ten Spells for Ten Smells
- Fishing Spells and Charms for Boys and Girls
- Washday Drying Spells for Busy Mothers
- How to Manage a Wizard Husband (poor condition)
- The **Magyk** of Foryx
- The Great Shape-Shifters of Our Time
- The ExtraOrdinary Apprentice Handbook

These items were removed for destruction:

- 1 Ordinary Wizard robe
- 6 unidentified potions, possibly **UnStable**
- 1 bag of dried frogs

The following decayed food was removed for composting:

- 3 turnips
- 1 brick of? cheese
- 4 maggoty chickens
- 1 pail of? milk
- 1 bag of Ma Custard's exploding rhubarb drops

These garments were sent to the Young Army Barracks:

- 10 boys' tunics, various sizes

These garments were sent to the Asylum for Distressed Persons:

- | | | | | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| -2 girls' short tunics | condition: threadbare | -49 odd socks | condition: disgusting | -2 pairs of boys' boots | condition: holed |
|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------|

Other household items sent to the Asylum for Distressed Persons:

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| -9 blankets | condition: threadbare |
| -6 houseplants | condition: dead |
| -8 bowls | condition: cracked |
| -10 cups | condition: cracked |
| -10 forks | condition: bent |
| -12 spoons | condition: bent |
| -5 towels | condition: threadbare |
| -9 toothbrushes | condition: not nice |
| -24 pens | condition: mostly broken |
| -2 rubber balls | condition: chewed |
| -1 mouse | condition: dead |
| -1 bag of dog hair | condition: smelly |



Found in the Heap Home

Little Theater's

WINTER SCHEDULE

The Knights on the Tiles are pleased to present
A MIDWINTER FEAST OF FESTIVITIES

Featuring::

PERCY THROWER, JUGGLING MASTER

Recently returned from his successful tour of the Far Countries! Mr. Thrower will juggle chickens and children for the delight of all! Book early to avoid disappointment.



New Year's Eve

The Pupils of the Purple Elementary School present their annual production of the pantomime: *The Queen and Hotep-Ra*

Snow Business

A selection of short plays on the theme of snow. Audiences are requested to come dressed as snowflakes. We aim to create a blizzard!



Letter from Alther Mella



Found in the Heap Home

**Alther Mella,
ExtraOrdinary Wizard
Wizard Tower
Wizard Way
The Castle**

Dear Silas,

Thank you for your hospitality yesterday evening. It was a lovely meal. I never thought I would actually enjoy sautéed frogs; please give Sarah my thanks. I trust that little Sam has now gotten over his stomachache. It was a dramatic moment, wasn't it?

I am writing to let you know that I have reached a decision about the matters we discussed over Sarah's wonderful cream sludge pie. I have decided to agree—with some regret—to release you from your Apprenticeship.

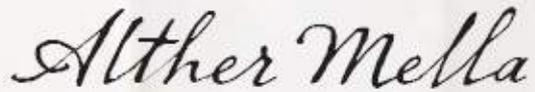
I am extremely sad to be losing you as an Apprentice. I have enjoyed your company very much indeed, but I do understand your desire to give up your Apprenticeship and spend more time at home with your delightful—and rapidly growing—family. I do also totally understand your concerns over the DRAW at the end of the Apprenticeship. I had not meant you to find out about that quite so soon. Of course, the odds are very much against DRAWING for the QUESTE, as there is, I understand, only one stone left. But, as you say, you never know. And to leave the children without a father would be a terrible thing.

My dear Silas, please know that there will always be a seat for you at the monthly banquets, and I shall look forward to your company there. Of course, as a former Apprentice, you will receive an automatic invitation to all official functions at the Wizard Tower.

I shall be interviewing for Apprentices in a few weeks' time. There are quite a few Hopefuls to choose from. I am very impressed with that young woman Marcia, although I can see she may not be as easy to work with as you were. Good-bye to those long lunches at the Grateful Turbot, I suspect!

Thank you again for a most delightful and lively evening. With this letter you are officially Released from your Apprenticeship.

With all best wishes for the future,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alther Mella". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored, slightly textured background.

ExtraOrdinary Wizard

P.S. I believe I left my knife, fork and spoon with you, but don't worry, you are welcome to keep them.



Found in the Heap Home

Sarah Heap's Recipe for SAUTÉED FROGS



PREPARATION TIME: thirty minutes; more than four hours if you have to catch the frogs first; a few days if you ask Silas to catch them

COOKING TIME: 10 to 15 minutes

One brace of frogs per person (1 brace = 2 frogs)

INGREDIENTS FOR SIX:

- 6 brace of frogs
- 1 chunk of butter
- 1 glug of cooking oil
- 1 large onion
- 1 bulb of fennel
- 1 cup of flour
- Herbs
- Salt and pepper to taste

SARAH SAYS: Frogs are at their best in early summer before they grow too large. You can either cultivate your own from frogspawn (see also recipe for Tadpole Soup) or find a nearby pond. I buy mine from Bertie Hatcher, who keeps the Ramblings' frog pond. His frogs are always succulent. I prepare my own, but the more squeamish can buy them ready-prepared from Bertie's stall in the Ramblings market on Saturdays.

PREPARATION:

Prepare your frogs if not already done. I recommend the method used in the *Frog-Pickers Almanac*. It is humane and not too messy.

Set prepared frogs aside.

Finely slice the onion and fennel.

Place flour in large bowl, chop the herbs and add to flour with seasoning. Mix together.

TO COOK:

Over a low fire, melt butter in heavy frying pan. Add the onion and fennel. Cook gently until the onion and fennel are soft. Remove pan from heat. Set aside the onions and fennel.

Now take the prepared frogs one by one and roll in the mixture of herbs and flour until they are coated. Set aside.

Bank up the fire. Place the frying pan over the fire; add vegetable oil and butter. When hot, add the frogs. Sauté. This will take between five and seven minutes depending on the size of the frog. Avoid overcooking, as this will lead to tough and chewy frogs.

When frogs are lightly browned, add the cooked onions and fennel, mix together for about thirty seconds, then remove from heat. Season to taste.

For a main meal, serve with fresh green beans and rice.

For an appetizer, use very small frogs and serve with a herby yogurt dip.

A great favorite in the Heap household!

Letter from Miss Match



Found in the Heap Home

Miss Match

The Purple Elementary School

The Ramblings

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Heap,

Further to your visit last week I enclose Nicko's most recent progress report.

Nicko is a very able and intelligent boy. He shows MAGYKAL potential, but, as you see, he is not making much progress. As I explained at our meeting, I do not feel that his heart is in it. He has not moved beyond the very basics and does not, as you now realize, stay behind for the MAGYKAL hour after school. I am sorry that you assumed he did. I understand he goes home via the boatyard; it appears they know him well there.

You will see from the report that Nicko excels in practical subjects. His grades for woodwork and technical design are superb.

I do understand that, as such an ancient Wizard family, you both are disappointed at Nicko's lack of interest in MAGYK, but as I said at our meeting, I think you should seriously consider allowing Nicko to take up an Apprenticeship with Jannit Maarten. I have spoken to Jannit informally about this and she would be willing to take him sometime next year.

Nicko is a very popular and valued member of this school and I would not hesitate to highly recommend him to Miss Maarten.

Yours sincerely,
Emily Match

Headmistress

WANTED BY ORDER OF THE SUPREME CUSTODIAN

SILAS HEAP

DESCRIPTION: Wizard. Green eyes and blond curly hair. Often disheveled.
Worn robes.

LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS: Seen at the North Gate by Gringe the Gatekeeper. Did not pay toll.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES:

Sarah Heap
Marcia Overstrand
Alther Mella (ghost)



SARAH HEAP

DESCRIPTION: Blue eyes and blond curly hair. Often seen picking herbs,
followed by many children. Grubby appearance.

LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS: Rumored to be in the Forest.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES:
Silas Heap
Galen the Physik Woman
Sally Mullin



SIMON HEAP

DESCRIPTION: Young man with green eyes and blond curly hair.

LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS:
Room 16
Corridor 223
East Side

KNOWN ASSOCIATES:
Lucy Gringe



NICKO HEAP

DESCRIPTION: Age twelve. Green eyes with blond curly hair. Dirty-looking.

LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS: Seen on a boat heading downriver.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES:

Rupert Gringe
Jannit Maarten



JENNA HEAP

DESCRIPTION: Age ten. Small for her age. Long, dark hair and violet eyes.

LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS: Seen on a boat heading downriver.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES:

Bo Tenderfoot

Alther Mella (ghost)



YOUNG ARMY EXPENDABLE BOY 412

DESCRIPTION:

Green eyes.

Pinched face.

LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS: Seen on a boat headed downriver. Presumed abducted.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES:

None



SAM, EDD, ERIK AND JO-JO HEAP

DESCRIPTION: Teenage boys. Jo-Jo Heap age fourteen. Edd and Erik Heap, identical twins age fifteen. Sam Heap age seventeen. All have green eyes and blond curly hair. Generally scruffy.

LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS:

Room 16
Corridor 223
East Side

KNOWN ASSOCIATES:

Silas Heap

MAXIE HEAP

DESCRIPTION: Wolfhound. Moth-eaten.

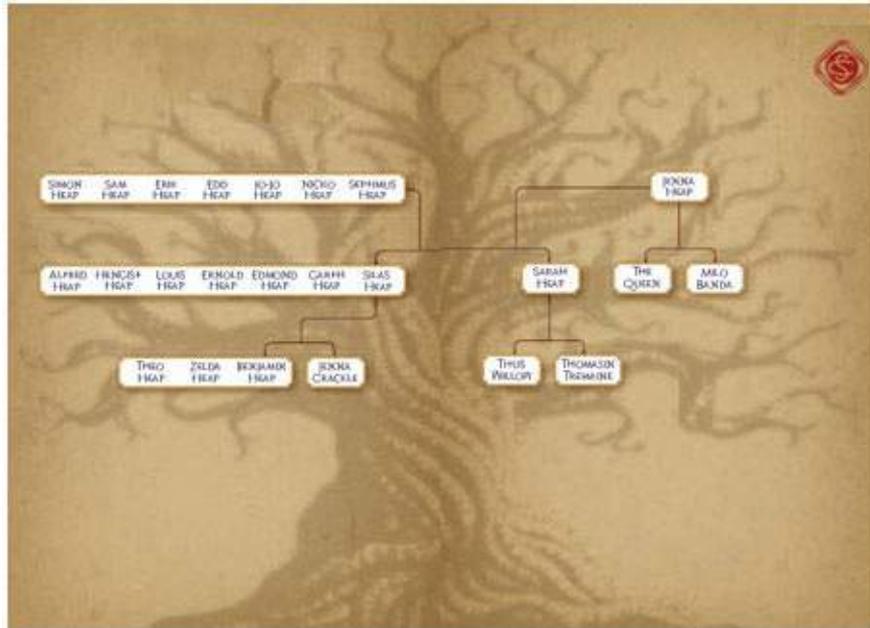
LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS: Seen on a boat heading downriver.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES:

Silas Heap
Nicko Heap



THE HEAP FAMILY TREE



The Supreme Custodian's Journal



Property of the Supreme Custodian My Journal

7:00 P.M. MONDAY

My feet are freezing. This Palace is a miserable dump. Every winter I forget how awful the Big Freeze is. Only ray of sunshine in my life is young Simon Heap. He's not a bad lad to talk to. Silly boy. Why he wants to be loyal to a bunch of useless Wizards, I have no idea, but I have a feeling it won't be for too much longer. I am definitely getting somewhere. Indeed, it is high time I got over to the Ladies' Washroom to see how he's getting on. I'll bring him one of those pies I had for lunch.

10:00 P.M. MONDAY

There was frost in the washroom; blasted fire has gone out and no coal left. But we had a nice chat, and young Heap ate the pie. He is mellowing. A week ago he wouldn't have touched it. I think he will tell me what I need to know any day now. Felt sorry leaving him alone. Would have offered him a blanket but wasn't quite sure how I could explain that to DD if he found out. Young Heap very morose. It can't be too comfortable chained to a freezing-cold radiator.

5:00 P.M. TUESDAY

Oh I feel quite ill. This afternoon got summoned by DD to the Wizard Tower. Had to walk all the way up to the top, as the stairs have ground to a halt, clogged up with a plague of DARKE cockroaches coated in Magog slime.

Whole place smells disgusting and is, frankly, quite creepy nowadays with all that DARKE stuff flitting around and that ghastly wailing all the time. Say what you like about old Overstrand (and many people do), but at least she kept the Wizard Tower running properly and it smelled nice.

Of course the old toad refused to believe I am doing my best to get the information out of young Heap. I told him you catch more flies with honey, and he just laughed and said *he* catches flies with a flyswatter and I should try *that* with young Heap. Then one of those awful Magogs slid up to me, clicking its claws and breathing down my neck, while DD said that if I don't get the whereabouts of the Queenling soon he'll have me CONSUMED. Told me exactly how he would do it. *Twice*. I feel sick thinking about it. Oh no, another knock on the door. I feel quite weak.

6:00 P.M. TUESDAY

Thank goodness it wasn't another summons to the Tower—it was Gerald. I do enjoy calling him Gerald. He hates it, of course. “I am the *Hunter*,” he said, very sniffily. Gerald gets on my nerves. He breezes in and stomps around like he owns the place. You'd never know that *he's* the one who lost the Trail, that he can't even track a bunch of smelly Wizards. Ha! I am surrounded by fools. I shall go and see young Heap again. I have a little plan, which I think might work. I am slowly bringing him to his senses through my charm and charisma. Mother was not right about *that*. I have great personal magnetism. I can see it in the way people avoid looking at me. It is all just *too* much for them.

1:00 A.M. WEDNESDAY

It has been an interesting evening. I took a nice hot drink of chocolate along with me to the Ladies' Washroom, and young Heap and I had our little chat. It was freezing, but I was fine, as I took my nice new ermine stole with me. Heap's teeth chattered, but I resisted lighting the fire—I just thought, flyswatter, *flyswatter*. Anyway, I played my trump card—I “offered” Heap the possibility of an Apprenticeship to our new ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Of course, he doesn't know it's not mine to offer, but that is beside the point. It worked. He told me the Queenling has gone to stay with her aunt in the Marram Marshes. I went straight around to the barracks to see Gerald. Gerald not pleased at being woken. Said the information was of no use to him at all. But I suspected something. I am no fool, whatever Mother may say. I waited outside Gerald's window and I saw him get out his maps of the Marshes. Ha! I know what he's up to—he's going to take the credit himself. I'll go and see DD first thing tomorrow and I'll scrap *that* little plan. Oh yes.

10:00 A.M. WEDNESDAY

Just returned from the Wizard Tower. Got there as soon as I could, but it takes so long to dress in the mornings. I do think appearance is so important, and especially when striding purposefully along Wizard Way one has to create a good impression. As it turned out, it's a good thing I was a little late. Gerald had gotten there first and I heard all about it from that peaky-looking Apprentice that DD keeps out on the landing. DD threw Gerald out! Literally! Called him a bumbling fool and *much* worse. Oh joy. This has quite made my day.

2:00 A.M. THURSDAY

My nerves will not take *any* more. Summoned to the Wizard Tower at midnight. Was convinced I was going to be CONSUMED. But all the disgusting old fraud wanted to do was to show me some tacky blue amulet thing around his fat, sweaty neck. Got it off old Overstrand apparently. Well, good for him, although I can't say that it suits him; he looks better in black. Anyway, that at least means my plan has worked—at last—and she's in Dungeon Number One now. Rather her than me. I left feeling a little more secure about the CONSUMED threat, but until we get the Message Rat I will not rest easy.

SATURDAY

Well, well, they've got the rat. Rat has been taken away for questioning, but seeing as it has had its Confidential status withdrawn that should not be a problem.

SUNDAY

Wretched rat proving difficult. Have had it shoved in a cage and put under the floor. It will come to its senses soon enough—I hope. Am very jumpy today. Locked myself in the bathroom in case DD's guards came for me.

MONDAY

Gerald looking very smug. Came up and whispered that he doesn't need any kind of rat—Heap or otherwise—he *knows* where the old witch is and as soon as the thaw sets in they'll be off. When I asked him which old witch, he just smiled and tapped the side of his nose in his usual I-know-something-that-you-don't kind of way. Just like all the kids used to do when I was at school... except I showed *them*. Now I know *everything*.

2:00 P.M. WEDNESDAY

Ungrateful little tick has gone! Escaped. Found the door wide open. Should never have unchained him; I am far too nice for my own good. Mother always said that—no, actually, come to think of it, Mother never did say I was too nice...Have set the guards after him. He'll regret this.



LINDA LANE

LINDA LANE was born in the Port. She was an only child and her parents moved to the Castle when she was seven. They found a couple of rooms in the Ramblings near the rooftop gardens and sent Linda to the Orange Elementary School.

Linda was a pretty child with long blond hair and blue eyes. She easily made friends, but she did not keep them. She would quickly make a best friend, and then as soon as she had found out all her friend's secrets, she would dump her and move on to another friend, who became the recipient for those secrets—and in return told her own. Linda worked her way around the class in this fashion until at last everyone realized what was going on. And that was the end of any friends for Linda Lane.

Linda became a lonely child. She had nothing to do but hang around

trying to overhear conversations. She even got into the habit of doing that with her family, and one day she caused her own mother to be arrested and thrown into a dungeon. Linda had overheard a disparaging remark that her mother had whispered to her father about the Supreme Custodian. Linda was by then a keen member of the Custodian Youth, who met in the Palace stables every week. At Tell-Tale-Time Linda proudly related what she had heard. She won a much-coveted Tell-Tale badge and when she got home that night her mother was gone. Her father saw the badge and guessed what had happened, but he was too scared to confront his own daughter.

Linda's father was relieved when she moved out. She did not tell him that she had been recruited into the spy network and given her own rooms in the Ramblings, but he guessed that something of the sort had happened. Linda's father finally got his wife out of the dungeon by selling everything he had. They fled to the Port and never saw Linda again.

Linda was a successful spy. And when some gossip about how the Heaps' daughter looked very unlike Silas Heap reached her ears, she went with her information to the Supreme Custodian. She immediately was given a room along the corridor from the Heaps and also a crash course in herbs and healing so that she could gain Sarah's confidence. Linda soon inveigled her way into the Heap household. She put her drawing skills to use and sketched all the children and sent copies of the sketches to the Supreme Custodian. And when she discovered Jenna's date of birth, she went triumphantly to him with the news. He was convinced that Jenna was the lost Princess and the trap was set.

For her own protection and as a reward for finding the Princess, Linda was given a new name and some of the best rooms in the Ramblings, overlooking the river. But she did not enjoy them for long. Some months later she was recognized by one of her past victims, and one night as she sat drinking the very pleasant wine that the Supreme Custodian had sent over, she was pushed off her balcony and into the river, where she drowned.

Linda Lane was not seen again until the night she **Appeared** on the ghostly barge of Queen Etheldreda, where once again she proved useful to someone who was after Jenna.





A MESSAGE FROM MADAM MARCIA OVERSTRAND, EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD

TO ALL IN THE CASTLE

The reign of the Supreme Custodian is over! The Wizard Tower is back in operation, and most of the Wizards have been **Returned**. The young Princess has taken her rightful place in the Palace with her adoptive parents, Sarah and Silas Heap. We ask that you respect their privacy as they become used to their new life.



The Palace Guard has been disbanded. The Young Army has been disbanded. All boys and girls who have lost touch with their families have been settled into the old barracks in family groups, for which we seek caring houseparents.

We also seek high-quality Apprenticeships throughout the Castle. Many people of the Castle have spent the past ten years working for the Supreme Custodian, performing tasks that perhaps, now, they are not so proud of. To that end, we are happy to announce the Second-Chance Scheme, the first of which will be many new programs to get the Castle back on track. Anyone may come to see us at any time and will be given new training toward a new profession, *no questions asked*.

We do not care what you have done in the past, only what you can do to contribute to *a brighter, better future*.

PAPERS FROM THE WIZARD TOWER



THE Wizard Tower

HOW TO GET THERE: From the Palace follow Wizard Way. Go through the Great Arch and stop for a moment to admire the amazing lapis lazuli facings. Now you are in the Wizard Tower courtyard. Cross the courtyard, ascend the marble steps and wait until the duty Wizard answers. *Do not bang on the door.*

WHO LIVES THERE: The ExtraOrdinary Wizard, the ExtraOrdinary Apprentice, Ordinary Wizards with some of their Apprentices and assorted peripheral staff.

WHY YOU'D GO THERE: You wouldn't, unless you were invited to see a Wizard.

WHY YOU WOULDN'T: Marcia Overstrand does not like unexpected visitors.

THE Wizard Tower

NO. 3 IN THE POPULAR SERIES HEAPS OF KNOWLEDGE

A PAMPHLET BY SILAS HEAP

OTHER PAMPHLETS AVAILABLE: *HEAPS OF FUN*, *HEAPS OF MAGYK*, *HEAPS OF HANDY HINTS*, *HEAPS OF HERBS*



DESIGNED AND BUILT by the first ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Hotep-Ra, the Wizard Tower is the Wonder of the Castle—twenty-one stories high and topped by the great golden Pyramid that houses the famous Pyramid Library, which has been collected by ExtraOrdinary Wizards across the centuries. At the very top of the Pyramid is a small, flat square inlaid with silver, on which are inscribed the unknown hieroglyphs. Tradition has it that these hieroglyphs can only be

deciphered at a time of Great Peril. A copy of a tracing of these is available at the Manuscriptorium for a considerable sum.



No one has ever been able to count the windows of the Tower and get the same number twice; this may be because of the **UnStable** window on the seventh floor, which is not always visible. The windows have a purple **Magykal** film floating over the glass, which may appear rainbow colored on a sunny day.

The **Magykal** lights that flicker around the Tower vary in color from light purple to dark indigo blue, depending on the amount of **Magykal** activity within the Tower. The underlying color of the Tower is silver.

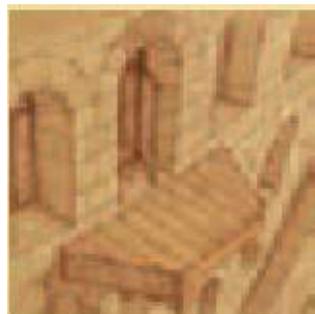
The most dramatic approach to the Wizard Tower is along Wizard Way and through the magnificent Great Arch. As you walk across the cobbled courtyard you will see the great white marble steps leading up to the awe-inspiring double silver doors that are the entrance to the Wizard Tower. Please note this entrance is by password only.



Marcia Overstrand's apartment

The current ExtraOrdinary Wizard is Madam Marcia Overstrand. Like all ExtraOrdinary Wizards, her rooms occupy the twentieth and twenty-first floors. Madam Overstrand shares her quarters with the current ExtraOrdinary Apprentice, Master Septimus Heap—a very talented boy who is rarely allowed to leave the Tower to visit his family. However, it is tradition that the younger Apprentices live in the Tower with their Tutor Wizards. Adult Apprentices may live elsewhere if they so wish.

Below the twentieth floor, there are generally two apartments on each floor, although on the lower stories there are some single rooms for the very junior Wizards. Wizards move up the Tower according to aptitude and experience, although some of those on the lower floors will dispute this.



Dragon launchpad

FEATURES TO NOTE

- 👉 The smell of **Magyk**. Please be advised that those with allergies may be adversely affected.
- 👉 The Great Hall with its **Magykal** floor. Stop awhile. If you are lucky, you will see a message cross its strangely sandy surface.
- 👉 The **Magykal** silver spiral stairs. Accompanied timed rides are available on alternate Monday afternoons. Please ask the DoorKeeper for a ticket.
- 👉 The **Magykal** pictures on the walls. These appear and disappear according to an ancient and long-lost Spell. The pictures depict moments from the history of the Wizard Tower. Please note that particular pictures cannot be produced on demand.
- 👉 The great purple door to the ExtraOrdinary Wizard's rooms. This may be viewed as part of the spiral stairs ride. Visitors must remain silent while on the landing outside the door. You may *not* touch the door.
- 👉 The fabled Pyramid Library at the top of the Tower. It is regretted that Library visits are no longer available to the public.



NOTABLE EXTRAORDINARY WIZARDS THROUGHOUT HISTORY



FIRST: HOTEK-RA

Arrived thousands of years ago from the Far Countries. Hotep-Ra built the Wizard Tower and founded the entire system of **Magyk** in the Castle. There are many legends surrounding Hotep-Ra, but most are confidential and we will not attempt to delve into them.

TALLEST: TERRENCE BROWN

Seven feet, five inches. Had all the doorframes raised in the ExtraOrdinary Wizard apartment. He suffered badly from vertigo, as many of the more talented ExtraOrdinary Wizards do.

SHORTEST: LOUANNA MOON

Four feet tall and proud of it.

YOUNGEST-SERVING: DAN FORREST

Dan Forrest was only sixteen years old when he became ExtraOrdinary Wizard. He was one of the early ExtraOrdinary Wizards, and in those times it was not so unusual for those in their teens to hold important positions, because people tended not to live so long.



Dan was a popular ExtraOrdinary Wizard and one of the more powerful, being descended from both Witch and Wizard stock. He added many new Spells—one of his longest-lasting was a popular **Unseen** (once used by Nicko Heap). Dan died at the young age of thirty-six.

LONGEST-SERVING: MYRIAM D. DROMENDURRY

Myriam was ExtraOrdinary Wizard for so long that most people in the Castle at that time could remember no one else. She became ExtraOrdinary Wizard at the age of twenty-two and retired on her ninety-third birthday because, she said, she was becoming a little forgetful. Myriam had thirteen Apprentices who all loved her dearly, and one of them, Julius Pike, became the next ExtraOrdinary Wizard.



OLDEST-SERVING: BRYNNA JACKSON

Brynna Jackson was a mediocre ExtraOrdinary Wizard and knew it, but she wanted something to be remembered for and this was all she could manage. She hung on to office for years longer than she should have. No one can force an ExtraOrdinary Wizard to retire, but they can drop heavy hints. For years

the Wizard Tower resounded with the clanging of hints being dropped, but Brynna was deaf to them all—until the day after her ninety-third birthday.

FATTEST: BIG BRIAN BOOM

Brian Boom ate seven meals a day because he thought seven was lucky. But it wasn't lucky for Brian. He got wedged halfway up the narrow stairs to the Pyramid Library, and for three days no one noticed he was gone. After that, Brian **Stopped** the Wizard Tower stairs and walked instead. He lost a lot of weight but was not popular with the other Wizards, who also had to walk.

SHORTEST-SERVING: TAM THISTLE

Tam Thistle was ExtraOrdinary Wizard for three hours twenty-three minutes and thirteen seconds. Unfortunately she got her new robes entangled in the spiral stairs and you don't want to know the rest. No, really you don't.

THINNEST: TIMOTHY PAU?

No one really knows—it is hard to tell under all those robes. But Timothy Pau was apparently known as Thin Tim. And that, indeed, is all that is known of Timothy Pau.

LEAST TALENTED: BERT THE BASHER

A case of mistaken identity. A few days before his induction as ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Hamilton How was mugged by a footpad known as Bert the Basher. Bert found the Letters of Induction in Hamilton's pocket and, realizing that he looked a lot like Hamilton, decided to assume his identity and see—as he put it—“what he could get out of those Wizard dummies.”



Bert toughed it out for a few weeks until Hamilton How turned up. Then Bert fled, taking ten gold plates from the dining service and the duty Wizard's best boots.

MOST TALENTED: _____.

The pamphlet would not dare to venture a comment, as we know that this will be read by the current ExtraOrdinary Wizard (see below).

MOST RECENT: MARCIA OVERSTRAND

Not bad, all things considered.



MARCIA OVERSTRAND
EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD

MARCIA OVERSTRAND grew up as the only daughter of an ancient Wizard family from the Far Countries. The family arrived at the Castle when Marcia was five years old after some embarrassing difficulty with her father's job as a minor Wizard and adviser to an Eastern Snow Princess. The young Marcia received little encouragement to take the extra **Magyk** classes at school, as her parents wished to distance themselves from **Magyk**, but, being Marcia,

she insisted and they—as usual—gave in.

Naturally Marcia excelled at school. She knew that she wanted to be ExtraOrdinary Wizard, but she kept quiet about it until one day as a teenager when she had a huge argument with her mother and told her that she was going to be ExtraOrdinary Wizard, *so there*.

After the argument, Marcia moved out of the family home—an attic in a tall house in Snake Slipway, two doors up from the Van Klampff house—and rented a small room in the Ramblings from where she enrolled as a Hopeful in the Open **Magyk** classes that were run at the Wizard Tower for those who hoped to become Apprentices.

Her chance came suddenly. Silas Heap gave up his Apprenticeship to Alther Mella, and Alther wanted to replace him immediately. Alther had given a few lectures to the Hopefuls and he had been impressed with Marcia. He invited her—along with three other Hopefuls—to spend a day at the top of the Tower. It was no contest: Marcia was by far the best for the job as his next Apprentice, and despite her rather brusque air, Alther found that he liked her very much. Marcia really *cared*—about **Magyk** and, more importantly, about people.

Marcia enjoyed her Apprenticeship with Alther. For seven years and a day she and Alther argued, laughed and learned together. Marcia had not long completed her Apprenticeship—and survived the dreaded **Draw** for the **Queste**—when she came with him to help him out at his Welcoming Ceremony for the newborn baby Princess.

That evening, a profoundly shocked Marcia found herself wearing the Akhu Amulet and the purple robes of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. It was what she had always wanted—but never like that. The old Castle saying, “Beware of what you wish for, lest it come true,” has haunted her ever since.

Now Marcia has her own Apprentice, Septimus Heap. Septimus is remarkably young to be an Apprentice, but Marcia chose him after ten years of living without one—and Marcia knows best.

ALL THOSE WHO HAVE BOUGHT Silas Heap’s *I-C-U in the Castle Scorebook* may wish to know how to spot Marcia Overstrand and gain the top 100 points.

DESCRIPTION: Tall with dark, curly hair. Piercing green eyes.

SHE WEARS: Around neck (although usually hidden), lapis lazuli and gold Akhu Amulet. Purple double-silk cloak (lined with indigo-blue fur in the winter). Long purple silk tunic with small amount of gold embroidery. Gold and platinum ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt. Pointed

purple python shoes.

N.B. If you see someone wearing all of the above but without the shoes, it is *not* Madam Marcia Overstrand.

[A Guide to How to Behave When Visiting the Wizard Tower](#)

BY **MADAM MARCIA OVERSTRAND EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD**



We, the Wizards of the Wizard Tower, firmly believe in access to all, and tours are available on alternate Monday afternoons. However, we reserve the right to refuse entry to those considered unsuitable. *Visiting the Wizard Tower is a privilege.* The following rules must be read before you enter the Tower. Please sign the “I accept” clause at the bottom, otherwise entry will be denied.

GENERAL BEHAVIOR

Remember that this is home to many Wizards, so please behave as you would in your own home (or at least as you would like people to think you behave). No screaming, shouting or swearing. No running, singing, dancing, playing ball games or skipping. No chewing gum, no musical instruments, no looking in the cupboards and no imported fruits or vegetables.

PETS

No pets allowed. Any smuggled hamsters will be speedily removed.

THE PASSWORD

The double silver doors at the main entrance are protected by the password.

This will be whispered by your host Wizard and it is considered very rude to try to listen. In any case, you will not hear anything that is correct, as the password is self-scrambling. Please do not try shouting random words at the doors, hoping to get lucky. If you do, you will be asked to leave immediately.

THE MAGYK FLOOR

In the beautiful main vaulted entrance hall of the Wizard Tower you will notice that the floor feels somewhat like sand. *Do not* attempt to poke at it with your foot; it is a delicate, enchanted substance and difficult to repair. Stand still a moment and take time to watch for any messages. It will welcome respectful visitors if there are not more important messages to be relayed. Do not ask the floor to write something special for you—*the floor does not take requests*.

THE SPIRAL STAIRS

These are probably the most popular feature of the Wizard Tower with visitors—and the most commonly abused. These are moving spiral stairs and must be treated with caution. Children under ten are *not allowed* on the stairs.

-  *Do not* attempt to mount the stairs unless accompanied by your Wizard guide.
-  *Do not* attempt to instruct the stairs. Your Wizard guide will instruct them to turn.
-  *Do not* run up the stairs while they are moving.
-  *Do not* request stairs to be placed on emergency speed.
-  Wizards have priority use, so please do not complain if one wishes to stop the stairs to get off or on.
-  Obey the safety instructions of your Wizard guide at all times.

N.B. Rides are timed to ten minutes maximum.

THE TWENTIETH FLOOR

The top two floors of the Tower are home to the private rooms of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. The spiral stairs stop at the twentieth-floor landing. Selected groups of visitors (those who have caused no trouble on the lower floors) may briefly get off the stairs and walk *quietly* along the landing to see the magnificent purple door that is the entrance to the rooms of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. *Do not touch*.

THE PYRAMID LIBRARY

We regret that access to the Library is not available at present.

I hereby agree to accept the above terms and conditions and promise that I will abide by all instructions given by the Wizard guide.

Signed _____

The Journal of Marcia Overstrand

Entry #1

Something awful has happened. I know at I have always wanted to become ExtraOrdinary Wizard, but I never, never wanted it to be like is. But it is true: I am now the ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and my wonderful teacher and friend, Alther, is dead. Shot. And the dear Queen too and her baby girl as good as an orphan, for who knows where her father is?

Tonight I left the Princess out in the snow and waited until I knew at a certain someone (I dare not reveal who here, as even if I **Seal** is journal, it may till fall into the wrong hands) had taken her to safety. It is not the ideal home for a Princess, but it is the only home at I can ink of.

Entry #3

Guards are everywhere. The Castle has been taken over. The Wizard Tower must stand firm. They will not dare touch us.

Entry #6

It is so sad, have just heard that the poor Heaps' seventh son died very soon after he was born. No one know why. I do hope everything else is all right.

Entry #15

Morning

This place is a mess. I don't see why Alther couldn't have managed a few housekeeping Spells. Oh, how could I ay at? Poor Alther. Anyway, today I have **Removed** the stains on the carpet. I put the stains on an old pair of socks and threw them down the rubbish chute—e rubbish chute is surprisingly useful.

Midnight

Very quiet up here tonight. All I can hear is the wind howling past the

windows and—oh, what was at? I am getting jumpy. Oh, I do miss Alther.

Entry #366

Alther finally **Appeared** while I was having breakfast. It was wonderful to see him again. The Supreme Custodian and his guards still search for e Princess, but they have no idea where she is. So far our plan is working.

But the Palace is ransacked, servants terrorized and drafted into the Custodian Guard. And Alther says the awful rumors of an army of children are true.

Alther seemed tired and a little confused. Suggested he stay here for a few days. I shall be glad of his company. Talked into the night. Alther convinced at his old master, DomDaniel, is behind everything. Surely not?

On a lighter note, I told him about Alice Nettles's new job at the Port. Alther worried about whether he would be able to find her. He kept muttering, "A ghost may only tread once more where, Living, he has trod before." But I don't see what he is worried about—Alther went all over the place. People used to moan to me about it all e time.

Entry #377

Alther made it to the Port and back! He found Alice in e Blue Anchor Tavern—which of course he could easily get into. Alice has just become Chief Customs Officer. Only trouble was Alther got **Returned** from her official residence. Said being **Returned** was horrible, felt like being sucked down the rubbish chute, which I told him was plain silly. No one goes down rubbish chutes. Couldn't believe at Alther had never been to e Chief Customs Officer's official residence, but he aid they gave very boring parties and he couldn't be bothered. But Alice will figure it out.

Entry #687

Alther went to check on e Princess again today. He says he is doing very well and is a lovely child. Doesn't look much like her adoptive brothers though. Hmm, hadn't ought of at.

Entry #1,257

Alther has been going on about is Apprentice business. But I don't have to get an Apprentice. The truth is, I haven't been anyone with an ounce of talent—let alone anyone I could imagine spending all at time with. Alther says

people are starting to talk, calling me fussy. Like I care.

Entry #3,001

Alther believes there is a spy in the Ramblings but can find nothing out. Nothing. The trouble is, the Supreme Custodian has begun holding his meetings in e Ladies' Washroom and Alther, try as he might to get in, is always **Returned**—of course. Bother and double bother.

Entry #3,650

Terrible news. An Assassin has been instructed. I must speak to Silas. I dread is day and what may come of it.

Entry #3,873

Woke late a er ano er Dungeon Number One nightmare. Have pounding headache. Must get up and check at Septimus has brushed his tee and combed his hair. He is very disorganized at e moment. But after years in that awful Young Army, who can blame him?

Entry #3,992

Another interesting day with Septimus. Who would have thought at a on of Silas Heap's could be of quick to learn? We moved on to **Hidden Seeks** today, and Septimus found them all. Had yet another note from Sarah (apparently attached to a bag of apples at was destroyed by the duty Wizard) asking him to come to tea. Does he not realize at Septimus has important work to do?

She sent me this letter:

The Palace

The Small Sitting Room

Dear Marcia,

I hope you will, for once, allow Septimus to come to tea this Sunday. I can still count on the fingers of one hand the times I have seen him since we all returned from Zelda's. He is looking very pale. Is he eating properly? I am sending some app les for him.

Please tell him that his mother is so looking forward to seeing him.

Sarah Heap

Entry #3,993

I let Septimus go to tea with his parents against my beer judgment, and what time did the child get back? Nearly midnight. These Heaps have no sense of responsibility.

Entry 4,438

Oh no no no no NO. I can't bear it...

Dear Marcia,

I know that one day you will find this note because when I don't come back I know you will look everywhere in the Library and through all the Alchemie things that are there. I've never seen Marcellus's book in the Library, but I bet you know where it is. It is probably on that Sealed shelf. I hope you find it soon after I have gone so that you do not worry about me too much and so that you can tell everyone where I am. I am going to put it in the Almanac section of Marcellus's book. He is writing it for our Time—I mean your Time. It is not my Time anymore. I will put it in the day that I went so you will know where to look for it.

I want to say thank you, as I really liked being your Apprentice and I wish I still was, but I am Apprenticed to Marcellus Pye now. You must not worry, as it is not so bad, but I miss you all and if you can by any chance come get me (but I don't know how you can), I would be SO happy.

I have to go now. Marcellus is coming.

I came here through a Glass. Jenna will tell you.

Love, Septimus xxx

Entry 4,449

*That dragon is a total health hazard and a disgrace. Have just **ReNewed** yet another window broken by all the disgusting stuff it coughs up. Why does it have to eat bricks? Those windows are not easy to **ReNew** anymore, after all is time. Had a delegation of Wizards yesterday complaining at the wretched beast traps them in the piles of poop and then tries to eat their cloaks. Enough is enough. To top it all off, got is pathetic note from old bossyboots down the road:*

The Manuscriptorium

13 Wizard Way

To: Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard

Re: Invoice number 44692

The above invoice remains unpaid. To refresh your memory, Marcia, this is for the damages caused at the Manuscriptorium by your dragon. You owe for three broken windows, a desk, four chairs, six lamps and the cleaning bill from the specialty cleaners we had to call in.

Your payment is three months overdue, but I trust I can expect it directly.

Sincerely,

(Miss) ***Jillie Djinn***

CHS MTHAB MSSLA BSDC FESAA DFC*

(Diploma of Fish Counting: Distinction)



ALThER MELLA

ALThER MELLA was the ExtraOrdinary Wizard during a long period of peace in the Castle. Everyone liked Alther—and respected him too. He enjoyed the company of all kinds of people in the Castle and the Port and was also known to be a powerful Wizard. He had many Apprentices, the last two being Silas Heap and Marcia Overstrand. People were surprised when Alther took on Marcia. None of his previous Apprentices had been known as great students of **Magyk**—but Marcia was different. Some people even went as far as to say that Alther Mella had grown up at last.

A small shadow on Alther's reputation was the way in which he became ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Most of the inhabitants of the Castle had gathered in the Wizard Tower courtyard to watch the fight between the highly unpopular

ExtraOrdinary Wizard DomDaniel and his much-loved Apprentice, Alther Mella. The fight took place on the golden Pyramid at the very top of the Wizard Tower, and it appeared that Alther pushed DomDaniel to his death. But things are not always as they seem.

It is worth noting here that Alther's protests that he did *not* push DomDaniel—that DomDaniel actually jumped—must indeed be true. Alther became ExtraOrdinary Wizard by a rare process of **Transformation**. ExtraOrdinary Wizards are created by a direct transfer of the Akhu Amulet from the previous incumbent—as happened with Marcia. This can also be taken by force, as DomDaniel did for his second—mercifully brief—period of office, and as, indeed, Alther did from DomDaniel. But Alther was also totally **Transformed**. During his horror-struck run down through the Wizard Tower, Alther's green Apprentice robes were **Transformed** to the purple robes of an ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and his very battered silver Apprentice belt **Transmuted** into the gold and platinum of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard. This is a rare occurrence and happens only at times of great importance. Incidentally, Marcia's belt was actually **Transmuted**, but she had to get her own robes from the Wardrobe Wizard on the tenth floor.

Now Alther wears only ghostly ExtraOrdinary robes, complete with the bloodstain on his chest where he was shot. He has long white hair, which is neatly tied back into a ponytail, and a well-trimmed white beard. This is because Alther had dressed up for his visit to the Queen and so is preserved forever in a way quite untypical of his usual everyday appearance.

Alther does not particularly like being a ghost. Who does? But, as he tells Marcia, it is better than the alternative. The one thing that Alther does enjoy about his ghostly state is his ability to fly. He loves the fact that he has lost his crippling fear of heights and is free to soar like a bird. His favorite occupation is skimming low along the river on a still night at full moon. At times like that Alther feels everything is right with the world.

Recently Alther has not done much flying. He has been taking care of Alice Nettles in her own Resting Time—the year and a day after entry into ghosthood. They have taken up residence in the Pavilion that Princess Jenna set up for them on the Palace Landing Stage, but Alther is looking forward to the time when he can take Alice by the hand and fly along the river with her by moonlight.

Alther Mella's Guide to Being Dead

TEN HANDY RULES FOR NEW GHOSTS

GHOSTWRITTEN BY SILAS HEAP

OKAY, SO THE WORST HAS ACTUALLY HAPPENED. You are dead. It's a big shock. In fact, some of you may not even realize you are dead. But you *are*. You have—as we so foolishly used to say—fallen off your perch, kicked the bucket and gone to a better place. Don't worry if you feel weird—it happens to us all eventually. It's a tough time, but you are not alone. With the help of my former Apprentice Silas Heap, I have put together this little pamphlet for all you new ghosts. We try and deliver it when and where needed and hope it may be of some use.

RULE ONE: Resting Time

This lasts for a year and a day. You will find that you are confined to the very spot where you died. This can be the most difficult time of all for some, as this very place may have bad memories for you. However, try to see it as a way of understanding what has happened to you. Do not use your time here as a way of getting back at those who are still Living in that place, however much you may feel they deserve it. As a ghost you should be above all that. For much of your **Resting Time**, particularly in the early days, you may be confused about where you are and why you are there. But, as the year and a day progresses, things will become clearer, and by the end of your **Resting Time** you will feel quite transformed.



RULE TWO: Move On

After your **Resting Time** you are free to leave the place where you entered ghosthood. Be brave and take that first step. Some ghosts never do, and this is a mistake. It can lead to a miserable and haunted time for all.

RULE THREE: Tread Once More

Be aware of this cardinal rule of ghosthood:

**A ghost may only tread once more
Where, Living, he has trod before.**

Most ghosts do not worry about this; they are happy to stick to familiar places. However, it does mean that you cannot use your ghosthood as an opportunity to go to all those wonderful lands you meant to visit when you were Living. My advice is to do the things you want to do *before* you die.

But I can pass on a useful tip—for all you sailors out there, you can still travel in your boat. Of course you cannot disembark, but you can see the world. Make sure someone keeps your boat in good order. If she sinks, you will be **Returned**. This also applies to horses (obviously not the sinking part), but unfortunately horses do not last forever. I have heard of some ghosts who have been **ReUnited** with the ghosts of their horses, but this is a complicated process. See our supplementary pamphlet *Advanced Ghosthood* displayed in the window of the Manuscriptorium and in the Hole in the **Wall** Tavern.



RULE FOUR: Returned

If you step outside your “trod before” zone, you will be **Returned** to the nearest place where you have trod before. Being **Returned** is a foul experience; the best way I can describe it is like being sucked into a screaming whirlwind. Unless you are very cautious, you will probably experience it once or twice.

RULE FIVE: Pass Through

This is an experience you will be bound to have. Being **Passed Through** is not as bad as being **Returned**, but it is no fun. This happens when a Living person—or a part of a Living person—**Passes Through** you. It may just be the wave of a hand or a complete body **Passing Through**. Either way it is not pleasant and makes you feel quite hollow for some minutes afterward. Best avoided by carefully watching where you are going. You cannot blame the Living for doing this, although some do seem to be particularly careless. But remember they cannot see you unless you **Appear** to them. See Rule Six.

RULE SIX: Appearing

Your first **Appearance** to the Living as a ghost is a big moment. Many choose never to **Appear** at all, and for all of us it is an important decision.

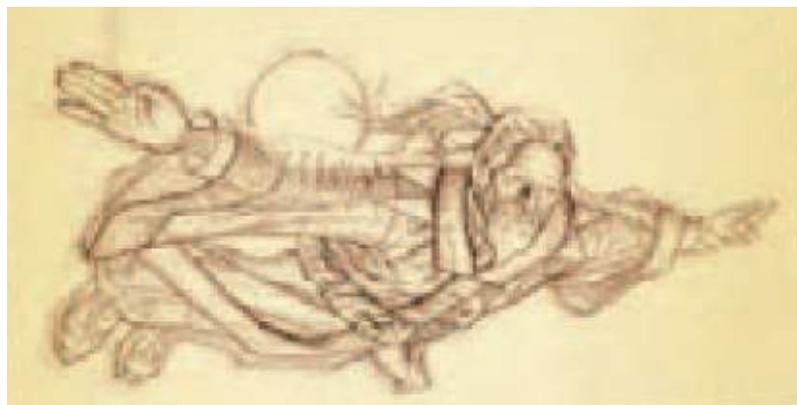
Some questions you may wish to ask yourself before you **Appear**:

- Who do I wish to **Appear** to?
- Is he or she expecting me?
- Is he or she in a situation where it is safe/not embarrassing for me to **Appear**?

Generally it is best to conduct your **Appearance** in the same way you would have conducted a visit when Living—make sure you will be welcome and do not stay too long. Remember, the Living may be upset at seeing you, particularly if you were close to them.

You yourself may also find the experience unsettling. Many ghosts say that it was at their first **Appearance** that they truly realized that they were indeed a ghost—especially if they saw themselves in a looking glass.

Think carefully before you **Appear**.



RULE SEVEN: Flight

One of the perks of being a ghost. Enjoy it. The air above where you once trod is available to you at any height. I recommend low-level flying.

RULE EIGHT: Causing

Under some circumstances you may be able to **Cause** something in the Living world to move. This is not easy. Instructions can be found in our Advanced pamphlet. **Causing** is mentioned here for your information only.

RULE NINE: EATING

You can't. It's a shame, but you get used to it.

RULE TEN: GHOST ETIQUETTE

Be polite to all ghosts.

Be patient to older ghosts, known as Ancients. They can be very faint and confused—remember, you will be an Ancient one day.

Do not scare the Living for the fun of it.

Do not **Pass Through** other ghosts.



TOP TIPS FOR A HAPPY GHOSTHOOD:

- ✠ Be sociable: visit the Hole in the Wall Tavern.
- ✠ Remember you are responsible for the atmosphere wherever

you are—be positive.

✠ And no, things were *not* always better in the Good Old Days.

Once you are familiar with these rules, you may wish to read our new pamphlet, *Advanced Rules of Ghosthood*, on display in the window of the Manuscriptorium and inside the Hole in the Wall Tavern. Subjects include:

- ✠ New Forms: How, why and when
- ✠ Reuniting with those who die later: Pitfalls and pleasures
- ✠ Reuniting with those who died earlier: Pleasures and pitfalls
- ✠ Pets: Can a hamster be a successful ghost?
- ✠ Discomposing: How to get through walls the easy way
- ✠ Ghosts to avoid
- ✠ Haunting for pleasure
- ✠ On being **Gathered** (recommended reading for ex-ExtraOrdinary Wizards)

And much, much more!



SEPTIMUS HEAP

SEPTIMUS HEAP spent the first ten years of his life as a boy with no name. All he had was a number: 412. Known as Boy 412, Septimus was one of the Expendables in the Supreme Custodian's Young Army. Septimus stayed alive by following orders and keeping quiet, and he survived the dangerous night exercises in the Forest because—unknown to him—many of the trees were looking out for him at the request of his shape-shifter grandfather, Benjamin Heap.

The day that Septimus nearly froze to death in front of the Wizard Tower was the day that changed his life. It threw his lot in with the Heaps and with Marcia Overstrand and began his voyage of discovery. He learned many things in those next few months: that people could be kind, that Wizards were not so bad, that cabbage sandwiches tasted good and that even Princesses

were quite nice really. He also learned to his surprise that he was good at **Magyk**—the very **Magyk** that the Young Army had taught him to despise. Not only was he good at it, he was so good that the ExtraOrdinary Wizard actually wanted him to become her Apprentice—which was, he thought, just ridiculous.

But during his few months in the Marram Marshes with Aunt Zelda, Jenna and Nicko, Septimus changed. He shrugged off the shackles of the Young Army, he began to understand and trust people, and by the end of his time there, he decided that if Marcia Overstrand really did want him as her Apprentice then he would accept. And when he finally discovered who he was—Septimus Heap, the seventh son of Silas and Sarah Heap—Septimus felt his life opening out before him.

With the routing out of DomDaniel and all his cronies, and the return of peace to the Castle, Septimus settled down to become Apprentice to Marcia Overstrand, and to try to get to know his family. This was at times a difficult balancing act—but something that he had never even dreamed would happen during his nightmare years as Boy 412.

So, if you were walking along Wizard Way on your way to buy a sausage sandwich from Wizard Sandwiches, how would you recognize Septimus? Like all the Heaps, Septimus has curly, straw-colored hair and bright green eyes. He does comb his hair, although Marcia does not always believe him when he insists that he has—*really*. You would notice the green Apprentice robes right away, as green is not a popular color in the Castle (most people go for more subdued hues). He would probably be wearing his green Apprentice cloak and he would definitely have on his silver Apprentice belt complete with all its little compartments for **Charms** and other bits and pieces. When you got close enough to say, “Hello, Sep!” (or just smile if you felt shy) you would see a beautiful gold Dragon Ring with its emerald eye on his finger. Septimus would return your smile or say hello; he is known around the Castle as a friendly, approachable Apprentice who has not gotten “above himself” as they say there. It is also easy to make him laugh.

A word of advice: if you see Septimus rushing along with Marcia Overstrand, it is advisable to do no more than give a brief wave. Marcia does not approve of distractions when Septimus is working.



EXTRACTS FROM SEPTIMUS HEAP'S APPRENTICE DIARY

I saved this from the night 409 was lost overboard:

NOTIFICATION TO CADET OFFICERS 2 AND 11.
Night exercise for Boys numbers 405 to 415. Cadet Officers 2 and 11 will:

- Assemble Boys at midnight.
- Silent-march Boys to waiting vessel at Slipway 5.
- Embark under battle silence.
- Advance vessel to Forest Landing Area 10.
- Disembark under battle silence.
- Complete night exercise 004a with double wolverine pit variation.
- At dawn embark surviving Boys.
- Return to Slipway 6.
- All Boys to return directly to duty.

* * * * * SPECIAL ORDERS * * * * *

It has come to the notice of the Cadet Commander-in-Chief that some Cadet Officers have been assisting the Boys when in danger. This will NOT be tolerated. The Young Army is a Strong Army. ALL Boys are Expendable. Boys must sink or swim.

I saved this from my Young Army days.

***** THE YOUNG ARMY *****

Rules and Regulations Applicable to: Boy Expendables ranks I, II and IIIa.
(for IIIb see Y.A.R.R. appendix 5c)

Kit Regulations:

- Uniform must be clean and pressed AT ALL TIMES
- Boots must be polished AT ALL TIMES

- Daggers must be sharp AT ALL TIMES
- Backpacks must be in battle-ready order and ready for inspection AT ALL TIMES

Any Boy in breach of above regulations will be allocated to the wolverine pit on the next Night Exercise. NO EXCEPTIONS WILL BE MADE.

All Boys will be issued with:

- Tunic. Gray. 2
- Leggings. Gray. Pairs: 2.
- Y.A. Standard-issue Belt. Leather. 1.
- Dagger. Short. 1.
- Cloak. Gray. 1.
- Socks. Gray. Pairs: 2.
- Boots. Pair of. 1.
- Backpack. 1. (For contents of backpack see Quartermaster's regulations EB-B IVa.)

Chief Cadet Grade 1 Boys will also be issued with:

- YA regulation hat with peak. Gray. 1.
- Rabbit Fur Jerkin. 1.
- Superior Boots. Pair of. 1.
- Socks. Superior-grade Wool. Gray. Pairs: 2.
- Dagger. Long. 1.

Any rank insignia will be issued on the first of the month at the Commander's Parade and will be sewn on IMMEDIATELY. Failure to do so will result in withdrawal of ALL privileges and allocation to the wolverine pit on the next Night Exercise.

STANDARD ARMY TESTS (SATS) MidWinter Feast Day Program

Rank: Boy (Expendable) Number: 412 Age: 6

0400 hours

Pack Junior backpack according to Young Army Regulations.

0423 hours

Proceed to canteen. Regulation porridge to be eaten under battle silence.

0430 hours

Commence ten-mile march under battle silence.

1000 hours

Return to barracks.

1100 hours

All Key Stage One rhymes to be recited. Boys shall recite until word perfect.

RHYME 1.

Tomorrow's Future Today: Young Army is the Way. Hooray!

RHYME 2.

On the Brink, Stop and Think.

RHYME 3.

Who in the Castle is Number One?
The Supreme Cust-oh-de-UN!

RHYME 4.

Friends are enemies; enemies, friends, We don't need to make amends.

RHYME 5: Re: ExtraOrdinary Wizard. All Boys on Wizard Tower guard must recite this ten times before going on duty.

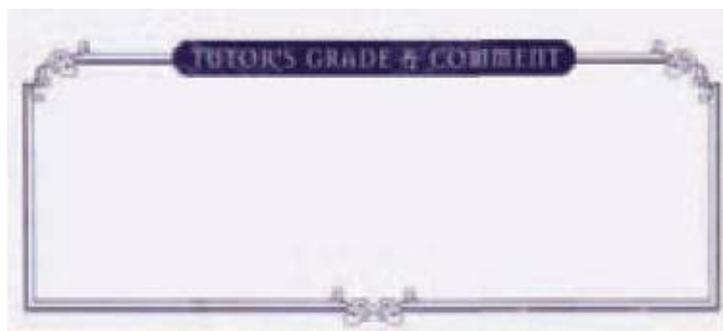
Crazy as a cuttlefish, nasty as a RAT, Put her in a pie dish, give her to the CAT!



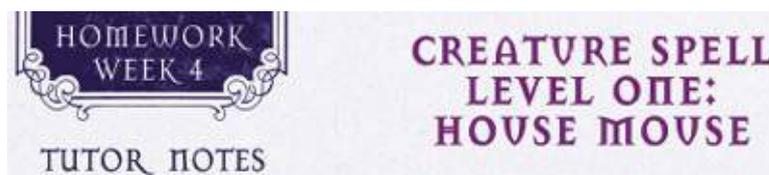
Septimus, please note you will only practice the first four types of Spells until your sixth year. All Spells come in different levels of difficulty and risk. During your first year you will only do level one. I know you have tried at least two level threes (don't think I don't notice what you are doing in your bedroom), but this must not continue. Also note that these are simple categories and all Spells can be combined to produce compound Spells at an advanced level.

Read and learn pages 2 to 4 in Dan Forrest's Basyk Magyk Primer, then list below the seven types of Spells with a brief description:

1. *Servant Spells: e.g., to **Find** Find something that is lost*
2. *Creature Spells: to cause a creature to change*
3. *Matter Spells: to change matter*
4. *Personal Spells: to cause yourself to change*
5. *Extra-personal Spells: to cause another person to change*
6. *Perception Spells: to change how things are seen e.g.,
Projections*
7. ***Other** Spells: calling on the assistance of **Darkenesse***



A+ Very well done. Well remembered.



Use a mouse from the kitchen. There is no need to go all around the

Tower making a nuisance of yourself and certainly no need *whatsoever* to go traveling up and down the stairs all day looking for one. We will prepare the CHEESE CHARM this afternoon.

Instructions: First catch your mouse (see above). Hold securely in both hands and give the mouse the Cheese Charm to eat. Look the mouse directly in the eye and chant the Incantation in a low voice so as not to alarm the creature:

**MOUSE OF MINE, LOOK AT ME,
MOUSE OF MINE, YOU WILL BE,
MOUSE OF MINE FOR A YEAR AND A DAY,
MOUSE OF MINE, YOU WILL NOT STRAY.**

When the mouse finishes eating the CHEESE CHARM, you will have your House Mouse. Now answer the following questions:

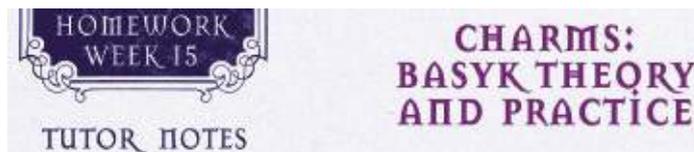
- 1. How do you treat your House Mouse? **With respect.***
- 2. Where will you keep your House Mouse? **I may keep it in my pocket all day, but at night it must be free to come and go as it pleases.***
- 3. What will you feed your House Mouse? **I will feed it healthy food suitable for a mouse, and I will not give it sweets or chocolate.***
- 4. Name five functions of a House Mouse. **To be a companion, for running errands, to take messages to friends, to play board games and to fetch and carry small objects.***

**CREATURE SPELL
LEVEL ONE:
HOUSE MOUSE**

**HOMEWORK
WEEK 4**



A- Well done. Your House Mouse is a little on the frisky side, and you had some trouble getting it to eat all of the Cheese Charm , but you persevered well. Apart from that, it was very good. Do you really want to call it Boris?



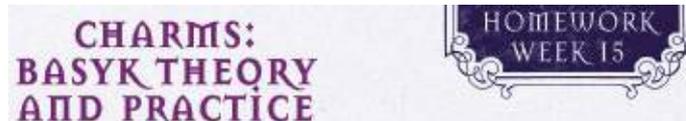
We will spend this week in the Pyramid Library and on a field trip to the Manuscriptorium. You will also have an afternoon free to browse in the smaller bookshops along Wizard Way to see what Charms you can find.

Questions to be answered by the end of the week and handed in on Friday 5:00 P.M. latest:

- 1. Where can you find Charms? **Almost anywhere because people lose them. But usually in Magyk Magyk books tucked in a folded corner of the page.***
- 2. What is a Charm? **A Charm is a small object that contains the Magyk Magyk imprint of the Spell and has the Spell***

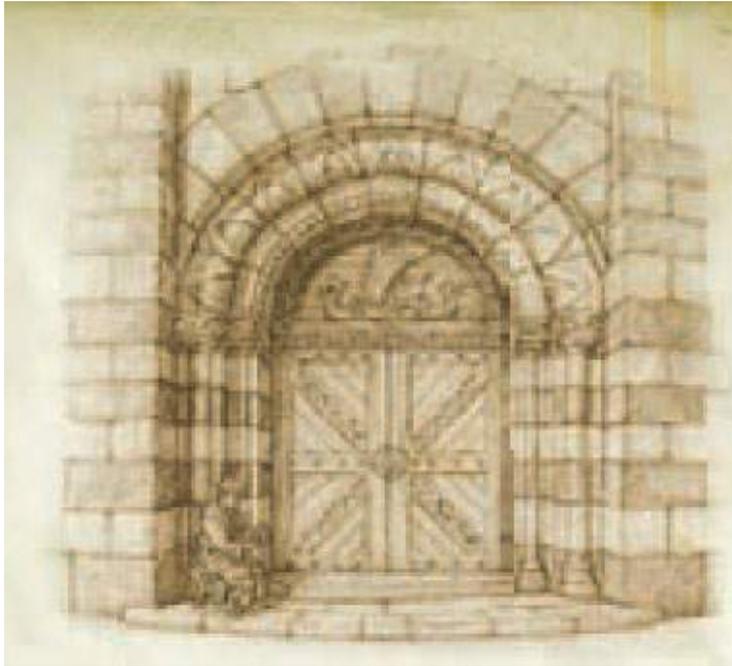
written on it.

3. Give seven examples of materials used to make CHARMS.
Cheese, parchment, diamonds, stone, haddock, silver, toast.
4. Do you always need the Charm to successfully complete a Spell? **No, but you will need it for the first time.**
5. What is the most popular Charm in the Castle? **A parchment pink heart true-love Charm—yuck.**
6. How many Charms are in the Pyramid Library? **More than a million.**
7. Have you written a thank-you note to the Manuscriptorium for allowing you to see their rare and UNSTABLE CHARM collection? **Yes. I gave it to the boy at the desk. He is really nice.**



A Haddock is not used for CHARMS . Were you trying to be funny? CHARMS are a serious business, Septimus. Also, “yuck” is not a suitable comment to be made in your homework. Apart from that you did well. And I am impressed with the CHARM you tracked down in Bertie’s Book Heaven. I have never seen such an ancient and perfect scarab SAFECHARM before. Well done. In fact, on consideration, this is worth an A.

PAPERS FROM THE PALACE



THE **Palace**

HOW TO GET THERE: From the river, land at the Palace Landing Stage. From the Castle, head south down Wizard Way; you can't miss the huge Palace Gate at the end of the Way.

WHO LIVES THERE: The Princess and her parents, Silas and Sarah Heap. Maxie the wolfhound and Ethel the duck. Merrin Meredith (unofficially). Numerous Palace ghosts.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND THERE: The ancient seat of the Castle Queens.

WHY YOU'D GO THERE: To visit the Princess or the Heaps, or to sneakily find a little attic room to live in.

WHY YOU WOULDN'T: The Palace is haunted and can be spooky. Some people find Silas Heap a little annoying.

So You Want to Visit the Palace

(OR WELCOME TO MY HOME)

A PAMPHLET BY SILAS HEAP

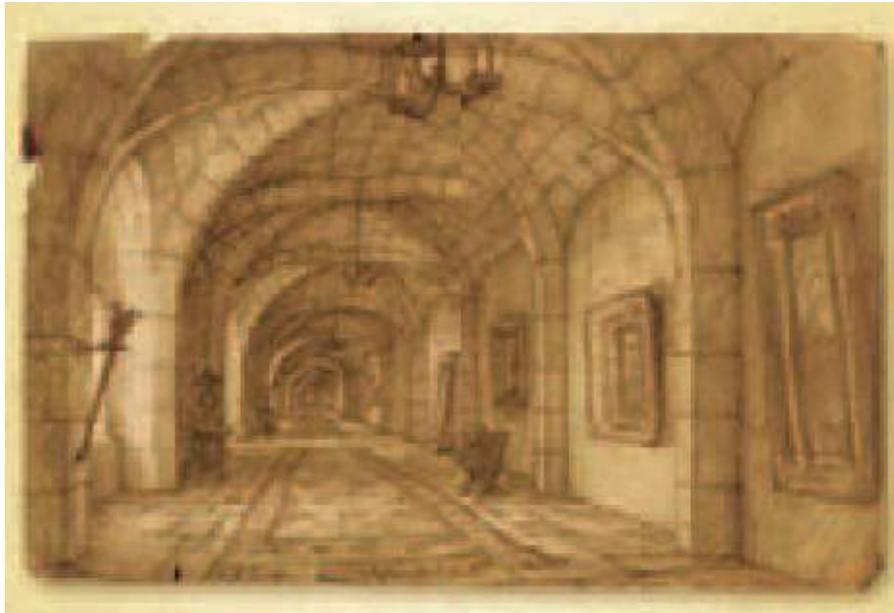


THE PALACE has not always been a place that just anyone can visit, but times have changed. My wife, Sarah, and I now welcome all on our guided tours.

The Palace Gate is open from 6:00 A.M. to 12:00 midnight. Please remember that we have a very Ancient ghost, Gudrun the Gate—oops, sorry, Gudrun the *Great*—on gate duty. It is polite to ask her permission to enter, but she will always give it. Once through the Gate, stop for a moment to admire this beautiful building. We believe the Palace to be one of the most ancient buildings in the Castle. It is constructed from the mellow yellow stone used in the olden times. The long, low lines of the building, with its ancient crenellations and turrets at each end, are like nothing else you will see in the Castle.

Proceed up the drive, past the well-tended lawns (courtesy of Billy Pot and his new mowing machine), and approach the wide plank bridge that crosses the ornamental Moat. Please *do not* dabble your fingers in the water. We have been trying to get rid of the infestation of snapping turtles, which were introduced by the Supreme Custodian in the Bad Old Days. We thought we had been successful but, after an unfortunate incident with an umbrella, it seems not.

Walk across the bridge and please announce yourself to the attendant on duty at the door. All tours meet up in the entrance hall and *must* wait for their tour guide to collect them.



Your tour will start at the Long Walk. This is one of the wonders of the Palace—a mile-long corridor that traverses the center of the Palace like a backbone. We've been told the Walk was once filled with paintings of past Queens, statues, treasures and trophies from all over the world. But since the Supreme Custodian sold the Palace's treasures to pay for his extravagant banquets, nothing has been the same. A Mr. Milo Banda—previous consort to our dear departed Queen Cerys—has sought to replace these treasures during his extensive trips to the Far Countries, but in my opinion the quality of the objects that can now be found scattered along the Long Walk is vastly inferior. The man has no taste.

Please note that on your tour we will not be visiting the Throne Room. My daughter, the Princess Jenna, has decided that she wishes the room to remain locked until the day she herself becomes Queen. This is out of respect to the memory of her mother, who was murdered in that very room, with the Princess Jenna herself only by chance escaping with her life.

You may notice that most of the rooms are at present unoccupied. While in the past the Palace was a busy place full of servants, we are no longer in the fortunate position of being able to continue this due to the raiding of the royal coffers in the Bad Old Days. We do hope one day to be able to return the Palace to its previous glory, but this may take some time.

But the Palace is not totally empty. My wife, myself and the Princess Jenna all live here, not forgetting our four-legged friend, Maxie, and Ethel, our duck. We also have two resident staff members—the cook and the

housekeeper—and our volunteer door attendants all have rooms at their disposal here.

We wish to extend a warm welcome to all and invite everyone to visit our beautiful Palace. Details and prices of tours are posted on the gates. The Palace is a place for *all* the people of the Castle. We hope you will stop by!

Silas Heap

N.B. If you wish to contribute to the Palace Restoration Fund, please use the box by the Palace Gate for your donation. No money is left overnight.

A MIDWINTER FEAST GREETING

Dear Friends,

How quickly the time flies! Last MidWinter Feast was a little fraught and we apologize for not being in touch.

I know you will all be thrilled to hear that our youngest son, Septimus, whom we thought dead, is alive! Silas is sending out a pamphlet telling you how this wonderful thing came to be, but you can all imagine how happy we are to have our little Septimus with us once more.

*Unfortunately, just before we were reunited, our Septimus was taken on as ExtraOrdinary Apprentice, and so he now lives at the Wizard Tower with Madam Marcia Overstrand. We do not see as much of him as we would like, but it is wonderful to know he is there. He is a very talented boy and excels at **Magyk**.*

You may have heard that our lovely daughter, Jenna, has turned out to be the Princess. We always knew she was special, but it is still amazing to think that the little bundle that Silas found in the snow the night the Queen was assassinated is the true Princess.

All our boys are doing well, although Simon is having a little rebellion at the moment. He recently kidnapped Jenna and tried to kill Septimus, but we feel it was all a misunderstanding; he is a good boy, really. If you see him, please ask him to write his mother.

Sam, Edd, Erik and Jo-Jo are in the Forest learning Forest skills and becoming independent young men. We are very proud of them and hope that they will take time out of their busy lives to visit soon.

Nicko now has an Apprenticeship with Jannit Maarten at the renowned Castle Boatyard. We are told that he is a gifted boatbuilder and excelling at his Apprenticeship.

Please note our new address. After twenty-five years in the Ramblings, the Heaps have picked up sticks and moved into the Palace. There are many empty rooms, so please come visit us.

We hope your year has been as exciting as ours has been! We trust that next years' Heap Update won't be nearly as full of adventure, but you never know. Since we left the Ramblings life has been full of surprises!

With all good MidWinter wishes,

Your friends,





JENNA HEAP

UNTIL SHE WAS TEN YEARS OLD, Jenna Heap thought she was the daughter of Sarah and Silas Heap. She lived with her six older brothers in a crowded, chaotic and happy room in the Ramblings. Jenna slept in a cupboard with its very own window that looked out over the river, which she loved.

For ten years Jenna lived a happy and secure life with her adoptive family, never dreaming that on her tenth birthday everything would change. That was the day Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard, came knocking on the door and changed Jenna's life forever. That was the day Jenna discovered that she was not a Heap but the Princess—and that there was an Assassin out to kill her.

Suddenly, Jenna was on the run for her life. But the Heaps stayed with her, and with the help of Marcia Overstrand and the Dragon Boat, Jenna

overcame all the **Darke** forces that were against her.

On her return to the Castle, Jenna moved into the Palace with Sarah and Silas Heap and began to get used to the idea that one day, when the Time was Right, she would be Queen—although she is not sure whether she really ever wants the Time to be Right.

Jenna has a tutor for what she calls “Princess Stuff” and she also goes to school in the mornings at Snake Slipway Middle School. Jenna’s tutor encourages her to practice talking like a Queen. Jenna has put this to good use at the Manuscriptorium—and enjoyed the experience.

Jenna spends as much time as she can with her adoptive brother Septimus. Whether they are flying on Spit Fyre—Jenna is Navigator—or just wandering through the Palace talking, there is no one Jenna would rather be with.

Jenna's Palace Diary

**Private.
Keep Out.
Princesses Only!**

MONDAY

Today Mum and Dad and I moved into the Palace. It's huge, and it is stuffed full of ghosts! Everywhere I go, especially at night, ghosts Appear and introduce themselves to me. They all tell me how pleased they are to have a real Princess here once again—so I suppose I must be a real Princess.

There is a really lovely ghost called Sir Hereward and he is on guard just outside my bedroom door. I have the bedroom that all Crown Princesses (that is what I am!) have had. I am glad Sir Hereward is there, as it is a little bit creepy. But the room is very beautiful and I suppose I shall get used to it—especially as it used to be my mother's bedroom when she was young. I like to think of her here when she was the same age as I am.

TUESDAY

Bo came over today and we went exploring in the attic. I met a ghost of a governess; her name is Mary. She kept calling me Esmeralda and telling me to be careful, which was a little spooky. I am glad Bo was there, even though she didn't see the ghost. Mum and Dad are really happy. They still can't quite believe that Septimus has come back. Mum went to the Wizard Tower to try to see him, but he was busy today. She's going to try again tomorrow.

WEDNESDAY

Mum had an argument with the Cook today. The Cook is very bossy and won't let Mum into "her" kitchen. Mum misses cooking, but the Cook says it is her job to cook the food and Mum's job to eat it—and we have to eat in the huge Palace dining room. Yesterday Mum sat at one end of the table—which is at least thirty feet long—and Dad sat at the other end and they couldn't even hear what each other was saying. So then they started doing signs, which they thought was really funny. Personally I thought it was silly.

THURSDAY

Nicko spent all day at the boatyard and didn't come back until really late. Nik told me that Jannit has offered him an Apprenticeship and he is going to tell Mum tomorrow. It will mean he has to live at the yard and I don't think Mum will be very happy. And I will miss him; we spent so much time together at Aunt Zelda's.

FRIDAY

I saw Boy 412—oops, Septimus—today! It was his day off so, as I haven't gone back to school yet, I was allowed to go to the Wizard Tower and meet him. I had forgotten what a weird place the Wizard Tower is; it smells very peculiar. Septimus came to us for tea and Mum didn't stop smiling. She kept trying to ruffle his hair; he looked a bit embarrassed, but he let her do it. Nik was around for a while and then he went to the boatyard. I don't think he has told Mum about the Apprenticeship yet. Septimus and I walked back to the Wizard Tower, and Marcia came down to meet us. And guess what? She told me the password to the Tower! How amazing is that? But I am not allowed to tell anyone else what it is, so I can't write it here.

SATURDAY

Nicko told Mum about the Apprenticeship and Mum is very upset. I went for a walk to the Wizard Tower; I said the password and it worked! Those huge silver doors swung open and they were totally silent. Septimus was allowed out for an hour, so we went down to the boatyard and saw Nik. It was fun.

SUNDAY

Tomorrow we will have been here a whole week! Mum has spent all day in the herb-garden-to-be and Dad has decided to be a writer. He says he is sick of being a Wizard. He says he has always wanted to write, but living with so many children in only one room meant he could never think straight. Now he has a huge room all to himself and has put up a notice on the door that says, PAMPHLETEER IN PROGRESS. QUIET! Sometimes I think my parents are a bit odd.

I am going back to school tomorrow and getting a tutor soon too. Must go; Bo is coming to sleep over and we are going exploring at midnight, but it is a secret. I like living here!

- ✿ *A Princess must always walk with her head up and her back straight.*
- ✿ *A Princess must speak slowly and clearly and not shout.*
- ✿ *A Princess must smile when smiled at and not frown.*
- ✿ *A Princess must learn to judge character.*
- ✿ *A Princess must be fair, just and impartial.*
- ✿ *A Princess must trust her instincts.*
- ✿ *A Princess must listen.*
- ✿ *A Princess must attend her Princess lessons.*
- ✿ *A Princess must not sneak out of the Palace in the middle of the night.*

MY HORSE

Today I got a horse! I love her—she is called Domino and she is beautiful. Here's what she looks like:

She is pure white, apart from six black spots where the saddle goes. Her mane and her tail are white too and really long, so I am learning how to keep them brushed and braided. I have a horse instructor—Mrs. B—from the farm where Dad bought Domino (good old Dad!). Mrs. B is staying with us for a month and teaching me everything about how to look after Domino and how to ride properly too. We go for a ride every morning before school and people wave to us, which is fun.



THE QUEEN'S ROOM
TOP SECRET. DO NOT READ!

This is secret! The Queen's Room is in the turret in the east end of the Palace, but only the True Queen and her descendants can see the door that leads to it. I found it because I am the Princess. I was able to open it with the key Aunt Zelda gave me, but Sep couldn't see the door at all!

The door to the room is gold with all kinds of patterns in it. There is a big keyhole right in the middle and only my key can open the door, which comes down like a drawbridge. Sep says that when I go into the Queen's Room, it looks like I'm walking straight through a wall and disappearing.

The room is smaller than you would expect and is surprisingly cozy. There is a fire burning in the grate, and a comfortable armchair is in front of it. I thought the chair looked like a really good place to sit, but I didn't. It was strange—I felt as though someone was already sitting there. Someone nice.

*But the best thing about the Queen's Room is the cupboard. It has UNSTABLE POTIONS AND PARTIKULAR POISONS written on it—just like Aunt Zelda's! If you go into it and close the door so that it clicks shut, then open the right drawer, it takes you straight to Aunt Zelda's own **UnStable** Potions and Partikular Poisons cupboard. How amazing is that? That is how the Castle Queens have traveled to visit the Dragon Boat, and that is why it is called the Queen's Way.*

HOMEWORK NOTES FROM OUR CASTLE STORY

Queens: the Good, the Bad, the Crazy and the Slightly Nervous

THE GOOD

Chapter Ten: THE FIRST QUEEN

-  *Name: Not known, but some people call her Queen Eleanor the Wise.*
-  *Age when succeeded to Throne: She did not succeed to the Throne—she arrived one morning in the Royal Barge. According to legend she was twenty-one at the time.*
-  *Length of reign: According to legend it was one hundred and one years long.*
-  *Known for: Being the first and founding the Palace. Also for being very beautiful. And good.*

Chapter Eleven: THE QUEEN AND THE DRAGON BOAT

-  *Name: Queen Miranda*

- ✿ *Age when succeeded to Throne: Twenty-two.*
- ✿ *Length of reign: Thirty-one years.*
- ✿ *Known for: Miranda asked Hotep-Ra to stay in the Castle and build the Wizard Tower. She was the first Queen to visit the Dragon Boat.*



Chapter Twelve: A CASTLE WITHOUT ALE

- ✿ *Name: Queen Daniella (The Dry)*
- ✿ *Age when succeeded to Throne: Twenty-three.*
- ✿ *Length of reign: Five years.*
- ✿ *Known for: Closing all the Taverns in the Castle.*

THE BAD

Chapter Thirteen: ETHELDREDDA THE AWFUL

- ✿ *Name: Queen Etheldredda*
- ✿ *Age when succeeded to Throne: Forty.*
- ✿ *Length of reign: Approx. fifteen years. Ended with a suspicious drowning, although there is a legend that she never actually died and is imprisoned in the attic.*
- ✿ *Known for: Murdering her two baby daughters and trying to murder her oldest daughter, Esmeralda.*

THE CRAZY

Chapter Fourteen: THE NIGHTGOWN QUEEN

- ✿ *Name: Queen Doreen*
- ✿ *Age when succeeded to Throne: Sixteen.*
- ✿ *Length of reign: Ten years.*
- ✿ *Known for: Running along Wizard Way in her nightgown. Keeping ferrets in the Throne Room. Making her advisers pass a skipping test every week.*



Chapter Fifteen: WHICH WAY DID SHE GO?

- ✿ *Name: Queen Datchet III*
- ✿ *Age when succeeded to Throne: Thirty-two.*
- ✿ *Length of reign: Two years.*
- ✿ *Known for: Moving the East Gate Lookout Tower to the western side of the Castle and Closing the Gate. It is thought she did this after being hit on the head by a rotten bedpost, which caused her to lose all sense of direction. One morning she took the dawn boat to the Port and was never seen again. Queen Datchet III had no daughter and was succeeded by her younger sister, Queen Daphne II (Daphne the Dull).*

THE SLIGHTLY NERVOUS

Chapter Sixteen: THE LESS AWFUL DAUGHTER

- ✿ *Name: Queen Esmeralda*

- * *Age when succeeded to Throne: Eleven, but her brother was Regent until she was well enough to start ruling when she was twenty.*
- * *Length of reign: Thirteen years.*
- * *Known for: Having bad headaches and wearing a very large crown. N.B. Are these two facts related?*



SUNDAY

Said good-bye to Milo—I mean my father. I still can't get used to thinking of him as my father. Felt really annoyed with him. He just shows up with a lot of stuff for the Palace and then he goes straight off again on another trip. This time he brought a pair of gold dragons, which Dad says look cheap. He gave me a compass and said maybe one day I would go on one of his voyages with him and then it would be useful. But I am never going in one of his ships. Why should I? Felt really angry after he left and threw it across the room. Took Domino out, but it rained.

MONDAY

Mum is really worried about this Sickness that is sweeping through the Castle. No one—not even Marcia—can find a cure. Last week they opened up the Infirmary just outside the Castle in case the Sickness is contagious, and Mum is going over there a lot. Dad is thumping around in the attic.

TUESDAY

Mum spent the night at the Infirmary and did not come home until this morning. Mum is tired and grumpy. Even Sep is being a bit weird at the moment. He told me he's been reading about some old Alchemist and he thinks he knew how to cure the Sickenesse. But what use is it anyway—the Alchemist was alive centuries ago.

WEDNESDAY

Had an argument with Mum at supper. Mum said she does not want me leaving the Palace in case I catch the Sickenesse. Said I have to visit the Dragon Boat every day. Mum said I didn't. Am going to read for a bit.

LATER

I can't sleep. It is one o'clock in the morning. It has been a foul evening. I was reading in my bedroom and I had a visit from a horrible ghost—Queen Etheldredda the Awful. I am not usually scared of ghosts, but I was scared of her.

Decided to sleep in Mum's sitting room as the thought of that ghost coming back gave me the creeps. Fell asleep on the sofa (after taking off all the junk) and was woken up by Sep! Suddenly he was in the room, soaking wet, white and spluttering like he was half-drowned. And even worse, that Awful Etheldredda was there, saying that she had saved him—I don't think so.

*And then, when I went to get Sep a dry tunic, Etheldredda ambushed me outside the door. It was horrible. She said that if I didn't do what she asked she would “**Reverse** my **ReClaim**e, Granddaughter, and your darling adoptive brother will drown at midnight tomorrow.”*

*I don't know what to do. I want to ask Mum, but she is at the Infirmary. Sep has told me all about **ReClaim**es—when you save people at the very moment they are about to die from some kind of accident. I am pretty sure he said they can be **Reversed**.*

I just don't know what to do. Can't sleep.



**Things I Will Do in the Palace
When I Am Queen**

BY JENNA HEAP

I WILL:

Have a candle burning at every window.

Ask lots of people to live there.

Open up the Throne Room and make it feel nice again.

Have a system of bells so that everyone can call one another.

Get more stuff in the Long Walk—lots of tapestries would be good.

Keep candles burning day and night down the Long Walk.

Have big parties in the Ballroom.

Open the summer house.

Never eat ducklings.

Find my mother's ghost.

DELIVERED FROM THE WIZARD TOWER BY MESSENGER

Received at Palace 10:00 A.M.

From: Septimus Heap

Dear Jen,

Thank you for cutting Spit Fyre's toenails—or claws, I suppose they are now. He likes it when you do that! Hope you have a nice day and the tutor does not do too much silly Princess stuff today. I have a few hours off this afternoon and will call in on you-know-who. He might just remember something.

Love to Mum and Dad.

Love, Septimus xxxx

Marcellus didn't remember ANYTHING. Sep says they went all the way to the top of the house and then Marcellus forgot why.

Some Palace Ghosts That I Have Seen

BY JENNA HEAP, PRINCESS

ALThER MELLA

Alther is not really a Palace ghost, but he is my top ghost of all time so he has to come first. I have known Alther since I was tiny. He is like a ghost-grandfather to me.

SIR HEReward

My second favorite ghost after Alther. He guards my room. He has only one arm and tells the same joke over and over again, but he is lovely and would do anything to protect me.



GHDRHN THE GREAT

She is an Ancient—an ExtraOrdinary Wizard ghost who lives at the Palace Gate. I don't know why. I suppose she likes it there. She is from the Lands of the Long Nights and is really nice but very faded. In the sunshine you can't see her at all.

GODRIC

He used to guard the Palace door, but now he sleeps in the big armchair in the hall. Sometimes he snores.



FARA FIELD

An old housekeeper. Has ancient uniform with lots of ribbons and carries a small piglet under her arm. She wanders around the battlements on the roof, where she says she can see danger coming from "farafield." I don't know what her real name is so that is what I've called her.

YOUNG WAINWRIGHT

He is a boy groom. I often see him curled up asleep in the corner of the stable. Domino likes him, so he must be okay. Sometimes he tries to help me brush her, which is a bit weird.

THE UNKNOWN PRINCESS

I think she is a bit crazy. I only see her at the full moon when she paddles in the ornamental Moat, waving her arms like a jellyfish.

SIR BRETTICUS-PETTICUS

*He was a knight and a Wizard too, which is unusual—plus he married a Queen. I can't think what she saw in him—he is very rude. He told me that I did not look like a real Princess. He was killed by an **UnStable** Spell of his own creation and now he roams the Long Walk with his feet on fire. At least he lights up the place a bit.*

MARY

Was once governess to Princess Esmeralda's poor baby sisters. She is convinced that I am Esmeralda and is always telling me to be careful. I do feel sorry for her, but sometimes I just wish she would cheer up. If I see her coming I try and go another way.

DELIVERED BY HAND FROM THE WIZARD TOWER

Received at the Palace 11:20 A.M.

From: Septimus Heap

Dear Jen,

Came by to see you, but you were out with Mrs. B on Domino. Hope you had a good ride. Tonight there is a special evening at the WT, as one of the really doddering old Wizards is retiring. Marcia said I could ask you. Well, actually, she said, "It would be appropriate for the Princess to be present tonight, Septimus. Please give her this Invitation." Except I have lost the Invitation. Oops. But please come tonight, Jen. A party of Wizards (me included!) will pick you up at the Palace at 7:00 P.M. Can you wear your best tunic with the gold stuff around the hem and clean your boots? You know what Marcia is like. And your best cloak.

Looking forward to seeing you!

Love, Septimus xxxx

P.S. Marcellus did not remember a thing. Spent the entire time looking for his glasses.

Marcellus and his stupid glasses! But I had a lovely evening in the Wiz Tower and Marcia was really nice.

People (and Dragons) at the Palace Who I Like

BY JENNA HEAP, PRINCESS

HILDEGARDE PIGEON

You would not believe it, but Hildegarde once worked for the Council of the Custodians! She was employed in the Accounts Department, which she says spent most of its time trying to curb the lavish spending of the Supreme Custodian. She was transferred to the Sales Force, which forced the sale of all the Palace treasures. Hildegarde loved the old pictures and furnishings she had to sell, but as she said to me, she had to balance the books. Later though, she felt really bad about what she had done and she applied to take part in the Second-Chance Scheme. She was accepted for training as a sub-Wizard, which is part-time, and volunteered for door duty at the Palace to try to make amends. She told me that she longed to be called to the Wizard Tower to train as an Ordinary Wizard, but she knew she had to be patient.

Now Hildegarde is at the Wizard Tower but not quite as she had hoped—she is in the Infirmary. I do hope she gets better soon.



BILLY POT

Billy Pot is grumpy, but he is sweet too. He told me that he once owned a pet shop that only sold reptiles. Billy loved lizards and snakes, and he specialized in breeding purple pythons. (The biggest python that Billy Pot ever bred now lives in the backyard of Terry Tarsal's shoe shop.)

When the Supreme Custodian bought a colony of snapping turtles from Billy, he ordered him to move into the Palace to look after them and Billy dared not refuse. Billy's niece, Sandra, took over the pet shop and started selling fancy hamsters and fluffy rabbits, which Billy thinks are silly.

Sandra bought Billy's pet shop, and Billy set up the lizard lodges down by the river. He built the Contraption and, with his lizards, embarked on his never-ending quest for the perfect lawn.

But now Billy cares for a lizard much bigger than those he used to breed—a dragon named Spit Fyre.

SPIT FYRE

Only just arrived! He is down on the big field by the river where Billy used to grow vegetables. They have finished building him a huge kennel. They thatched it at first, but Mum pointed out that thatch and dragons don't go well together so now it has fireproof tiles. Mum's friend Sally told the builders where to get them. I think having Spit Fyre here is going to be really interesting.



DELIVERED BY HAND FROM THE WIZARD TOWER BY B. CATCHPOLE

Received at the Palace 7:30 A.M.

From: Septimus Heap

Dear Jen,

Can you meet me at Marcellus's place today? Have just had a note from him! It is really good. I think he has remembered some things at last. He has some stuff of Nicko's to show us and he says there may be a way for him to come back!!!! See you there.

Love, Septimus xxxx

Yay! I can't wait until midday. We are going to get Nicko back—I know we are!



Wizard Way

HOW TO GET THERE: Wizard Way runs between the Palace and the Wizard Tower. As the saying goes in the Castle: “All roads lead to Wizard Way.”

WHO LIVES THERE: Scribes, printers and papermakers and anyone who likes to be in the center of things.

WHAT YOU’LL FIND THERE: A beautiful wide avenue lined with trees and tall silver torch posts. The buildings are the oldest in the Castle, and they are home to everything to do with the written word. Here you will find the fabled Manuscriptorium.

WHY YOU’D GO THERE: If you need Spells, **Charms**, pamphlets or just a book to read. You might have an appointment at the Manuscriptorium. Or you might just want to buy a Wizard Sandwich, sit on one of the benches in the shade of the trees and see if you can spot the ExtraOrdinary Wizard’s Apprentice wandering down to the Palace.

WHY YOU WOULDN’T: You might get asked to pick up litter by the Wizard Way Conservation Society Representative.

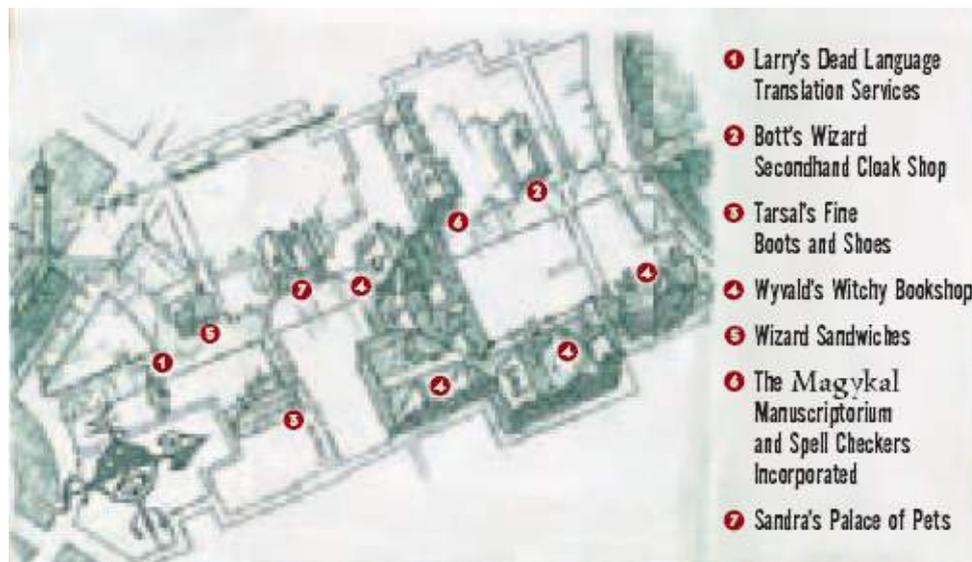
The Shops and Services of Wizard Way

An Informative Guide by the Wizard Way Conservation Society

{ A MESSAGE FROM THE WIZARD WAY CONSERVATION SOCIETY:
Take your litter home. }

Whether you are a day-tripper from the Port or a resident of the Castle, there is a myriad of surprises and delights to be found on Wizard Way.

To make your shopping experience a pleasant one—and to guide you to some of the more unusual establishments—the Wizard Way Conservation Society has produced this handy map with a brief description of some of the more interesting destinations. Please note that we cannot be held responsible for the goods and services offered in these establishments. Caveat Emptor! *



- 1** **Larry's Dead Language Translation Services:** A small cubbyhole of a shop with room only for a desk, which is occupied by Larry himself. Will translate any dead language for a small fee.



PROPRIETOR: Larry

Larry can be a little irascible. When we asked him his surname for the purposes of this guide we were told, “Antiquis temporibus, nati tibi similes in rupibus ventosissimis exponebantur ad necem.”*

- 2 Bott’s Wizard Secondhand Cloak Shop:** Formerly located in the Ramblings, Mr. Bott’s popular shop now has an impressive frontage on Wizard Way. Note the ornamental green dragons and crouching purple lions. Mr. Bott tells us that he carries only the finest pre-loved fashions for the discerning Wizard—mainly cloaks. All garments are **Deep-Cleaned** and **Anti-Darke** treated. Also available: tunics, shoes and some Ordinary Wizard belts.

PROPRIETOR: Mr. Bott (the younger)

Mr. Bott took over the Secondhand Cloak Shop when his father retired thirteen years ago. He is inclined to be talkative but is very helpful.

TIP FOR SHOPPING AT BOTT’S:

Bring a magnifying glass—the labels on the cloaks are very small.

- 3 Tarsal’s Fine Boots and Shoes:** Follow Instep Way—a small dead end off Wizard Way—and you will find Terry’s shop at the end.

PROPRIETOR: Terry Tarsal

Terry is a master craftsman and a gifted shoe designer. He will make shoes to your own specifications, repair a shoe while you wait and give advice on shoe care (whether you ask for it or not). Although famous for the purple python shoes he creates for ExtraOrdinary Wizard Marcia Overstrand, Terry Tarsal has asked the Wizard Way Conservation Society to point out that he will not make any further snakeskin designs.

SERVICES:

- » Heel repair
- » Toe repair
- » New soles
- » Stretching
- » Restoration
- » Dragon poop removal (*price on application*)
- » Custom orders (*no snakeskin*)

Tarsal's Fine Boots and Shoes

Half-price Sale!

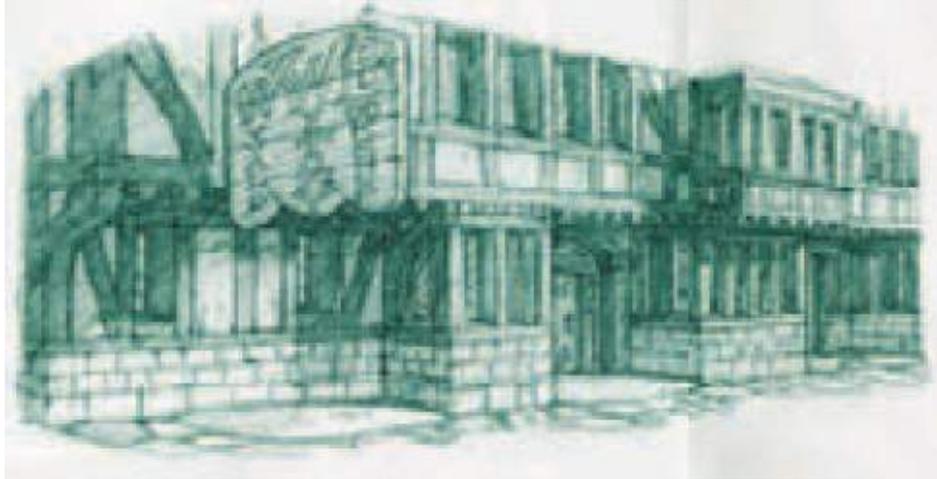
2 PAIRS red worker's clogs. Size: Extra large. New.

4 PAIRS green worker's clogs. Size: Extra large. New.

10 PAIRS pink hippo children's dance pumps. Assorted sizes. Used once. Very good condition.

1 PAIR red boots with blue laces. Child size: extra small. New.

1 PAIR pointy purple python shoes. Large size. Small (unnoticeable in the opinion of Mr. Tarsal) tear on heel.



4 **Wyvald's Witchy Bookshop:** Wyvald's Witchy Bookshop is the largest of the many bookshops on Wizard Way. It is the premier carrier of all literature relating to the world of witches and contains a vast uncataloged stock of old **Magyk** books. The bookshop extends back for nearly a quarter of a mile and has taken over at least four other houses behind it.

{ A MESSAGE FROM THE WIZARD WAY CONSERVATION SOCIETY:
*For your safety, we recommend that before visiting Wyvald's you tell someone where you are going and at what time you expect to return.
We will only send our search-and-rescue party on that basis. }*

PROPRIETOR: Tom Wyvald

You may have seen Tom Wyvald striding along in his purple cloak and long black tunic. The wearing of purple cloaks is discouraged by the Wizard Tower, but Mr. Wyvald is, as he often points out, free to wear whatever color he likes. You will discover that he finds it amusing to be mistaken for the ExtraOrdinary Wizard.

Wyvald's Witchy Bookshop
THIS WEEK'S RECOMMENDATIONS:

FROM THE ROMANTIC NOVEL BIN:

Meet Me at the Witching Hour by Desdemona Dream

FROM THE WITCHERY WALL:

Harnessing Hexes by Algaric and Pugh

FROM THE PAMPHLET PARADE:

Top Ten Counter-Foot Tricks by Silas Heap

FROM ROYALTY ROW:

Our Princess: An Unauthorized Biography by Pinkie Pry

FROM THE ARCANES AREA:

Theories of Time: A Book for Beginners (author unknown)

FROM THE UNLUCKY DIP:

A Brief History of the Sheeplands by Fred Partridge

5

Wizard Sandwiches: *First Floor, Number 44 Wizard Way.* This facility is featured in *The Egg-on-Toast Restaurant Guide*. The Wizard Way Conservation Society wishes to point out that we have not given approval to the current door decoration of this establishment.

A MESSAGE FROM THE WIZARD WAY CONSERVATION SOCIETY:

Take your sandwich crusts home.



- 6** **The Magykal Manuscriptorium and Spell Checkers**
Incorporated: *Number 13 Wizard Way*. Recognizable by the chaotic stacks of papers in the windows. Door has recently been repainted in unauthorized color.

PROPRIETOR: Chief Hermetic Scribe, Jillie Djinn

Miss Djinn is the latest in a long line of prestigious Chief Hermetic Scribes, the top position at the Manuscriptorium. She is a valued adviser to the Wizard Way Conservation Society on procedural matters and litter.

ADVICE FOR THE FIRST-TIME VISITOR TO THE MANUSCRIPTORIUM:

- » Always go to the front desk first. Do not attempt to enter the Manuscriptorium itself.
- » Be considerate! This is a place of work and study.
- » The Chief Hermetic Scribe is available by appointment **ONLY**.

Please make your appointment with the Front Desk Clerk and arrive ON TIME.

- » Safety advice: do not approach the Wild Book Store at any time.

LIST OF SERVICES AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC:

- » Old, **UnStable** Spells checked and **ReStablized**.
- » Order copies of formulas, conjurations, incantations.
- » Transcription of Spells, letters, manuscripts, poems, tomes, parchments, declarations, treaties and other texts.
- » Calculations, Predictions and Astronomical Answers available if pre-booked.
- » Some secondhand Spells for sale.
- » Safe storage for **Darke** materials.
- » Conservation, Preservation and Protection service available. See brochure for details.
- » In conjunction with the Wizard Tower, the Manuscriptorium offers many arcane services. These are not advertised, and to find out more we suggest you book an appointment with Miss Jillie Djinn or with the duty Wizard at the Wizard Tower.

NOTICE

The Manuscriptorium wishes to announce that the annual Entrance Examination will take place on the thirteenth of this month at 7:13 A.M. Success in this—with rare exceptions—is a requirement for employment at the Manuscriptorium. Please collect an entry form from the Front Office and return by the eleventh of the month at 5:02 P.M.

-  **Sandra's Palace of Pets:** Once owned by Billy Pot. Now Billy's niece, Sandra, has taken over the business. Bunnies, kittens, hamsters—if it's fluffy, Sandra will stock it.

PROPRIETOR: Sandra Pot

Sandra has turned the previously basic (and smelly) lizard-breeding store into a pastel-painted palace for cuddly pets.

SERVICES:

- » Complete grooming service: perfumed shampooing, nail clipping, fur trimming, teeth whitening.
- » Hamster homes interior design service.
- » Complete personal shopper wardrobe service for tiny dogs.
- » Designer pet carriers—take your loved one everywhere you go!
- » Pet counseling and advice service for nervous pets or owners.
- » Ask about our breeding program (pets only).

A MESSAGE FROM THE WIZARD WAY CONSERVATION SOCIETY:
{ *Take your pet's poop home.* }



Pets currently looking for the new person in their life:

BRIAN, BARNEY, BILLY, BRENDA, BARRY, BOFFY AND BEN
Baby mice, ten days old.

DAVE, DINAH, DIXIE AND DILBERT
Guinea pig family who wish to stay together.

PING-PONG
Exotic gerbil. Temperamental.

PRINCESS
Small chinchilla.
Fussy about food.

CHIEF HERMETIC SCRIBES, PAST AND PRESENT

TERTIUS FUME

The very first Chief Hermetic Scribe, whose ghost still guards the Vaults. As boys, Tertius Fume and Hotep-Ra (the very first ExtraOrdinary Wizard) were the closest of friends. After Hotep-Ra fled his home country, Tertius Fume, who was at that time a loyal friend, set out to look for him. Many years later Tertius Fume arrived at the Castle and was joyfully greeted by Hotep-Ra. Tertius Fume was amazed by what he found. Not only was his friend in the process of finishing the incredible Wizard Tower, he was now loved and respected by all and was the closest of friends with the beautiful Queen. Tertius felt a little put out—he had come to rescue his grateful friend and now all he could do was bask in his friend’s reflected glory.

But Hotep-Ra was his usual generous self. He set Tertius Fume up in a large house at 13 Wizard Way and, when Tertius expressed an interest in starting up what he called a Scribe House, Hotep-Ra gave him all the help possible. It was a terrible shock to Hotep-Ra when he returned to his beloved Dragon Boat from one of his visits with the Queen and discovered that Tertius Fume had declared a State of Emergency, installed himself as Locum ExtraOrdinary Wizard and taken over the Wizard Tower. Hotep-Ra was forced to oust his friend and banish him.

Tertius Fume made three of his scribes accompany him into banishment, one of whom, it is rumored, killed him.



WALDO WATKINS

A quiet man and a much-respected Chief Hermetic Scribe. For ten long years, Waldo bravely held out against the Supreme Custodian's demands for putting the Manuscriptorium to **Darke** uses. But his refusal eventually cost him dearly. Unlike many Chief Hermetic Scribes, Waldo chose to live outside the Manuscriptorium rather than in the apartment above it. Late one night, on the way back to his little house within the Castle wall, Waldo was ambushed by a troupe of Custodian Guards and was never seen again.

HUGH FOX

Hugh Fox had been an unremarkable scribe for twenty-five years when, to everyone's amazement, he was **Picked** to become Chief Hermetic Scribe. DomDaniel wanted a Chief Hermetic Scribe who would do his bidding and unlock the secrets of *The Undoing of the Darkeness*—a book that he had snatched from Marcia Overstrand—and he fixed the **Pick**. Everyone knew he had done this, but no one was brave enough to say anything. But they all wondered who should have been Chief Hermetic Scribe instead.

JILLIE DJINN

It was Jillie Djinn who should have been **Picked** instead of Hugh Fox. This may surprise you—it surprised the author of this biography too. It is Marcia Overstrand's opinion that some people seem promising, but when they assume authority they change for the worse. She considers that Miss Djinn is one of these people. Madam Overstrand also considers that while Jillie Djinn is undoubtedly a good person, her lack of skills in assessing people's true characters may put the Manuscriptorium in some danger. Jillie Djinn is extremely knowledgeable—and awfully boring.

SOME EMPLOYEES OF THE MANUSCRIPTORIUM

O. BEETLE BEETLE

Beetle grew up in the Ramblings in two rooms beneath the Heaps, and Beetle's earliest memories are of his mother banging on the ceiling with a broomstick, yelling, "For heaven's sake, be *quiet!*"

Beetle was an only child and lived alone with his mother. Beetle's father, Brian Beetle, died before he was born after being bitten by a spider hidden in a box of bananas. *

At the age of eleven, much to his mother's delight, Beetle passed the highly competitive Manuscriptorium Entrance Examination and was taken on as General Dogsbody. When the Inspection Clerk fell off his sled, Beetle was entrusted to take over the weekly inspections of the Ice Tunnels. Beetle is Septimus Heap's best friend. They share a love of FizzFroot and a hatred of **Darke Magyk**.



COLIN PARTRIDGE

Colin had once been unwillingly recruited into the Custodian Guard. He was from a small village on the edge of the Sheeplands. Partridge was a dreamy child who spent his days minding his father's sheep—and losing more of them than his father cared to count. Colin's father despaired of his son. So

when the Custodian Guard Recruiting Party arrived at the Partridge sheep farm promising to “make a man out of your son,” Partridge’s father had young Colin packed and ready in no time. Luckily for Colin, he arrived at the end of the Supreme Custodian’s regime. He signed up for the Second-Chance Scheme and was snapped up by the Manuscriptorium. Partridge loves being a scribe and has no wish to return to losing sheep.

BILL FOX

Known to all as Foxy, he is the son of the disgraced ex–Chief Hermetic Scribe, Hugh Fox. Foxy, a lowly scribe, is extremely tall and thin and prone to fainting spells, but despite his being a bit of a wimp, Beetle likes Foxy. It is Foxy who introduced him to sausage sandwiches, and in an emergency in the Manuscriptorium, it is to Foxy whom Beetle will turn. Foxy does his best but often ends up in the Manuscriptorium infirmary in times of trouble. Jillie Djinn terrifies him, but Foxy enjoys his work.



ROMILLY BADGER

A new recruit who scored highly in the last Manuscriptorium Entrance Examination. Romilly has beautiful handwriting and a wicked sense of humor. Jillie Djinn has already had to speak to her about laughing on duty and bad timekeeping. Partridge very much hopes that she will not be dismissed.

EPHANIAH GREBE

The Manuscriptorium’s Conservation, Preservation and Protection Scribe. He lives in the cellars under the Manuscriptorium and is rarely seen

aboveground. Ephaniah had only just begun work at the Manuscriptorium when he was ambushed by a Rat Hex. It was a permanent Hex, but Morwenna the Witch Mother managed to undo some of the effects, leaving Ephaniah as part rat, part man. Ephaniah is a skilled and painstaking Conservation Scribe and can rescue even the most damaged papers, Spells and keepsakes.



HOW THE CHIEF HERMETIC SCRIBE IS PICKED

STEP 1

The current Chief Hermetic Scribe must die or retire.

STEP 2

Each Manuscriptorium scribe places his or her pen into the large enameled **Draw Pot**.

STEP 3

The outgoing Chief Hermetic Scribe, or the most senior scribe, takes the **Pot** into the Hermetic Chamber. It is left there overnight.

STEP 4

In the morning, the youngest scribe is sent to the Chamber. One pen will be lying on the desk while all the others will remain in the **Pot**.



STEP 5

Whoever is the owner of the pen on the desk is the new Chief Hermetic Scribe.

A NOTE: The **Draw** has been used for thousands of years. Only the best are **Picked**. Most scribes toil away their entire lives without ever being **Picked**. The position of Chief Hermetic Scribe is a great honor, and those **Picked** must be serious, dedicated and fair. And preferably not given to counting haddock.

DAILY APPOINTMENT DIARY OF JILLIE DJINN, CHIEF
HERMETIC SCRIBE (CHS)

DIARY KEEPER

O. Beetle Beetle

Monday

TIME: 9:22 A.M.

WITH: *Silas Heap*

REASON FOR APPOINTMENT: *To ask for twenty-one pamphlet copies at discounted Ordinary Wizard rate.*

NOTES: *Three-and-a-half minutes late. CHS refused to see.*

ACTION: *OBB agreed to OW discount. Scribe employed: Scribe Foxy. To be collected 9:00 A.M. tomorrow.*

TIME: 2:55 P.M.

WITH: *Terry Tarsal*

REASON FOR APPOINTMENT: *Delivery of shoes.*

NOTES: *On time.*

ACTION: *CHS declared shoe s unsatisfactory. Rescheduled for Tuesday 10:08 A.M.*

Tuesday

TIME: 9:00 A.M.

WITH: *Silas Heap*

REASON FOR APPOINTMENT: *To collect pamphlets.*

NOTES: *Arrived 10:07 A.M.*

ACTION: *OBB handed over pamphlets. Work satisfactory, apart from one pamphlet slightly smudged. Not charged for. Full payment received.*

Tuesday

TIME: *10:08 A.M.*

WITH: *Terry Tarsal*

REASON FOR APPOINTMENT: *To deliver shoes for CHS (see previous day).*

NOTES: *On time but refused to wait. Accused Silas Heap of "blathering on and on while some people had work to do."*

ACTION: *OBB asked Mr. Tarsal to leave shoes. Assured him shoes would reach CHS ASAP. Mr. Tarsal left shoes.*

SUBSIDIARY NOTE: *Door slamming has caused second paper stack on the left window to collapse. OBB asked Scribe Partridge to rebuild.*

Wednesday

TIME: *3:19 P.M.*

WITH: *Ma Custard*

REASON FOR APPOINTMENT: *Witnessing of signature.*

NOTES: *One minute early.*

ACTION: *Contract for new licorice supplier Signed and Sealed.*

SUBSIDIARY NOTE: *Client left large tub of banana fizzes for scribes. Thank-you letter sent.*

Thursday

TIME: *10:12 A.M.*

WITH: *Marcia Overstrand*

REASON FOR APPOINTMENT: *Not given.*

NOTES: *Sixteen minutes late but insisted on being seen.*

ACTION: *New appointment.*

TIME: *10:28 A.M.*

NOTES: *On time.*

ACTION: *CHS provided Scribe Badger to facilitate access to Hidden shelf number three.*

TIME: *4:02 P.M.*

WITH: *Silas Heap*

REASON FOR APPOINTMENT: *Counter-Feet Sealed Box repair.*

NOTES: *Three-and-a-half minutes late.*

ACTION: *CHS refused to see. Box to go in night basket for EG.*

Friday

TIME: *2:16 P.M.*

WITH: *Marcia Overstrand*

REASON FOR APPOINTMENT: *Not given.*

NOTES: *Arrived 2:10 P.M. Requested to be seen immediately. Refused to wait until appointment time.*

SUBSIDIARY NOTE: *Scribe Partridge rebuilt second paper stack on the left window again.*

Beetle's INSPECTION CLERK DAYBOOK

O. BEETLE BEETLE'S VERY OWN HISTORY OF THE ICE TUNNELS

(work in progress)

Dear readers,

You may wonder why no one has ever told you about the Ice Tunnels. Well, you are not alone. Even though I am the Ice Tunnel Inspection Clerk, no one has ever told me anything either. But here is some stuff I have worked out.

- 1. The Ice Tunnels used to be just tunnels without ice.*
- 2. In the old days, officials used the Tunnels to travel around the Castle underground.*
- 3. Almost the entire Castle is connected by the Tunnels. Weird...*
- 4. The Tunnels were sealed by the Emergency Freeze. This happened so fast that thirty-nine people were trapped*



MY SLED



ADD AERODYNAMIC WINGS ONTO THE BACK.



ADD A POINTED NOSE TO THE FRONT FOR MORE SPEED.



SEP'S SLED



WIZARD TOWER SLED

THE ICE TUNNELS

ONCE-A-WEEK INSPECTION DUTIES:

Travel the Ice Tunnels on Manuscriptorium Sled.

Check that all the hatches remain Sealed.

Report any suspicious hatches, e.g., with clear ice indicating recent ReSealing.

ONCE-A-MONTH INSPECTION DUTIES:

Travel every tunnel, even those without hatches.

Test ice samples at specified areas.

Report to CHS.

SAFETY PRECAUTIONS:

Always secure sled, as it will wander off if left unattended.

Do not breathe in while Ice Wraith passing.

Always inform duty scribe of time expected to return.

Always ReSeal hatch to Manuscriptorium.

BEETLE'S ICE TUNNEL INFO

FAVORITE SPOT: *The high slope on the way to the Van Klampff Hatch. The perfect spot for the Reverse Whizz jump.*

LEAST FAVORITE SPOT: *The tunnel to the Palace kitchen hatch. Too thin for any tricks. Also feels creepy.*

GHOSTS: *Usual mix of officials, Wizards and tramps. Avoid those trapped in Emergency Freeze if you can. Some of them are still panicking. Not nice.*

ICE WRAITHS: *The worst is Moaning Hilda. Hold your breath as she goes past or she'll freeze the breath inside you. Cover your ears or she'll burst your eardrums. Other Ice Wraiths much less powerful.*



MOANING HILDA

BEST SLED MOVES

JUMP: *Free catching air at the top of a steep hill.*

DECK-UP: *Riding on the rear edges of the runner. Backwards alley:*

BACKWARDS ALLEY: *Riding backward.*

SPIN REVERSE WHIZZ: *Once around and then coming to a stop with a backward slide.*

DOUBLE SPIN REVERSE WHIZZ: *Twice around and then coming to a stop with a backward slide.*

BACKWARDS ALLEY SPIN-AROUND WHIZZ: *Coming to a stop from the backward position, then with a spin at the end and a sliding stop. The best!!!*



**JILLIE DJINN ALWAYS SCOLDS ME WHEN I SPEND TOO MUCH
TIME IN THE ICE TUNNELS.**

PAPERS FROM AROUND THE CASTLE



MR. AND MRS. GRINGE OF THE NORTH GATE GATEHOUSE

GRINGE, THE GATEKEEPER

No one in the Castle knows Gringe's first name—or so he thinks. But the writer of these biographies has done her best to find out as much for her readers as possible. She can reveal here that the keeper of the North Gate gatehouse once answered to the name of Augustus—although he no longer does so, as the writer found out last week. In fact the writer strongly recommends that you do *not* use this form of address if you want to use the North Gate drawbridge.

Augustus Gringe is married to Theodora Gringe. They met in the Port and came to the Castle for a better life. At first they had a hard time and lived in a ramshackle shelter beneath the Castle wall. When Rupert was born, Gringe was determined to do better for his family. One day, when the Bridge Boy at

the North Gate was injured by a loose chain, Gringe helped out. It was not long before his strength and reliability were noticed and he was asked to be stand-in Gatekeeper. Two years later, when the Gatekeeper retired, Gringe took over and at last his family had a proper roof over their heads.

The Gringes now have two children, Rupert and Lucy. Gringe is proud of what his son, Rupert, is doing and often talks about him, but he refuses to discuss his daughter, Lucy. Mrs. Gringe has been known to tell her closest friends that her husband has never gotten over Lucy running off with Simon Heap. He worries that Lucy will never forgive him for locking her up in the gatehouse after the Custodian Guards dragged her back from the Chapel, where she and Simon had secretly gone to get married.

Gringe is not a big fan of the Heap family. Gringe does not trust Wizards, he thinks that **Magyk** is “an easy way out of yer troubles” and he also had no end of problems with the high-spirited Heap boys playing Chicken on the drawbridge when they were little. When he asked Silas Heap to stop them, Silas just laughed and told him, “Boys will be boys.” After Lucy attempted to elope with Simon Heap, Gringe’s dislike of the Heaps increased.

But since Gringe realized that Silas did not approve of Simon either and saw how worried he and Sarah were about their children, he has felt some sympathy for the Heaps. The turning point came when Gringe found out that Silas had a **Magyk** set of Counter-Foot (Gringe’s favorite game and his one exception to his dislike of **Magyk**). Gringe has now decided that Silas Heap is not so bad after all, although when asked by this biographer if they were friends, he refused to answer and went off to yell at the Bridge Boy.

THEODORA GRINGE

Known to all as Mrs. Gringe, Theodora has been the driving force behind the Gringe family’s reversal in fortune. When the family was existing in their ramshackle shelter below the Castle wall, it was Theodora who told Gringe that the Bridge Boy had had a terrible accident and he must get down there *right now* and lend a hand. Gringe did not see why he should, but Mrs. Gringe did. And she was right.

Mrs. Gringe looks after the accounts at the gatehouse and makes sure the money is clean before it is put in the gatehouse coffers. Once a month she supervises its transport to the Castle Treasury, where Gringe’s salary is paid and the rest of the money is used for repairing the Castle wall and maintaining the bridge.

Now that her children have—to her regret—left home, Mrs. Gringe has started the Café la Gringe. It has, however, not been well-reviewed in the influential *Egg-on-Toast Restaurant Guide*. Mrs. Gringe may still find herself washing more money than knives and forks.



THE [North Gate](#)

HOW TO GET THERE: From outside the Castle, head south from the One Way Bridge toward the Castle. From within the Castle, follow the streets North; it is well signposted.

WHO LIVES THERE: The Gringee family lives in the gatehouse. The Bridge Boy works there from sunrise to sunset.

WHY YOU'D GO THERE: To get into the Castle—and to get out again.

WHY YOU WOULDN'T: You might not want to pay the toll—in which case, you would have to go in through the South Gate just past the rubbish dump.

THE ABSOLUTELY TOP-SECRET SEVEN-YEAR DIARY OF LUCY GRINGE

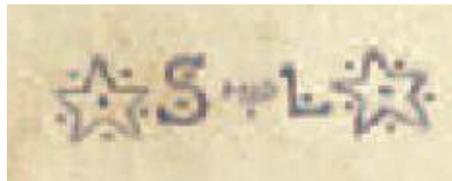
Year One

SPRING

MONDAY. *Boring dance class today. Mum says I have to go. But WHY?*

TUESDAY. *Class yesterday not so bad. Met this boy called Simon. He's nice.*

MONDAY. *Asked Simon his name. He said Simon. I said (ha ha) I know that I mean what is your second name and he said Heap. I said you can't mean that and he said yes I do mean that what is the problem and I said my dad thinks you Heaps are nuts. But what I really meant was that I want to keep seeing Simon and I know that Dad will go crazy. What will I do?*



Year Two

SUMMER

SATURDAY. *Met Simon this afternoon at our secret place. It is across the One Way Bridge. No one knows. I love him.*

Year Five

WINTER

THURSDAY. *The Heaps have left! Everyone is talking about it. AND SI HAS GONE WITH THEM. I can't believe it! How could he go and not tell me?*

SUNDAY. *Woke up this morning before dawn. Thought it was raining as I heard pattering on the windows. But the rain was Si! He was throwing little stones at my window. How romantic is that? So I went downstairs really quietly as I knew that Dad would be up any minute. Si had such a big smile when he saw me! He asked me to marry him and I said yes yes YES! So we went to the Chapel and we waited until it was open and it was my dream come true. Except it didn't. It was horrible. There was a CRASH and the Custodian Guards rushed in. They took Si away even though he punched at least THREE of them and they brought me home. Mum and Dad*

went crazy. I have never heard such a racket. Now Dad has locked me in the attic because I told him I was going to rescue Simon and I didn't care what happened to me SO THERE. Mum and Dad are horrible. The Custodian Guards are horrible. EVERYONE is horrible. Except for Si. Ooo oo oo oo oo oo h.

WHAT DAY IS IT? I don't know. I don't care. I have a rat up here and it is my only friend. I am feeding it biscuits.



ANOTHER BORING DAY. Mum came and tried to talk to me, but I ignored her. Was too busy embroidering my tunic to bother with HER. My only friend is my rat. He is called Stanley and he talks enough for anyone. Who needs stupid parents anyway?



SPRING

MONDAY. Dad said I can come out of the attic. Told him I liked the attic and I didn't want to SO THERE and he could just GO AWAY. So he left the door open and then as he was going he said something AWFUL. He said that Simon has disappeared in the Marshes and we won't ever see him again. I don't believe him. Dad is so horrible. From now on I shall not call him

Dad, I shall call him Father (which I know he hates).

Year Six

SUMMER

Had a huge fight with Mum on the drawbridge. And with Father too. Simon 's little brother came and said that Si had kidnapped Princess Jenna. At first I was just so happy that Si is still alive! It has been so long since I heard anything. But why didn't he come and kidnap me? WHY? I am SO unhappy.

AUTUMN

TUESDAY. *Princess Jenna came here today! She gave me a beautiful blue cloak and said that Simon had meant for me to have it. I didn't know what to say. I know all the bad stuff they have been saying about Si kidnapping Jenna and trying to kill Marcia and all that, but I don 't believe it. Jenna wouldn't have come to see me if he had kidnapped her, would she? And she was really nice too.*

My own
Lucy,

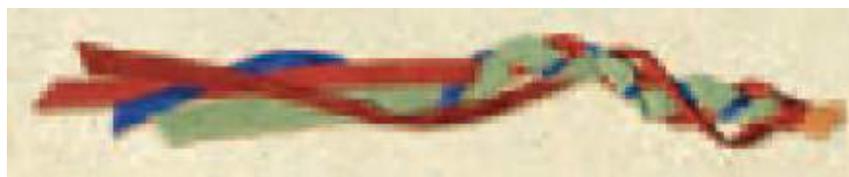
This cloak is for you. I will be back soon and we will be together at the top of the Tower. I shall make you proud of me.

Wait for me.
Your only,
Simon.

Found this in the cloak. I am so happy!!!!

AUTUMN

THURSDAY. *Where is he? I have waited forever and he has still not come. I AM SO MAD. Have woven some ribbons.*



FRIDAY. *Had another argument with Father who told me to “stop mooning around like a sick ferret and do something.” So I am GOING to do something. I am going to find Simon! I don’t know where he is, but I figure the Port is a good place to start. I shall take the Outside Path tonight and then there is no chance of meeting Dad Father on his way to see silly old Silas Heap. Goodbye, horrible Castle!!!*

MONDAY. *Arrived at the Port in Nicko Heap’s boat. The Heaps are okay really. Even Septimus is not a bad kid although he did say some rotten stuff about Simon. And Nicko reminds me so much of Si—something about the way he laughs. Am working at the Harbor and Dock Pie Shop for Maureen and Kevin. They are both really nice.*

FRIDAY. *Tons of rats here. Am sure one of them is that Message Rat I fed in the attic. I wonder if he knows where Si is?*

SATURDAY. *It IS Stanley. I am SURE he knows where Simon is! He keeps going on about it being “top secret,” but I shall get him to tell me eventually. I have a motto now: “No One Says No to Lucy Gringe!”*

THE Message Rat Office

EAST GATE LOOKOUT TOWER

HOW TO GET THERE: Located in the East Gate Lookout Tower. Take the steps by the Manuscriptorium up to the path along the Wall and, keeping the Moat on your right, the tower is about a ten minute walk. When you can smell garbage, you are there.

WHO WORKS THERE: Stanley. No other rats are employed at present, but there are vacancies.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND THERE: A sign on the door that reads:

RATS WANTED FOR MESSAGE RAT DUTIES NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY FULL TRAINING
WILL BE GIVEN APPLY WITHIN

And another that reads:

BEST RATES OF PAY
WE PAY DOUBLE THE PORT RATE!
DON'T MISS OUT ON THIS WONDERFUL OPPURTUNITY!!

And one more that reads:

FREE FOOD!!!!!!

WHY YOU'D GO THERE: To send a message.

WHY YOU WOULDN'T: With only one rat on duty, the office may be closed while the rat is out on a message. Also if the one rat *is* in the office you may not want to listen to the rat's wide-ranging observations on Life,

the Universe and Everything.

STANLEY: MY LIFE—A RAT'S RAMBLINGS



I WILL BE BRIEF. Or as brief as possible. I was born to a wonderful old Castle rat family, who had a proud history of employment in the Message Rat Service. My father, bless his dear memory, worked in the Rat Office for all his life, and my dear old ma used to receive the basket of messages at the top of the Tower. Ah, those were the days. It was therefore only natural that I, Stanley, their pride and joy, should go into the Service—as it was known in the family.

I had not been long in the Service when I met my future wife, Dawnie, one summer's evening at my favorite rubbish bin. She emerged with gravy all over her nose and I was (unfortunately, as it turned out) smitten.

At Dawnie's insistence, we set up house together next door to her mother. The arrangement was not entirely successful. Dawnie's mother told my dear old ma, who was not well at the time, that she did not consider me good enough for her daughter. Not good, I hear you say—and how right you are.

The crisis point in my marriage came when I was kidnapped—or ratnapped—by Mad Jack. It was a nightmare. I was away for more than two months, and Dawnie's mother told her that I had done this deliberately to spite them. Well, I can think of much more pleasant things to do to spite someone than that.

My homecoming to the Castle was not good. After all I had been through, I was expecting a hero's welcome, but it was not to be. Dawnie had left and gone to live with her sister, Mabel. I was interrogated by the Rat Office and thrown into a disgusting little cage under the floor.

After I was released from imprisonment I spent some time recovering in the North Gate gatehouse under the care of the delightful Lucy Gringe. Not unnaturally, I am sure you will agree, I decided that I had had enough of the Message Rat Service.

Then one day, by the very same rubbish bin where I had first met Dawnie, I was approached by a shifty-looking rat and asked if I would like to join the Secret Rat Service. I accepted at once. It was my dream job.

My first Mission was one that I will never forget. I was dispatched to find the kidnapped Princess and return her to the Castle! How many rats have had that kind of responsibility entrusted to them? Not many, I can tell you. Those who know me well will know that I do not like to blow my own trumpet, but as a matter of record I have to say that I succeeded magnificently—there is no point pretending otherwise. Being a romantic at heart, I decided to try again with Dawnie.

Our reunion was not all it could have been. Dawnie's mother came over for supper every night. But the main problem was the RatStranglers—a bunch of thugs running a campaign to rid the Castle of rats. I wanted to go to the Port, but Dawnie would not leave her mother. However, one morning we discovered that her mother had legged it overnight and left us behind—so at last Dawnie agreed to go.

But fate was against us—as we crept out we were spotted by the RatStranglers. It was a terrifying chase and we only narrowly escaped by grabbing on to a departing dragon's tail.

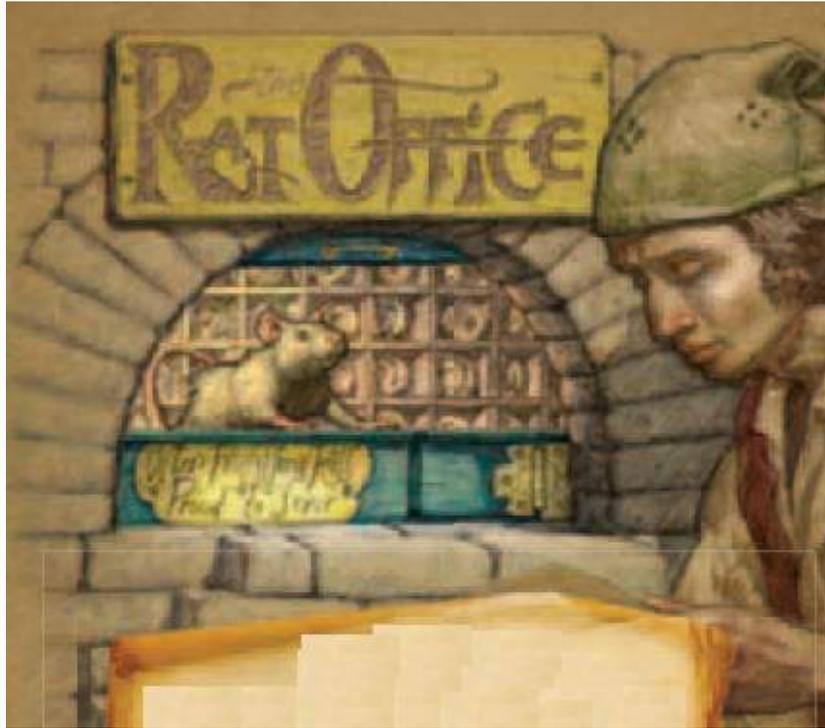
It turned out that the dragon belonged to the Princess's brother, whom I had met before. I move in interesting circles, actually, and it does help at times. We were offered a ride on the dragon to the Port, but it was on this trip that the scales fell from my eyes and I saw Dawnie's true nature for the very first time. It was not a pretty sight and was the beginning of the end. Dawnie is now living in the Port near the pie shop. I hear she is even fatter.

But I am determined to be positive. Many good things have come out of this experience, and I am now considered to be, among other things, a friend of royalty. Sometimes I wonder what Dawnie would think of this, but deep down I know that Dawnie wouldn't really care. She has no soul.

Recently I have adopted four orphan ratlets, whom I found on the Outside Path one night.

I have also restarted the Message Rat Service and am hoping to find some staff soon. All applicants welcome. Free interview. But the ratlets are growing fast and if I don't find any staff, I will soon have some homegrown talent entering the Service. It will save on wages too.

All things work out in the end, don't they?



RULES

1. A message **MUST** be delivered no matter what.
2. A message must **ONLY** be delivered to the identified recipient.
3. A Message Rat **ALWAYS** travels undetected.
4. A Message Rat **NEVER** makes himself known to strangers.
5. A Message Rat may **NOT** refuse an assignment.
6. Message Rats carry messages **ONLY**. No parcels.
7. **ALL** conversations in the Rat Office are Highly Confidential.

REMEMBER: **NOTHING** STOPS A MESSAGE RAT!

STANDARD MESSAGE FORM

to be used by ALL RATS

Await Command to speak. Wizards will use **Speeke, Rattus Rattus**. Non-Wizards use a variety of Commands, not all of them polite. But a Message Rat never answers back and never deviates from the Standard Message Form (SMF).

SMF IS:

- ☞ *First, I have to ask: Is there anyone here answering to the name of **(INSERT NAME OF RECIPIENT)**?*
- ☞ *Following recipient identifying him or herself correctly, deliver message in SMF:*
- ☞ *I have come here to deliver a message to **(INSERT NAME OF RECIPIENT)**.*
- ☞ *The message is sent **(INSERT DAY)** at **(INSERT TIME)** from **(INSERT NAME OF SENDER HERE AND, IF POSSIBLE, PLACE OF RESIDENCE)**.*
- ☞ *Message begins:*
- ☞ *Deliver Message VERBATIM. A Message Rat does not paraphrase, gabble, abbreviate or censor. At end of message sign off with:*
- ☞ *Message ends.*

REMEMBER: A MESSAGE RAT IS **PROFESSIONAL AT ALL TIMES.**

Be proud of your Service.

ZONE PRICING

ZONE 1: Inside the Castle wall
 Outward Message only.....1 penny
 Outward Message and wait for reply (**MAXIMUM OF TEN MINUTES' WAIT**).....2 pence
 Next day Return Message..... 3 pence

ZONE 2: Immediately outside the Castle wall as far as lower Farmlands, Infirmary. Not the Forest.
 Outward Message only.....2 pence
 Outward Message and wait for reply (**MAXIMUM OF TEN MINUTES' WAIT**).....4 pence
 Next day Return Message..... 6 pence

ZONE 3: The Port (BY SCHEDULED PORT BARGE ONLY). Positively no stop-offs for the Marram Marshes.

Outward Message only..... 10 pence

Outward Message and wait for reply. (**MAXIMUM OF TEN MINUTES' WAIT**).....20 pence

Next day Return Message..... 30 pence

ZONES 4, 5, 6 AND 7: The Forest, the Sheeplands, the Badlands, Marram Marshes. No night messages accepted.

Outward Message only.....Price on application

Outward Message and wait for reply (**MAXIMUM OF FIFTEEN MINUTES' WAIT**).....Price on application

Next day Return Message...Price on application

*Please refer all requests for messages to these areas to the duty office rat.
They are no longer accepted as a matter of course.*

DISPATCHES FROM THE OLD MESSAGE RAT OFFICE

MESSAGE STATUS: RETURN MESSAGE



FROM: PRIVILEGE ACCOUNT HOLDER, ZELDA ZANUBA HEAP @ KEEPER'S COTTAGE, DRAGGEN ISLAND, MARRAM MARSHES

TO: PRINCESS JENNA @ THE PALACE, THE CASTLE

DEAR JENNA,

I WAS SO PLEASED TO RECEIVE YOUR LETTER! BERT AND I ENJOYED READING IT VERY MUCH INDEED. I AM GETTING A REPLY STRAIGHT BACK TO YOU. EXCUSE ME IF IT IS A LITTLE RUSHED, BUT THE RAT WILL ONLY WAIT FOR FIFTEEN MINUTES. I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE MESSAGE RAT SERVICE IS COMING TO.

I AM SO PLEASED THAT YOU AND YOUR PARENTS ARE ADJUSTING WELL TO LIFE IN THE PALACE. IT MUST SEEM VERY BIG AFTER YOUR COZY ROOM IN THE RAMBLINGS. I DO UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE UPSET THAT YOUR ROOM HAS BEEN EMPTIED WHILE YOU WERE AWAY AND I AM SO SORRY THEY TOOK YOUR TEDDY. BUT I AM SURE MR. TED WILL BE ALL RIGHT AND I REALLY DON'T THINK ANYONE WOULD HAVE THROWN HIM ON THE RUBBISH DUMP, WHATEVER THEY DID WITH EVERYTHING ELSE. YOU COULD ASK MARCIA TO DO A FIND—OR, ON SECOND THOUGHT, MAYBE NOT. BUT ONE DAY SEPTIMUS WILL BE ABLE TO DO ONE FOR YOU.

AND IMAGINE YOU WANTING A PONY! I AM AFRAID I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT PONIES, BUT I THINK YOUR FATHER KNOWS OF SOME GOOD STABLES IN THE FARMLANDS.

I AM VERY MUCH LOOKING FORWARD TO YOUR VISIT AT MIDSUMMER DAY.

ALL MY LOVE, AUNT ZELDA XXX



MESSAGE STATUS: OUTWARD MESSAGE ONLY



FROM: ALICE NETTLES @ WAREHOUSE NUMBER NINE, THE PORT

TO: ALTHER MELLA, DECEASED @ THE HOLE IN THE WALL TAVERN

DEAREST ALTHER,

I HAVE JUST HEARD THE WONDERFUL NEWS—THAT MURDERING VILLAIN HAS FLED THE CASTLE ALONG WITH ALL HIS CRONIES. ABOUT TIME TOO, ALTHOUGH OF COURSE IT IS FAR TOO LATE FOR SOME PEOPLE. SO SAD WHAT HAS HAPPENED...

WE HAD A TERRIBLE STORM HERE A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO AND PARTS OF THE PORT WERE FLOODED. ONE WAREHOUSE WAS BREACHED AND THE ENTIRE STOCK OF BONDED GOODS WAS LOOTED—OR “RECLAIMED™ BY THE OWNER I SUSPECT.

I HAVEN'T SEEN YOU FOR A WHILE AND I DO WONDER IF YOU HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE ABOVE EVENTS? DO TELL. I SHALL BE IN THE BLUE ANCHOR ON FRIDAY AFTER WORK.

YOURS FOREVER, ALICE XX

MESSAGE STATUS: OUTWARD MESSAGE



FROM: PRIVILEGE ACCOUNT HOLDER EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD @ THE WIZARD TOWER

TO: TERRY TARSAL @ TARSAL'S FINE BOOTS AND SHOES, OFF WIZARD WAY

DEAR MR. TARSAL,

PLEASE FINISH PREPARING MY NEW PAIR OF SHOES AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. THIS IS A MATTER OF EXTREME URGENCY. MY NEW APPRENTICE HAS MISTAKENLY TURNED MY PRESENT PAIR INTO HOBNAIL BOOTS. WITH EVERLASTING MUD.

I SHALL COLLECT THE NEW PAIR THIS AFTERNOON.

REGARDS, MADAM MARCIA OVERSTRAND, EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD

MESSAGE STATUS: RETURN MESSAGE



FROM: TERRY TARSAL @ TARSAL'S FINE BOOTS AND SHOES, OFF WIZARD WAY

TO: PRIVILEGE ACCOUNT HOLDER EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD @ THE WIZARD TOWER

DEAR MADAM,

I REGRET WE ARE CLOSED TODAY FOR STOCK-TAKING.

ASSURING YOU, MADAM, OF OUR BEST SERVICE, TERRY TARSAL, MASTER BOOT AND SHOEMAKER

MESSAGE STATUS: RETURN RETURN MESSAGE URGENT



FROM: PRIVILEGE ACCOUNT HOLDER EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD @ THE WIZARD TOWER

TO: TERRY TARSAL @ TARSAL'S FINE BOOTS AND SHOES, OFF WIZARD WAY

DEAR MR. TARSAL,

IF THIS RAT REACHES YOU BEFORE I DO, YOU WILL BE FORTUNATE. I SHALL BE ALONG TO COLLECT MY SHOES FORTHWITH.
MADAM MARCIA OVERSTRAND, EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD

MESSAGE STATUS: OUTWARD MESSAGE. MESSAGE UNABLE TO BE DELIVERED. INCORRECT/INEX ACT ADDRESS. RETURN FEE INCURRED.

FROM: LUCY GRINGE @ NORTH GATE GATEHOUSE

TO: SIMON HEAP @ THE BADLANDS



DEAREST SIMON,
I AM LOST WITHOUT YOU. I WILL WAIT ON THE QUAY EVERY EVENING UNTIL YOU ARRIVE. I LOVE YOU.
YOURS FOREVER, LUCY XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

MESSAGE STATUS: OUTWARD MESSAGE



FROM: PRIVILEGE ACCOUNT HOLDER, EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD @ THE WIZARD TOWER

TO: PRIVILEGE ACCOUNT HOLDER, ZELDA ZANUBA HEAP @ KEEPER'S COTTAGE, DRAGGEN ISLAND, MARRAM MARSHES

MY DEAR ZELDA,
THAT IS *NOT* MY TOOTHBRUSH! I HAVE RETURNED IT TO YOU FOUR TIMES NOW AND I GIVE UP. I WILL DONATE IT TO THE ASYLUM FOR DISTRESSED PERSONS. I AM SURE THEY WILL BE PLEASED TO HAVE IT.
REGARDS, MARCIA OVERSTRAND, EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD
P.S. SEPTIMUS HAS REQUESTED YOU TO SEND HIM A CABBAGE SANDWICH. I TOLD HIM THAT GIVEN THE INEFFICIENCY OF THE RIVER POST AND PACKET COMPANY IT WOULD BE STALE BY THE TIME IT ARRIVED, BUT HE SAYS THE

SANDWICHES TASTE EVEN BETTER STALE. PLEASE NOTE THAT THE PASSING-
ON OF THIS MESSAGE DOES NOT INDICATE APPROVAL.

MESSAGE STATUS: RETURN MESSAGE

FROM: PRIVILEGE ACCOUNT HOLDER, ZELDA ZANU BA HEAP @ KEEPER'S
COTTAGE, DRAGGEN ISLAND, MARRAM MARSHES

TO: PRIVILEGE ACCOUNT HOLDER, EXTRAORDINARY WIZARD @ THE
WIZARD TOWER



DEAR MARCIA,

PLEASE DO NOT DISTRESS YOURSELF ABOUT YOUR TOOTHBRUSH. I QUITE
UNDERSTAND. I WOULD BE EMBARRASSED TOO.

YOURS, ZELDA

MESSAGE STATUS: ADDITIONAL MESSAGE AT REDUCED RATE



FROM: PRIVILEGE ACCOUNT HOLDER, ZELDA ZANUBA HEAP @ KEEPER'S
COTTAGE, DRAGGEN ISLAND, MARRAM MARSHES

TO: SEPTIMUS HEAP, EXTRAORDINARY APPRENTICE @ THE WIZARD TOWER

DEAREST SEPTIMUS,

JUST TO LET YOU KNOW, I WILL SEND THE REQUESTED CABBAGE
SANDWICH VIA THE RIVER POST AND PACKET COMPANY. I BELIEVE THEIR
ESTIMATED DELIVERY TIME IS TEN DAYS. IT SHOULD BE JUST RIGHT BY THEN!

I DO HOPE ALL IS GOING WELL FOR YOU AT THE WIZARD TOWER. YOU
ARE A VERY BRAVE BOY. DON'T WORK TOO HARD. I THINK OF YOU OFTEN.

ALL MY LOVE, AUNT ZELDA XXX

MESSAGE STATUS: OUTWARD MESSAGE

FROM: PRIVILEGE ACCOUNT HOLDER, ZELDA ZANUBA HEAP @ KEEPER'S COTTAGE, DRAGGEN ISLAND, MARRAM MARSHES

TO: SARAH HEAP @ THE PALACE, THE CASTLE



DEAREST SARAH,

THIS IS A TRULY TERRIBLE BUSINESS WITH NICKO. IT IS PROBABLY OF LITTLE COMFORT TO YOU, BUT ALTHOUGH UNFORTUNATELY I CANNOT TELL YOU THAT I HAVE SENSED HIS PRESENCE ANYWHERE, I DO FEEL CERTAIN HE IS NOT DEAD. AS YOU REQUESTED, I ATTEMPTED A SCRYING AT THE FULL MOON AND SAW NOTHING BUT WHITE. IT WAS MOST ODD. I DID WONDER AFTERWARD IF I WAS SEEING A WHITE MIST OR SNOW, BUT THAT IS OF LITTLE USE NOW. IT IS A CONUNDRUM. IT IS AS THOUGH HE IS HERE AND YET NOT HERE. ALIVE AND YET NOT—NO NO, I WILL NOT GO ON. THE TRUTH OF IT IS, SARAH DEAR, I HAVE NO ANSWERS.

PLEASE SEND MY LOVE TO JENNA AND SEPTIMUS, AND TO POOR SILAS.
WITH LOVE, AUNT ZELDA XXX

THE EGG-ON-TOAST RESTAURANT GUIDE

by G. & M. Coast

EATING OUTSIDE THE CASTLE

Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House

PROPRIETOR: Miss Sally Mullin.

LOCATION: A new wooden building on the pontoon just above the Quay. Good river views are somewhat spoiled by the closeness of the amenity to the rubbish dump.

SERVICE: Good. Order at the counter and Sally or her assistant will bring it to you.

SPECIALTIES: Sally Mullin's renowned barley cake and Springo Special Ale. The barley cake is a little heavy for some tastes and THE EGG-ON-TOAST RESTAURANT GUIDE advises that you treat the Springo Special Ale with caution.

MENU: Many varieties of barley cake, homemade hot pot, small selection of pies, baked potatoes, apple buns and an assortment of hot chocolate drinks and ales.

WE ATE: Barley cake and hot pot. My assistant had the Springo Special after being offered sausage pie.

COMMENTS: Very enjoyable. Miss Mullin can be a little talkative.



The Egg Box

PROPRIETOR: Ava Poltava.

LOCATION: Half a mile past the Grateful Turbot you will find a stone hut at the gate of the Chicken Farm—the first farm on the way to the Farmlands. Has yellow-and-white-striped awning on sunny days.

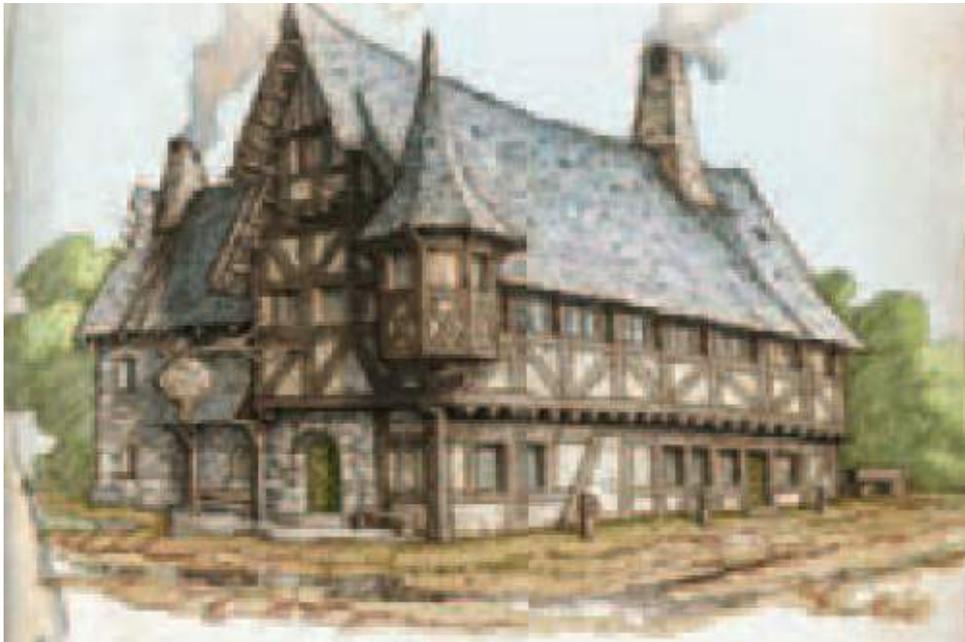
SERVICE: Friendly, although a little slow at chicken-feeding times.

SPECIALTIES: Soft poached egg in a freshly baked bun.

MENU: Anything to do with eggs, including one hundred varieties of omelette.

WE ATE: Egg bread washed down with a glass of eggnog.

COMMENTS: Fine, as long as you like eggs and don't mind the occasional peck.



The Grateful Turbot Tavern

PROPRIETOR: Mr. Dan T. Specter and Mrs. P. Geist.

LOCATION: Just across the One Way Bridge on the other side of the river.

SERVICE: A little gloomy but reasonably efficient.

SPECIALTIES: None.

MENU: Basic food.

WE ATE: Obviously not the sausages. Bean dumplings with cabbage and fish.

COMMENTS: The fish was dubious and the authors of THE EGG-ON-TOAST RESTAURANT GUIDE were unwell that night. The inn had a very strange atmosphere. It felt particularly chilly beside the fire.

**A NOTE FROM
*The Editors***

In this volume, you will find a collection of papers that will augment your knowledge of the Castle where the Heap family dwells, as well as papers from the Wizard Tower and the Palace. Many of these are excerpts from previously published works, such as the Pigeon Post Biography series, the Heaps of History series, and other popular pamphlets that have been widely distributed. You will also find some useful flyers and listings for popular destinations and restaurants as well as helpful maps.

Much of the material here, however, has never been published before, such as the private journals of Jenna Heap, Marcia Overstrand, and Septimus Heap. You will also find the secret files of the Supreme Custodian and excerpts from the journals of Stanley and fascinating dispatches from the Message Rat Office.

Read on to enter the world of

SEPTIMUS HEAP

[SEARCHABLE TERMS](#)

Note: Entries in this index, carried over verbatim from the print edition of this title, are unlikely to correspond to the pagination of any given e-book reader. However, entries in this index, and other terms, may be easily located by using the search feature of your e-book reader.

Advanced Rules of Ghosthood, 83

Ancient Glades, 23

Appearance, 52, 71, 81–82

Apprentices (to ExtraOrdinary Wizards), 18–19, 22–25, 59, 65–66, 84–86

Apprenticeships, 54

Bad Old Days, 98, 99

Badger, Romilly, 135

Banda, Milo, 98, 112

Basher, Bert the, 63

Beetle, O. Beetle, 133, 137–139

 inspection clerk daybook of, 140–142

Bertha's Banana Bookshop, 21

Big Bloomer Flower Shop, 21

Big Freeze, 46

Boom, Big Brian, 62

Bott's Wizard Secondhand Cloak Shop, 124

Bretticus-Petticus, Sir, 117

Brown, Terrence, 61

Café la Gringe, 15, 146

Castle

 boat tour around, 10–13

 eating in, 14–15

 history of, 2–7

 tunnels of, 26–27

Causing, 82
Cerys, Queen, 99
Charms, 86, 93–94
Chief Hermetic Scribes, 129, 131–132
 daily appointment diary of, 137–139
 Picking, 132, 136
Consuming, 29, 47, 48
Crackle, Jenna, 23
Custodian Youth, 51

Darke, 3, 24, 46–47, 130
Darke Magyk, 133
Datchet III, Queen, 11, 13
Dawnie the rat, 154–156
Dead, Guide to Being, 79–83
Djinn, Jillie, 128–129, 132
 daily appointment diary of, 137–139
DomDaniel, 29, 46, 48–49, 71, 77, 85–86
Domino, 107
dragon, 11, 75, 120
Dragon House, 12
Draper Clock, 13
Dromendurry, Myriam D., 62

East Gate Lookout Tower, 11
Egg Box, The, 165
Egg-on-Toast Restaurant Guide, 14–15, 164–165
Esmeralda, 12
Etheldredda, Queen, 12, 52, 113
ExtraOrdinary Wizards, 6–7
 biographies of, 64–86
 first, 57
 notable, 61–63
 rooms of, 59

Farmlands, 3
Field, Fara, 117
Flying, 82

Forest, 2–3
Forest Night Patrol, 3
Forrest, Dan, 61–62
Fox, Bill, 134
Fox, Hugh, 132
Fume, Tertius, 131
Fyre, Spit, 120

Galen, 23
Gatekeeper, 144–146
Geist, Mrs. P., 165
Gerald, 48, 49
ghosts, 104
 in Palace, 116–117
 rules for, 79–83
Godric, 116
Gothyk Grotto, 21
Grateful Turbot Tavern, 36, 165
Great Arch, 13, 58
Great Hall, 60
Great Peril, time of, 58
Grebe, Ephaniah, 135
Gringe, Augustus (the Gatekeeper), 144–146
Gringe, Lucy, 145, 155
 diary of, 148–152
Gringe, Rupert, 10–13, 145
Gringe, Theodora, 146
Gringe family, 144–152
Gudrun the Great, 116

Haunted Landing Stage, 12
Heap, Benjamin, 23, 85
Heap, Edd, 43, 101
Heap, Erik, 43, 101
Heap, Jenna (Princess Jenna), 52, 102–103, 151
 diary of, 104–121
 wanted poster for, 42
Heap, Jo-Jo, 43, 101
Heap, Maxie, 43
Heap, Nicko, 25, 39, 41, 105, 106, 152

Heap, Sam, 43, 101
Heap, Sarah Willow, 22–25, 40, 73
 Midwinter Feast greeting from, 100–101
 sautéed frogs recipe of, 37–38
Heap, Septimus, 18–19, 24, 59, 66, 73–74, 84–86, 100, 103, 104, 106, 152
 Apprentice Diary of, 87–94
 castle tunnels map of, 26–27
 letters to Jenna from, 118, 121
Heap, Silas, 22–25, 35–36, 40, 74, 77, 85
 Midwinter Feast greeting from, 100–101
 pamphlets of, 57–60, 97–99
Heap, Simon, 41, 46, 100–101, 148, 149, 152
Heap family
 file on, 30–33
 home of, 32–33
 papers of, 34–45
 tree, 44–45
 wanted posters for, 40–43
Hereward, Sir, 104, 116
Hidden Seeks, 73
Hopefuls, 36, 65–66
Hotep-Ra, 2, 6–7, 57, 61, 131
House Mouse, 91–92
How, Hamilton, 63

Jackson, Brynna, 62

Knight on the Tiles Little Theater, 19, 20

Lane, Linda, 29, 30–31
Larry's Dead Language Translation Services, 124
Little Theater's winter schedule, 34
Long Walk, 99

Ma Custard's Cake Stop, 14
Maarten, Jannit, 24, 39
Mad Jack, 154

Magyk, 60, 65–66, 85, 145
Magykal Manuscriptorium and Spell Checkers Incorporated, 128–129
Manuscriptorium, 13, 58, 128–129
 employees of, 133–135
Marram Marshes, 85
Mary, 117
Match, Emily, 39
Meat Pie & Sausage Cart, 14–15
Mella, Alther, 23–24, 70–72, 76–78, 116
 Guide to Being Dead, 79–83
 letter from, 35–36
Message Rat Office, 153, 157
 dispatches from, 160–163
 rules of, 157–159
Message Rat Service, 157–159
Mid-Summer Day Feast, 4
Midwinter Feast, 100–101
Moat, 5, 11, 98
Moon, Louanna, 61
Mullin, Sally, 164
Municipal Rubbish Dump, 12
Mussmancers, 13

Nettles, Alice, 78
New Dragon Field, 11
North Gate, 18, 147
North Gate Gatehouse, 4, 12, 144–147

One Way Bridge, 4
Orange Elementary School, 18, 51
Our Castle Story, homework notes from, 109–111
Overstrand, Marcia, 24, 36, 46–47, 59, 63, 64–66, 77, 85, 86, 103, 105–106
 in dungeon, 48–49
 journal of, 70–75
 message from, 53–54, 161, 162

Palace, 11, 96
 ghosts of, 116–117

- pamphlet on visiting, 97–99
- papers from, 96–142
- Palace Gate, 97
- Palace Guard, 54
- Palace Landing Stage, 5, 11
- Palace Restoration Fund, 99
- Partridge, Colin, 134
- Passing Through, 81
- Pau, Timothy, 63
- Pigeon, Hildegarde, 119
- Poltava, Ava, 165
- Pot, Billy, 120, 130
- Pot, Sandra, 130
- Princess, 7, 151. See also Heap, Jenna
 - lost, 52
 - Queenling, 29
 - return to Palace, 53
 - Unknown, 117
 - Welcoming Ceremony for, 66
- Princess lessons, 107
- Purple Elementary School, 18, 39
- Pyramid Library, 57, 60

- Queen, 5
 - assassination of, 29
- Queen's Room, 108
- Queen's Way, 108
- Queste, Drawing for, 35–36, 66

- Ramblings, 9, 12, 16–21
- Ramblings Play Association, 18
- Rat Hex, 135
- RatStranglers, 155–156
- ReClames, 113
- ReNewing, 75
- Resting Time, 78, 79
- Returned, 72, 80, 81

Sally Mullin's Tea and Ale House, 12, 164
Sandra's Palace of Pets, 130
sautéed frogs recipe, 37–38
Second-Chance Scheme, 54, 134
Snake Slipway, 11
Snake Slipway Middle School, 103
South Gate, 12
Specter, Dan T., 165
Spells
 creative, level one, 91–92
 ReStablized, 130
 seven Basyk types of, 90
 UnStable, 117, 130
Stanley the rat, 149, 152, 153, 154–156
Supreme Custodian, 28–29, 51
 end of reign, 53–54
 files of, 30–45
 journal of, 46–49

Tarsal's Fine Boots and Shoes, 125
Tell-Tale-Time, 51
Thistle, Tam, 63
Transformation, 77–78
Transmutation, 78

Wainwright, Young, 117
Watkins, Waldo, 132
Weazal, Sirius, 10–13
 Speedy Guide of, 16, 56, 122, 144, 153
Wizard Sandwiches, 15, 127
Wizard Tower, 8–9, 20, 53–54, 56
 dungeons, 48–49
 features of, 60
 how to behave when visiting, 67–69
 pamphlet on, 57–60
 papers from, 56–94
Wizard Way, 58, 122
 shops and services of, 123–130
Wizard Way Conservation Society guide, 123–130
Wyvald, Tom, 126

Wyvald's Witchy Bookshop, 126–127

Young Army, 54, 85
 cadet officers in, 87
 rules and regulations of, 88–89

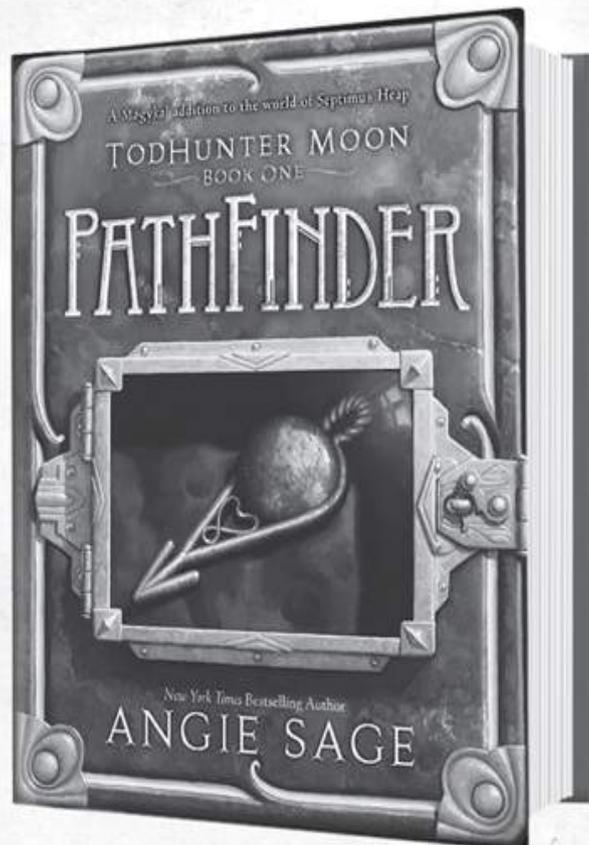
Zelda, Aunt, 105, 108, 160, 163

Acknowledgments

The artist would like to thank Janelle Bender for her doodles in the hand of Jenna Heap and Lucy Gringe.

Back Ad

Return to the world of
SEPTIMUS HEAP



Taking place seven years after the original bestselling Septimus Heap series, *PathFinder* tells the story of Alice TodHunter Moon, a young PathFinder who comes to the Castle with a Magyk all her own.

WWW.TODHUNTERMOON.COM



KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS
An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

About the Author and Illustrator

ANGIE SAGE was born in London and grew up in the Thames Valley, London, and Kent. She now lives in Somerset in a very old house that has a 480-year-old painting of King Henry VIII on the wall. The seven books in her original Septimus Heap series are international bestsellers. She is also the author of the Araminta Spookie series. Visit her online at www.septimusheapblog.com or follow @AngieSageAuthor on Twitter.

MARK ZUG has illustrated many collectible card games, including *Magic: The Gathering* and *Dune*, as well as books and magazines. He lives in Pennsylvania. You can visit him online at www.markzug.com.

Books by Angie Sage

Septimus Heap, Book One: Magyk
Septimus Heap, Book Two: Flyte
Septimus Heap, Book Three: Physik
Septimus Heap, Book Four: Queste
Septimus Heap, Book Five: Syren
Septimus Heap, Book Six: Darke
Septimus Heap, Book Seven: Fyre
Septimus Heap: The Darke Toad
Septimus Heap: The Magykal Papers
TodHunter Moon, Book One: PathFinder
Araminta Spookie: My Haunted House
Araminta Spookie: The Sword in the Grotto
Araminta Spookie: Frognapped
Araminta Spookie: Vampire Brat
Araminta Spookie: Ghostsitters

Credits

Jacket art © 2009 by Mark Zug
Jacket design by Joel Tippie

Copyright

Portraits in the Pigeon Post Biography series were rendered by Max Zatzuma.

SEPTIMUS HEAP: THE MAGYKAL PAPERS. Text copyright © 2009 by Angie Sage. Illustrations copyright © 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009 by Mark Zug. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

EPub Edition June 2009 ISBN 9780061919923

Version 01022018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
<http://www.harpercollins.com.au>

Canada

HarperCollins Canada
2 Bloor Street East - 20th Floor
Toronto, ON, M4W, 1A8, Canada
<http://www.harpercollins.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollins.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollins.co.uk>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollins.com>

[*For translation we suggest you visit Larry's Dead Language Translation Services at number 67 number 1 on the map.](#)

**In the Good Old Days, children like you were left to perish on windswept crags.*

[*](#)You may have read elsewhere that Beetle grew up with both his parents, but we regret to say that this is not true. Some of our sources are not always reliable. Also Beetle had a habit, when young, of pretending that his father was still alive and this has led to some confusion around the Castle.

SEPTIMUS HEAP

The
**Darke
Toad**



ORIGINAL
NOVELLA

ANGIE SAGE

National Bestselling Author

SEPTIMUS HEAP

The
Darke Toad

ANGIE SAGE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK ZUG



KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS
An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

DEDICATION

*For Karen and Peter Collins, with love. May you never meet a **Darke**
Wombat.*

CONTENTS

Dedication

- Chapter 1 ♦ Trick or ...
- Chapter 2 ♦ Treat?
- Chapter 3 ♦ Knock, Knock ...
- Chapter 4 ♦ Who's There?
- Chapter 5 ♦ Blood
- Chapter 6 ♦ Going Out
- Chapter 7 ♦ Alice at the Window
- Chapter 8 ♦ Invisible
- Chapter 9 ♦ Working the Crowd
- Chapter 10 ♦ Gribbles
- Chapter 11 ♦ Follow the Toad
- Chapter 12 ♦ Goldfish
- Chapter 13 ♦ Truth

Excerpt from Fyre

- 1: What Lies Beneath
- 2: A White Wedding

About the Author and Illustrator

Other Works

Copyright

Back Ads

About the Publisher

1

TRICK OR ...



Flick. Flick. Flick. *Simon Heap* walked slowly around the darkening Observatory, **Lighting** the candles. He was using the old **Darke** trick of clicking finger and thumb together to produce a small black flame. It was the first thing he had mastered when he arrived at the Observatory some six months previously, and although he had learned **Darker** and more dangerous skills since then, he was still proud of his **Darke** flame.

Flick. Flick. Flick. Simon touched the wicks of the candles that he had placed on the old slate worktops, which were built into the circular walls of the underground chamber in the manner of a laboratory. Soon an orange glow took hold and began to light the large dismal space. Simon knew he shouldn't be cheered by the light of a flame; he understood only too well that he should love the dark and damp shadows of an October evening, but he didn't. He missed the light and warmth of a fire; he also missed the prospect of a hot supper in the company of friends. And even though he tried his hardest not to think about it, he missed his family—well, most of his family. He didn't miss his new so-called youngest brother one little bit.

Flick. Flick. Flick. The thought of the scrawny kid who now called himself Septimus Heap and who was living in splendor at the top of the Wizard Tower, prancing around being ExtraOrdinary Apprentice—taking the Apprenticeship that Simon had dreamed one day would be his—made Simon seethe. Fueled by his anger, the **Darke** flame on his thumb leaped high into the air and very nearly singed his eyebrows.

Simon approached the last candle with trepidation. Fat and white, it stood alone at the far end of the benchtop opposite the stairs. But it was not the candle that filled Simon with dread; it was the thing that sat beside it—the skull of his Master, DomDaniel. Simon’s hand shook as, under the disapproving glare of the skull, he put the flame to the wick and watched the yellow light flare up, sending dark, dancing shadows deep into the eye sockets.

Simon shivered and pulled his black woolen cloak around him. The cloak, heavily embroidered in **Darke** symbols, was one of his Master’s castoffs. According to DomDaniel it was steeped in **Darke Magyk**, but so far all Simon had found it steeped in was the smell of old sweat. He had also found a damp toffee stuck to the lining, three dead spiders squashed inside the collar and a mouse skeleton in one of the pockets. Simon sighed. He glanced at the rest of his Master, which was propped up in a carved oak chair a few feet away, guarding the top of the stairs. The headless skeleton gave him the creeps, and the two nasty green faces on the thick gold ring that was wedged tight on DomDaniel’s left thumb bone stared at Simon malevolently. The prospect of the long, cold night ahead with nothing but **Darke** bones for company filled Simon with gloom.

Phut. The candle flame went out. Simon looked down and saw, to his shock, that the skull was now hovering in the air. As he watched, the form of his Master’s face slowly became visible, with DomDaniel’s lips pursed in blowing-out-a-candle mode.

Simon stared in amazement. DomDaniel had been trying to get his **Clothing Bones Spell** right ever since his bones had been picked clean by the Marsh Brownies when his ship, the *Vengeance*, had sunk with all hands. However, **Clothing Bones** was, DomDaniel informed Simon, the kind of **Magyk** that was very difficult to do for oneself. To DomDaniel’s frustration, Simon had been no help at all—“*about as much use as a chocolate teapot, Heap.*” But after witnessing several failed attempts by DomDaniel to **Clothe** his bones, Simon had begun to wonder whether his Master really was the powerful and talented Wizard he had made himself out to be when he had recruited Simon into his service.

But now at last DomDaniel was having some success. Simon watched with a kind of revolted fascination as the outlines of the skull slowly faded below the blobby contours of DomDaniel’s face, and the old Necromancer’s cylindrical stovepipe hat appeared out of the shadows and planted itself onto the thinning hair. DomDaniel’s head was now looking unpleasantly realistic. The disembodied head, which was hovering some six inches above the workbench, turned an almost complete circle until it was facing its bones,

which sat—still **UnClothed** and displaying a distinct lack of interest—in their chair. The head now set off to join them. Floating about four feet off the floor, it traveled sedately across to its bones, lined itself up with the top vertebra—the atlas—and then slowly descended until once again it sat upon its body.

The head swiveled around and gave Simon a triumphant smirk.

“Amazing,” said Simon. “Quite superb.” Simon knew that the easiest way to keep his Master happy and to stop him from indulging in petty little nuisance Spells like hair-tangling, itching in embarrassing places—or, even worse, itching right in the middle of his head—was to lay on the flattery with, as his mother would have said, a trowel.

“It’s nothing compared to how I used to be,” said DomDaniel’s rather squeaky voice. “But I’ll show them, Heap. I *will*. And then they will all be ...” His voice faded away into the clammy night air.

“Sorry?” Simon finished for him.

The head nodded and began to topple. Simon leaped forward and caught it as it tumbled toward the floor. It glared at him ungratefully. Very carefully, his hands trembling slightly, Simon balanced the head on top of the broad, flat vertebra and snatched his hands away. He felt quite sick.

“Not like that, you idiot!” said the head, beginning to wobble. “Push it down, man. It’s got to fit. Properly.”

Simon swallowed hard. DomDaniel’s head was cold as ice, and although the **Clothed** skull did have substance, it felt unpleasantly squishy and Simon was afraid his fingers might push through its surface at any moment. Gingerly, he pushed the head down until he could feel the connection between the base of the skull and the atlas.

For once, the expression on DomDaniel’s face was one of satisfaction. “Ooh, nearly there ... a bit to the left ... yes, yes ... now *push*. Got it! Hey, Heap—where are you going?”

But Simon was gone, racing to find a bucket to be sick in.

He returned, white-faced and shaky, to find DomDaniel standing at the top of the stairs, waiting impatiently. The Necromancer had wrapped himself in his newest **Darke** cloak and was wearing a stout pair of boots. But beneath the cloak, Simon glimpsed white bones going into the boots and he knew that there was no more than a skeleton beneath the dark folds of cloth.

“Ready?” DomDaniel demanded.

“Er, yes,” said Simon, wondering what it was he was meant to be ready for.

“Get a toad, will you, Heap? A nice big one. Then we’ll be off.”

“Oh. Right.” Simon quickly unscrewed the top of the toad jar and peered in. A large, particularly googly-eyed toad blinked up at him. Simon grabbed it

and held it out to show his Master.

DomDaniel eyed the toad with approval. “Very nice. It should go down well. Put it in a toad bag, Heap.” Simon took a black, shiny bag from beside the toad jar and dropped the toad into it. The newly **Clothed** skull smiled. “Off we go!” it said.

Simon followed an unusually jolly DomDaniel as he began to lurch toward the stairs. Suddenly something clattered to the floor—something white and thin.

Arm bones, thought Simon, steeling himself to pick them up.

DomDaniel looked impatiently at Simon trying to put together all the little wrist bones. “Oh, put them in the toad bag for later. Give me your arm, Heap.”

Simon looked horrified. “But ... but ...”

A slightly hysterical laugh echoed around the Observatory like a door swinging wildly on its hinges. “To lean on, Heap—to *lean on*. Ha ha ha.” And then, menacingly, “Don’t go giving me ideas, will you?”

Simon and DomDaniel began the long descent down through the cold slate cliffs. At the foot of the stairs outside the Magog Chamber, DomDaniel stopped and drew his lips back into what Simon guessed was meant to be a smile. Taking courage from the smile, Simon asked where they were going.

DomDaniel looked exasperated. “Why do I always get the stupid ones? Toad, boy—toad!”

“Oh,” Simon said, none the wiser.

“We are going to pay a little visit to our fan club in the Port.”

“That’s nice,” Simon said politely, although he had not heard of a Port DomDaniel fan club. He supposed that was because it was rather small.

DomDaniel seemed to find Simon’s puzzled expression funny. A series of squeaky chuckles came from somewhere in his neck. “You didn’t know I had a fan club did you? Ha ha! *Ha ha ha!*” DomDaniel’s head rocked from side to side as though it were on a hinge.

Simon looked horrified.

“You may well look shocked, Heap. We are going to visit the Port Witch Coven! Oh!”

DomDaniel’s head gave one last wobble and fell off.

TREAT?



Marcia Overstrand, *ExtraOrdinary Wizard*, was regretting her decision. It was the first time she had taken her new Apprentice, Septimus Heap, away from the Castle, and it was turning into a nightmare.

Septimus had been working hard in the Wizard Tower for six months now, and Marcia had decided that it was time he had a break. She had arranged what she called a “treat” for Septimus—a treasure hunt through the bookshops in the Port in search of a book that she knew Septimus loved: *A Hundred Stories for Bored Boys*. Marcia had already tracked the book down to Woollie Wottery’s Pots’n’Books, an odd little shop that she was fond of. With the help of Woollie Wottery, who owned the shop, Marcia had devised a

series of clues to lead Septimus to the book, which Miss Wottery had hidden in a **Magykal** box under the counter. Not only would the treasure hunt be fun for Septimus, it would also be a good way for him to learn how to get around the Port safely. Marcia had been very pleased with her idea—until now.

Right now she and Septimus were sitting on the Port Barge, which was itself sitting on a sandbank that the skipper swore had moved overnight. Using the Port Barge had been part of Marcia's plan. She wanted to show Septimus how to get around for himself, so that he did not need to rely on **Magyk** or the Wizard Tower ferry boat—which meant that everyone always knew where you were going and why. But right now Marcia wished she had taken the easy way and used the Wizard Tower ferry.

Marcia was wet, cold and an uncomfortable focus of interest for the other passengers from the Castle, who had not expected to find their ExtraOrdinary Wizard keeping them company. Marcia, in her turn, had not expected her fellow passengers to look so very *weird*. There were three young men wrapped in bandages stained with what Marcia hoped was fake blood, two young women wearing vast quantities of black netting and someone in a ferret costume, the head of which he or she wore throughout the voyage. Marcia supposed they were all going to some kind of fancy dress party.

As the waves of the incoming tide bashed against the side of the barge and darkness fell, Marcia felt miserable, but she was relieved to see that Septimus was still excited to be on a journey *just for fun*. When Marcia had proposed the trip, it had come as a shock to her that Septimus had clearly never thought it might be possible to go anywhere purely for pleasure. It had caught Marcia somewhere in her throat and made her eyes water when she realized that all her Apprentice's previous outings from the Castle had been terrifying Young Army maneuvers from which he had had a well-founded fear that he might not return. This had made Marcia even more determined that Septimus would have a really good time in the Port. But, as she watched Septimus smiling broadly and gazing excitedly at the lights of the Port—which were tantalizingly close—Marcia realized that there were more important things in life than being annoyed at being stranded on a sandbank, and she smiled too.

Five minutes later there was a round of applause from the passengers, and the Port Barge was floating free. They now made rapid progress to Castle Quay, where the mortified skipper saw her strange passengers off the barge and into the nighttime Port.

Like all ExtraOrdinary Wizards, Marcia had the use of a suite of rooms in the Customs House on the main harbor front. She was looking forward to getting there, where she knew the fire would be lit and supper awaiting them. She hurried Septimus off into the network of alleyways that would take them

to the harbor front. After about ten minutes, Septimus, who had been lagging behind, said, “Are we there yet?”

Marcia tried very hard not to be snappy. This is meant to be fun, she told herself. “Nearly there,” she said.

Ten cold minutes later, Septimus said, “We’ve been here before.”

Marcia stopped. “Bother,” she said.

“We’re lost, aren’t we?” said Septimus.

“No. No, not at all,” Marcia insisted.

Septimus fished out a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. “It’s a good thing I’ve brought a map.”

“A map?” Marcia wished she had thought of that.

“Yes. *‘It’s a fool who travels to places new, without a map to guide him through.’*”

“Well, *really!*” Marcia said indignantly—and then she remembered. “Oh, that’s one of your Young Army sayings, is it?” she asked in her gentle, talking-about-the-past voice.

Septimus nodded. “They were quite useful, really,” he said—and then he remembered some rude ones they had had to learn about Marcia. “Well, most of them.” Septimus and his map now led the way and they quickly emerged from the maze of alleyways into a wide and well-lit street.

“I thought it best to get out of the alleys,” said Septimus, “and then head back down the bigger streets to the harbor. It’s safer at this time of night.”

“Yes, good idea,” Marcia agreed, thinking that maybe Septimus wasn’t in need of learning how to get around the Port safely after all.

A cold rain began to spatter down and Septimus shivered. The street felt somewhat creepy, and something, he didn’t know what, was making the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Marcia set off briskly and Septimus hurried after her, checking his map for the first turn that would take them down to the harbor. Suddenly he heard Marcia hiss, “**Unseen** number three. Now, Septimus. *Right now!*” Excited at the urgency in Marcia’s voice that told him this was for real, Septimus quickly did as he was told.

A few seconds later, two **Unseen** shadows were walking along very quietly, watching two figures coming toward them on the other side of the street. One was hooded and swathed in a dark cloak; the other looked very strange.

“Goodness,” Marcia whispered to Septimus. “For a horrible moment I thought it was DomDaniel. It’s got his face, but look at the way it’s walking—how it lurches from side to side like a huge puppet.”

“It *looks* like someone dressed up, like those people on the boat,” Septimus said. “But it *feels* really horrible.”

Marcia was pleased with her Apprentice. “Exactly,” she said. “I suspect it is some kind of **Darke** illusion. There are, unfortunately, a few places here where you can buy those kind of things.” She sighed. “There are some very strange people living here in the Port, Septimus.”

Septimus agreed. He had never seen so many peculiar things in one place before.

Marcia watched the two figures turn a corner and disappear into the night. “We can let go the **Unseens** now, Septimus,” she said.

At the end of the road, Septimus found his shortcut to the harbor. Known as Drab Dive, the alleyway ran between the backs of small, drab houses, but despite its name it was bright and cheerful. Septimus and Marcia hurried along, noticing that the lights that lit their way were of an unusual variety. Balanced on the sills of windows that looked out over the Dive were all kinds of hollowed-out gourds with candles placed inside them. The gourds had been carved with fiendishly grinning faces, which stared down into the Dive and appeared to laugh and leer at them from their perches. Septimus was entranced; Marcia less so. “How very peculiar,” she said.

Things rapidly became even more peculiar—as they rounded a corner, they met three white-faced ghouls leading a dog on a string. The ghouls were laughing in a happy, unghoul-like way. As they approached Marcia and Septimus they said cheerily, “We know who *you* are!”

“Jolly good,” said Marcia frostily.

“Oh, ha ha. Very good. That’s just what she’d say, isn’t it?” the ghoul asked its companions. They laughed in agreement and stopped to talk.

“Yeah, but you know, the real Marcia’s *much* scarier.”

“Oh?” said Marcia.

“And taller,” added another ghoul.

“Yeah, man, a good foot taller, I’d say. And *seriously* weird. I wouldn’t like to meet the real one down the Dive on a dark night, ha ha!”

“Well, *really*!” said Marcia. “How rude!”

“Love it! Keeping in role. Very good. See ya—*Marcia*!” The ghouls departed, still laughing. One of them turned back and shouted, “And the new Apprentice too. Good touch. Have a good night!”

Bemused, Marcia watched them go. “I don’t know, Septimus,” she said. “The Port never fails to surprise me.”

Some ten minutes later Septimus and Marcia were sitting by a small—and highly luxurious—coal fire. Septimus had never seen coal burning before and he was amazed at the heat it threw out. Outside, the rain was falling heavily

and a wind was blowing in from the sea, sending the ropes thrumming against the masts of the boats tied up in the harbor no more than a few feet from the Customs House. Septimus felt really happy—for the first time in his life, he was away from the Castle and not outside in foul weather. And, even more amazingly, he was *not scared*. Not one little bit. He wriggled down into the warmth of the squashy armchair and breathed in deeply. Something smelled delicious.

“Supper,” said Marcia. “And about time too.”

KNOCK, KNOCK ...



DomDaniel and Simon were standing on the wide doorstep of what had once been a typical Port townhouse: tall and narrow with a large front door. This particular house looked as though it were about to fall down. The windows had planks nailed across them and there were **Darke** symbols painted on the wall over which had been scrawled some very rude graffiti. It was, thought Simon, just the kind of place he would expect DomDaniel to visit.

“Toad, Heap,” snapped DomDaniel.

“But—” Simon began defensively, thinking that DomDaniel was insulting him.

“The toad. In the toad bag, noodlebrain.”

When DomDaniel spoke, his lips did not move in quite the right way. It was odd, Simon thought, like being with a bad ventriloquist. Simon suppressed the uncomfortable idea that that probably made *him* the ventriloquist’s dummy. He plunged his hand into the toad bag, scabbled past the arm bones and at the bottom of the bag his fingers found a damp, squashy lump. The toad, covered in bone dust, sat on Simon’s hand, blinking in the shock of the cold night air.

DomDaniel chuckled. “Fat and ugly,” he said. “They’ll love it.”

Simon grimaced. Try as he might, he could not see the attraction of toads.

“I’ll give you a piece of advice, Heap,” DomDaniel said confidentially. “Give a witch a **Darke** Toad and she will do anything you ask. If a Coven has one of these on their door, they’ll get respect from every Coven in the land.

No witch will dare to mess with them. Well, go on then, Heap. **Place** the toad.”

Simon looked confused. “Where?”

DomDaniel looked exasperated. “On the door, cabbage brain.”

Simon stared at the door. It was bristling with nails like a hedgehog and showed signs of having been attacked with a hammer. But among the forest of nails Simon spotted a small plinth just below a plain, flat doorknocker, and above the plinth someone had scrawled: TOADYWOADY. He reached up and carefully placed the toad on the plinth. To Simon’s surprise the toad did not stay there. It hopped off and landed neatly onto the doorknocker where it settled down onto what Simon now realized was a toad-shaped surface. A **Darke** ripple passed across the toad and it **Transformed** into a toad-shaped doorknocker.

“Good,” said DomDaniel. “If a **Darke** Toad knocks, the Coven has to answer. Well, go on, then.”

“What?”

“*Knock, you fool.*”

Simon raised his hand to the cold metal toad, but before he could do anything, there was a tremendous thudding of footsteps inside the house, and the door was thrown wide open. Simon leaped to one side just in time and out burst a disheveled young man with piercing blue eyes, dressed in black. He pushed DomDaniel aside in a fine football tackle and hurtled down the street as though in pursuit of the ball. DomDaniel swayed dangerously, and Simon heard the bones clink ominously against one another beneath the cloak.

Ter-link-clink-plink.

DomDaniel was just regaining his balance when another figure in black—female this time—came pounding out of the door yelling, “Madrigor! Madrigor! Wait. Please wait. *Pleeeeeeeese!*”

She too elbowed DomDaniel aside in as fine a tackle as her quarry had done, and it caught DomDaniel on the rebound. With a loud *clinkle-clank* his bones folded up and descended into an orderly pile on the doorstep, on which his cloak settled like a cover over a birdcage. Simon watched as DomDaniel’s head dropped neatly down onto the top of the pile. The head stared angrily up at Simon as though it were *all his fault*. Simon could do no more than return the stare in amazement, while he tried to fight the desire to pick up the head and run with it and join in the football game that seemed to be in full swing farther down the street—accompanied now by shrieks and a few well-aimed punches from the female protagonist.

A moment later a white-faced woman swathed in black—teetering on shoes from the soles of which sprouted a forest of spikes twelve inches high

—arrived at the door. The woman stared at Simon and gave a gruesome smile, showing a few stubby black teeth. She turned around and yelled into the house, “Veronica! Dorinda! Daphne! Look what we’ve got here!” Then she leered at Simon. “Hello young man, *young man*.”

Simon felt horribly uncomfortable. Three young witches arrived at the door. “Ooh, Witch Mother.” They giggled, staring at him. “Where did you get that?”

Simon felt himself turning pink.

“He’s blushing,” said one of the witches, who had a conical peak of hair balanced on the top of her head.

“So sweet,” added the small, chubby one.

The third witch said nothing and stared at Simon with disconcertingly big blue eyes.

The Witch Mother leaned forward to inspect Simon at close quarters. Hastily, he stepped back from the old-cat breath. The Witch Mother went to take another step forward but a sudden screech came from somewhere near her left boot—the sharp spikes of which DomDaniel had a distressingly close view.

“Pamela!” shrieked DomDaniel’s head. “Stop!”

The woman stared down at her feet and swore loudly.

“No need for that kind of language,” DomDaniel said primly.

The Witch Mother stared with incredulity at DomDaniel’s head, so neatly placed on its cloak. Her shoulders began to shake, and suddenly the thick white makeup that was plastered over her face split into a tracery of cracks and she burst into hoarse, barking laughs. “Dommie, is that you?” she spluttered.

“Yes, as it happens, it is me,” said DomDaniel. “I don’t see what is so funny, Pamela.”

“You never did have a sense of humor, did you?” the Witch Mother observed. “So, are you coming in or what?”

“At present, Pamela, I am somewhat immobile. However, my assistant here—when he stops gawping like a stuck fish—will assist me. Pick me up, will you, Heap?”

Simon stared at the fleshy head sitting atop its pile of bones. He suppressed a shudder. “Oh! Well, yes. Um ...”

Unexpectedly, the Witch Mother came to Simon’s rescue. “Leave him,” she commanded and turned to the young witch with the big blue eyes. “Dorinda! Wheelbarrow!”

“Yes, Witch Mother,” said Dorinda, and she disappeared back into the house.

“No!” yelled DomDaniel’s head.

The Witch Mother looked down and favored DomDaniel with a black-toothed smile. “I suppose you’re a pile of bones under that fancy cloak of yours?”

DomDaniel scowled in answer.

The Witch Mother’s smile grew even wider and blacker. “I thought so. Well, we don’t want them dropped, do we? A *wheelbarrow* it must be.”

“Pamela, you are a cruel woman.”

“But a practical one, Dommie, dear.”

And so it was that DomDaniel was ignominiously wheeled over the threshold of the Port Witch Coven in a wheelbarrow—just as the Witch Mother, in a fit of fury with DomDaniel over one broken promise too many, had once foretold. Simon, however, was escorted in style, with a young witch on each arm.

WHO'S THERE?



There was a very peculiar smell in the kitchen of the Port Witch Coven. Simon sat on a small greasy sofa, squashed uncomfortably between Veronica—the witch with the cone of hair on top of her head—and Daphne, the small, chubby one. To take his mind off how uncomfortably close they were—and what knobby elbows Veronica had—Simon tried to work out what the weird smell was. Soon, as his eyes grew accustomed to the murky darkness—which was illuminated only by the fire in the stove—he realized what it was. Cats. Countless pairs of blank yellow eyes, glinting in the glow from the flames, were staring at him.

Simon felt edgy. He was wedged so tightly between the witches that he

could hardly breathe. It was just his luck, he thought, that the nice witch who had fetched the wheelbarrow was not sitting next to him. She was busy stirring a dirty old pot on the stove, from which came another peculiar smell—Witches’ Brew. Every now and then she glanced around at Simon and smiled shyly at him, and Simon smiled back. But even Dorinda’s smiles did not stop Simon from longing to jump up and run out of the fug, into the clean night air of the Port. However, he knew better than to leave his master, who was piled on the kitchen table with his head placed at a jaunty angle by Dorinda.

DomDaniel was looking at the Witch Mother, who seemed, Simon thought, to have a score to settle. “What did I tell you, Dommie?” the Witch Mother crowed. “I said you’d come to no good in the end. I *told* you the next time you came to see me it would be in a wheelbarrow.”

“Oh, give it a rest, Pamela,” DomDaniel snapped. “Anyway, things are perfectly fine. I am regrouping. Reassessing. Recharging. That Overstrand woman—she’ll be sorry. I have plans. Rather clever ones, actually. I will soon be back with a *vengeance*. Won’t I, Heap?”

“Yes,” Simon said obediently, though right then he thought it seemed highly unlikely.

DomDaniel stared at up the Witch Mother. “To that end, Pamela, I need a little assistance.”

The Witch Mother gave a snort of amusement. “A *little!*”

“Ahem. With a **Clothing Bones Spell**. Difficult to do it for oneself.”

The Witch Mother leaned down, put her elbows on the table and stared eye to eye with DomDaniel’s head. Simon saw the head wince at the onslaught of cat breath. “Well, now, who would have thought it—*you* asking *me* a favor?” the Witch Mother said with a stubby-toothed smile.

DomDaniel looked very uncomfortable. “You won’t regret it, Pamela. You get me back on my feet so that I can sort out old Nastier Overstrand for keeps, and I will let you keep the **Darke** Toad, which is, at this very moment, sitting on your door.”

“The **Darke** Toad? For *keeps*?”

“For keeps, in exchange for a top-of-the-range, permanent **Clothing Bones**. I need one that lasts even without the bones—after they have been, let us say, **Placed** elsewhere. Can the Coven do that, Pamela?”

The Witch Mother frowned. What DomDaniel was asking for was a very difficult and complex **Darke Spell**, and she wasn’t sure that the Coven *could* do it—especially the bit about lasting without the bones. What, she wondered, was the old goat planning? But a **Darke** Toad was a huge status symbol—a sign to any passing witch or warlock that beyond the door lay serious **Darke**

Magyk. The Witch Mother made a decision: The Coven could manage something, and once the **Darke** Toad was theirs, what did she care about DomDaniel's boring old bones?

"Yes," she said. "We can do that. No problem."

Crash! The sound of the front door crashing open, then slamming shut, shook the kitchen floor and far, far beneath it, Simon thought he felt something stir. A heavy pounding of footsteps came toward the kitchen and the door burst open. *Bang!* The fifth witch, Linda, rushed in. Her dark blue eyes glowed in the gloom and her long, shiny black nails flashed like claws. Linda looked furious. Simon saw Dorinda cower in fear, and beside him Daphne and Veronica went tense.

"Ear-flapping, nosy cow!" Linda yelled at Dorinda.

Dorinda dropped the wooden spoon and, like a rabbit caught in a flashlight, she watched, terrified, as Linda set a course for her, kicking her way through the rubbish-strewn floor.

Linda reached her victim and poked her in the ribs. "Madrigor has gone," she said. "And he is not coming back. Ever. And it is all *your* fault, you nasty little earwig, you filthy string of nose slime, you—"

"Now, now, Linda," said the Witch Mother. "Language."

"I'll give her *language*," snarled Linda. "Earwigging at my door. Listening to every word we said. And then *giggling*."

Dorinda gave a whimper and hid her face in her hands. "I didn't mean to," she said.

"Yes, you did, you lying little weasel. You listen at all our doors; don't think I don't know."

"Does she really?" asked the Witch Mother, looking worried.

"Yes, she does. You'd be amazed at the secrets those delicate little ears have heard."

"Oh dear," muttered the Witch Mother.

Linda reached out and tweaked one of Dorinda's ears. Dorinda squealed. Linda leaned closer and breathed the special kind of Linda mouse breath all over the terrified witch. "Never mind, Dorinda. I'm going to do you a favor."

Relief flooded across Dorinda's face. "Oh, Linda, are you?"

Simon sighed. Dorinda must be very silly, he thought—anyone else could see that Linda was planning something very nasty indeed. On either side of him, Veronica and Daphne were watching, enthralled.

"What are you going to do, Linda?" they asked in unison.

"Well, seeing as how Dorinda loves to go flapping her ears around the place, I'm going to give her some ears she can really flap."

Dorinda began to look worried.

Quick as lightning, Linda grabbed hold of Dorinda's ears, her nails digging in viciously. Dorinda whimpered in pain. "I'd keep still if I were you," Linda hissed. "Because I am going to **Bestow** upon you the finest pair ever of ..."

"Yes, yes?" chorused Daphne, Veronica and the Witch Mother.

"Elephant ears!"

Dorinda screamed so loudly that Simon stuffed his fingers in his own (thankfully human) ears and closed his eyes. When the smoke cleared and the smell of burning flesh subsided into the comparatively pleasant odor of cat poo, Simon opened his eyes just in time to see Dorinda flee sobbing, her huge, gray African elephant ears flapping wildly as she hurtled from the kitchen, pursued by gales of raucous laughter. Simon felt sorry for the young witch; he knew that a **Bestow** was a permanent spell, and for the rest of her life Dorinda would have to live with a pair of elephant ears sprouting from her head. The fact that they looked so comical and that Simon had trouble not joining in the laughter somehow made it even worse.

The laughter subsided and the Witch Mother turned her attention to DomDaniel. The elephant ears had put her in an extremely good mood. It had also shown her that Linda was a force to be reckoned with.

"Linda, dear," she said obsequiously, "I do hope it would not be too much trouble for you to assist us in a **Clothing Bones Spell?**"

Linda smiled. "With pleasure, Witch Mother." She looked down at DomDaniel, who was beginning to relax. "Is this old tramp here for us to practice on?"

DomDaniel frowned but said nothing. He was so near to getting what he wanted, he did not want to jeopardize anything.

The Witch Mother giggled—not a pleasant sound. "Oh, Linda, you are so very amusing. Oh, ha ha. So droll. This, of course, is none other than DomDaniel."

Linda looked shocked. "Really?" She bent down and stared at DomDaniel's head. "Gosh," she whispered. She waggled her fingers in what Simon supposed was a wave and trilled, "Hello, Mr. Daniel. I've always wanted to meet you."

"Oh, *get on with it!*" said DomDaniel, who had reached his limits of patience.

"Very well," said the Witch Mother. "Let it begin."

BLOOD



A chill fell in the fuggy kitchen and the hairs on the back of Simon's neck prickled. The Witch Mother signaled to Daphne and Veronica and they struggled out of the sofa, elbowing Simon in the ribs as they got up to join her and Linda. The four witches linked hands and stood around the table. Suddenly the Witch Mother broke the circle and stared at Simon.

"What *now*?" DomDaniel asked grumpily.

"Him." The Witch Mother nodded her head toward Simon. "Your acolyte. Is he safe?"

"Oh, *Heap*." DomDaniel sounded dismissive. "Don't bother about him."

Simon was not sure how to take this, but he told himself it was good that he was presumably considered "safe." He sank back into the sticky sofa and

tried to ignore the sharp points of the springs poking into him.

The witches rejoined hands and began an intense, achingly high-pitched humming, which found its way right into the middle of Simon's head and sent pains stabbing through his back teeth. He longed to stuff his fingers into his ears once more, but he did not dare.

The humming grew louder and more intense until—at the very moment that Simon thought he would scream at the needle that was surely being driven into his ears—it stopped. Dead. A heavy silence fell and Simon began to sense the presence of something cold descending upon the kitchen.

Suddenly there was a hiss, a scuffle among the rubbish at Simon's feet and a loud yowl. A pile of cats had started a fight.

The Witch Mother turned to Simon as if it was his fault. "*Shh!*" she hissed.

Simon spread his arms as if to say, *It's nothing to do with me*, and the Witch Mother glared at him. "Stop them at once," she ordered.

Simon knew better than to ignore the Witch Mother. He got up and steeled himself to scabble through the mixture of old papers, vegetable peelings and bits of filthy blankets, which were heaving with cats scrapping and batting at one another with increasing ferocity. Simon managed to grab hold of one by the scruff of the neck. There was an ear-splitting yowl and then a scream. Simon leaped to his feet with a small yellow cat dangling from his hand, its teeth firmly sunk into the flesh below his little finger.

"Argh!" yelled Simon, frantically shaking his hand, trying to get the cat off. The cat swung wildly to and fro and with every swing its teeth sank in deeper. Simon began to panic.

"Tiddles!" yelled the Witch Mother. She stamped across to Simon, the spikes on her shoes spearing an assortment of potato peelings as she went, and came so close to Simon that he could see her angry red face below the cracks in her thick white makeup.

"Stop ... playing ... with ... my ... *cat*," she hissed furiously.

The pain in Simon's hand was jangling his head and he forgot how important it was to be polite to a Witch Mother. *At all times*. He said a very rude word and added, "... you and your filthy cat."

A sharp intake of breath came from everyone in the kitchen and Simon stammered, "I—I'm sorry."

"You *will* be." The Witch Mother glared at him. She put her hands around the cat's sticky-out ribs and hissed. "**Teeth Release!**" The cat let go and Simon grabbed his hand back. White-faced, he held it tightly while drips of blood dropped onto his boots.

The Witch Mother smiled. "Blood," she hissed. "Give!"

“Uh?” Simon felt faint. He hated the sight of blood.

“*Give it.* Then I might, just *might* overlook your attack on poor little Tiddles.”

Simon began to come out of his daze. He realized what the Witch Mother wanted. He held his hand up and watched the steady drip of blood from the cat’s jagged tear drip into the Witch Mother’s cupped hands. When there was a small pool, she rubbed her hands together and went back to the table, elated. She wondered why she hadn’t thought of human blood before. Now the **Clothing Bones** was sure to last long enough to get DomDaniel past the end of the street and safely out of sight. She didn’t want to be walking by a resentful pile of bones every day.

“Now we shall begin,” said the Witch Mother happily. “With the blood of a Cowan, it will go well.”

Sucking his injured hand, Simon watched. Once again the chill descended and this time no cat stopped it. The circle began to chant in high, squeaky witch voices and move slowly around the table. DomDaniel’s head followed them, swiveling complete circles in the way that Simon found so chilling. Around and around it turned, eyes fixed always on the Witch Mother. The witches’ singing grew higher and fainter as they increased their speed until it sounded like the distant trilling of birds. Faster and faster they went, until Simon could no longer make out who was who, and all he could see was a faint blur buzzing around DomDaniel’s head. By now the head had—wisely, Simon thought—stopped following the witches and was sitting on top of its black cloak with its eyes closed and its lips reposed in a smug little smile.

And then it happened. There was a flash of brilliant, bloodred light and a loud *craaack*. Suddenly, standing on the table, his bones fully **Clothed**, was DomDaniel. A little unsteady, it is true, and fatter than Simon had expected—but he looked as human as anyone in that room.

The witch circle slowed until each witch was once again visible and the chill in the room was replaced by the old warm fugginess overlaid by a lingering smell of burnt pumpkin. The Witch Mother regarded her success—who was now nervously trying to work out how to get down from the table without upsetting his **Clothed Bones**—with excitement. The **Darke** Toad was as good as hers.

6

GOING OUT



DomDaniel looked down fretfully at his large, rounded stomach. “Pamela, I was never *this* fat.”

“Yes, you were,” the Witch Mother told him. “In fact, if you ask me, I have erred on the thin side.”

“And look at the state of these clothes—they’re disgusting.” DomDaniel inspected his tunic. “There’s dried egg all down the front.”

Simon was surprised how curt the Witch Mother was with DomDaniel. “Oh, stop moaning, Dommie. That’s how I remember you, and that’s the way you are now.”

DomDaniel sighed loudly. “I suppose it will have to do. Help me down, Pamela, will you?” Supported by the Witch Mother, DomDaniel gingerly stepped down from the table.

“Right,” said the Witch Mother, “time to go home. I’ll see you to the door and you can hand over the toad.”

“I need a little rest first,” DomDaniel said.

“What—here?” the Witch Mother said unenthusiastically.

“If it were anywhere else, I would have to get up and go there, wouldn’t I? Then it wouldn’t be a rest, *would it?*” DomDaniel said snappily as he lowered himself onto the lumpy sofa with a sigh of relief. The newly **Clothed** Wizard looked suspiciously at the Witch Mother. She was up to something, he was sure. “And then, when I have had my rest,” he said, “I shall go for a little test drive.”

“A *test drive*?” asked the Witch Mother. “What on earth do you mean?”

“I want to check that everything works properly, Pamela. And then, if it doesn’t, you’ll be able to fix it.” DomDaniel glared at her. “*Won’t you?*”

“*But what about the toad?*”

“You’ll get your toad. A bargain is a bargain,” said DomDaniel. “But I won’t be rushed, Pamela. I am going to sit here and get used to my new **Clothes**; then we shall take a little walk around the Port. To make sure that nothing falls off.”

Veronica and Daphne were overtaken by a fit of giggles but Linda was made of sterner stuff. A walk with DomDaniel presented the opportunity she had been looking for.

“Now that we shall have a **Darke** Toad,” Linda said to the Witch Mother, “we will need a servant to answer the door.”

“Ooh, yes,” Veronica chimed in. “A *servant*. That would be fun. But one that lasts, not like all the other ones.”

“They never last, Veronica,” said the Witch Mother. “That’s the trouble. You just can’t get the staff nowadays.”

“Maybe if we fed them,” said Daphne, “they would last a bit longer.”

“Feed them!” The Witch Mother sounded shocked. “Don’t be ridiculous, Daphne.”

But Linda wanted a servant. And what Linda wanted, Linda got—especially now, after Dorinda’s elephant ears.

Linda had it all worked out. “We’re not dragging some idiot Port girl off the streets this time; we need a professional who is used to a tough life. I reckon if we feed one just a bit—we don’t have to give it much—then we’ll get at least six months’ use before it wears out.”

The Witch Mother looked impressed. She had never had a servant long enough to wear one out. “That’s a good idea, Linda. But what kind of professional? Not a nasty little Wizard Apprentice, I hope.”

Linda laughed. “No, something much better than that. A ship’s rat!”

“A rat?” The Witch Mother sounded scornful. “We’ve got plenty of those living in this rubbish.” She kicked at the floor and sent flying a shower of liquified carrots. As if on cue, a rat fled for cover.

Linda sighed. “Not a real rat, Witch Mother. It’s what they call those kids who work on the ships doing all the nasty jobs that no one else wants to do. They’re tough little things. One of those would last for ages.”

The witches fell silent. Simon could tell that the suggestion was not popular.

“But Linda,” Daphne ventured, “those rat kids live on ships. And ships live on salt water. And, well, you know what happens to us in ...” Daphne

trailed off. It was considered bad luck to mention that **Darke** Witches had a tendency to dissolve in salt water (which is why you will never see a **Darke** witch cry).

“I know *exactly* what happens to us, Daphne, thank you,” said Linda. “But we shall not need to go near any of that saltwater stuff. Because we will get the *kid* to come to us.”

“How?” asked Daphne.

“Woodworm,” said Linda.

Daphne went pale. She could tell that Linda had something nasty planned.

Linda turned to the Witch Mother. “Tell Daphne to go get her giant woodworms, please, Witch Mother.”

“Go get your giant woodworms, Daphne,” the Witch Mother said obediently.

Daphne looked horrified. “Why?”

“Why?” the Witch Mother asked Linda.

“Because I *say so*,” said Linda.

“Because she says so,” said the Witch Mother.

“B-but ...” Daphne spluttered.

“Unless, Daphne,” Linda snarled, “you, *too*, would like a pair of elephant ears. So that you and Dorinda could have little elephant-ear styling sessions together.”

The Witch Mother cackled loudly and Veronica dutifully joined in.

Daphne gulped. “How many woodworms would you like, Linda?”

Linda smiled, her yellowing teeth glinting in the light from the stove. “All of them.”

Daphne looked horrified. “*All* of them?”

“You heard. Get them!”

Daphne fled. She clattered up a ladder and disappeared through a hole in the kitchen ceiling.

Simon and DomDaniel sat awkwardly on the sofa together, watching the preparations for going out. Drowsy in the warm fug of the kitchen, Simon fell asleep and was woken half an hour later by the nasty, squashy sensation of DomDaniel’s hand squeezing his shoulder.

“Come on, Heap,” his Master said. “Time for my test drive.”

Simon got blearily to his feet and very nearly fell over the wheelbarrow.

“Mind my woodworms!” yelled Daphne.

“Oh. Sorry,” Simon mumbled.

Daphne glared at him. “You will be, if anything happens to them.”

A grating laugh came from Linda. “Get used to it, Daphne. A *lot* is going to happen to those boring—ha ha, *boring*, get it?—little biters.”

Excited now by the prospect of a servant *and* the **Darke** Toad—and much encouraged that the **Clothed Bones** were still **Clothed**—the Witch Mother smiled, her makeup cracking like a dried-up riverbed. “Ah, Dommie,” she said. “Off out on the town, eh? Just like the old times.”

DomDaniel sighed. The old times with the Witch Mother had been nothing but trouble. “Indeed, Pamela,” he murmured.

“Oh, you *know* you can call me Pammie, Dommie.”

DomDaniel grimaced and Simon suppressed a smile—clearly that was a step too far.

“Off we go!” The Witch Mother threw open the kitchen door and offered her arm to DomDaniel, who obediently took it and led her out. A quick scuffle between Linda and Veronica ensued over who should go next. It was settled by a nasty kick to the shins that left Veronica hobbling down the corridor in Linda’s wake.

Simon followed Daphne and her wheelbarrow, in which lay a large black metal box containing, he guessed, the woodworms. The box was covered in tiny writing, which Simon stared at, trying to decipher.

“Nosy, aren’t you?” said Daphne.

Simon sprang back. “Sorry,” he said. “I mean, about your woodworms.”

Daphne immediately thawed. No one had ever been nice about her woodworms before. “They’re my friends,” she said. “I know every single one of them. Look, I’ve written all their names on the box.”

Trying to be friendly, Simon asked, “Gosh. How do you think up so many names?”

Daphne looked indignant. “I don’t think them up. They tell me what their names are. *Stupid.*”

“Oh. Yes. Of course they do.”

Daphne sighed. “They are all in there except for Louise, Paulie, Bernina and Freddo, who are stuck on the spikes of the Witch Mother’s shoes. Oh, and Dukey, who died last night. Do you want to see him?”

“Oh! Well, no, thanks, I—”

But Daphne was not listening. From her pocket she pulled out a surprisingly large—and clearly dead, judging by its stiffness and the amount of pocket fluff stuck to it—segmented fat brown worm with stumpy legs. “He was one of my favorites,” Daphne said sadly. “I used to tell him bedtime stories, and he had his own little house and everything. But he got ill last week after I fed him some cat food. You don’t think I killed him, do you?”

Simon thought that Daphne probably had, but he knew better than to say so. “No, of course not,” he said.

Daphne dropped the ex-Dukey back into her pocket, wiped her arm across

her eyes and sniffed. “It was probably Linda. Nasty cow.” With that, the witch grabbed the handles of the wheelbarrow and trundled out of the kitchen.

Simon followed the procession down the dark corridor toward the front door. Suddenly everyone came to a halt. A door opened and Dorinda came out, a huge towel wrapped precariously around her head.

“Oh, hello, Dorinda,” the Witch Mother said, as though nothing to do with elephant ears had ever happened. “We’re going out. You coming?”

Dorinda gingerly patted her towel and gave a small, brittle smile. “Oh, not tonight, thank you, Witch Mother. I’ve just washed my hair.” And she wandered back into the shadows.

The witches staggered down the corridor and fell out of the front door, screaming with laughter.

From its perch on the doorknocker, the **Darke** Toad watched its Master go. It waited its statutory **Listening Time**—five minutes and a little bit more—then it hopped down and set off along the street, following its Master as a **Darke** Toad must.

ALICE AT THE WINDOW



It was two in the morning, and a small, high window on the ground floor of the Customs House still showed a light. Alice Nettles, Chief Customs Officer to the Port, believed in doing her fair share of the late shift, but she was beginning to wish she weren't quite so evenhanded. A large shipment of brown Wellington boots had come in on the late tide and a dispute had arisen about the classification of the boots (work or domestic use) and consequently which rate of duty applied to them. Alice had settled the argument by impounding the lot, and some half an hour ago had sat down to write her report. It was tedious but it had to be done—tomorrow was another busy day.

Alice was an imposing, businesslike woman, with gray hair and more often than not a stern expression, which she had acquired from her time working as a judge at the Castle. But tonight she looked tired and a little lonely as she sat in the chilly little office with her deep blue Customs Officer robes wrapped around her. She was, to her relief, reaching the conclusion of her report: ... *inclusion of child-size footwear indicates domestic destination, therefore shipment impounded until the higher rate of duty paid* ... when she heard yet another disturbance outside.

It had been a noisy night in the Port. All Hallows' Eve—or Hallowseeth, as it was known—was a festival that was ignored in the Castle but

enthusiastically celebrated in the Port. It had kicked off just after midnight, and since then the revelers had done nothing but make a nuisance of themselves, thought Alice. And would continue to do so until dawn. Alice sighed. She wouldn't mind, but the Customs House had important guests that night in the form of the ExtraOrdinary Wizard and her new Apprentice. Alice dragged her chair over to the window, stood on it and looked out to see what kind of trouble was happening now.

To Alice's surprise, some foolish people had been brave enough to dress up as the Port Witch Coven. They were obviously performing some kind of comedy routine centered around a wheelbarrow that contained a large box over which they were fighting. Alice tutted under her breath. She hoped the revelers knew what they were doing—it was well known that the Port Witch Coven did not take kindly to being made fun of. Alice watched the performance, which was turning a little violent now as one of the characters—she wasn't sure which witch he or she was meant to be—had hurled themselves across the box and was kicking another, much taller witch. Alice winced as the taller witch aimed a nasty kick in return that sent the smaller witch sprawling onto the ground. The trouble with Hallowseeth, she thought, was it always got out of hand. It was at times like this that she missed the peace and quiet of the Castle.

Alice was just wondering if she ought to call the Harbor Master for help to break up the fight when she saw something very peculiar. Someone was hanging around the witches *dressed as DomDaniel*. That, thought Alice, was very rash. (Alice shared the Port Hallowseeth superstition that dressing as a particularly evil human called up bad things for the night.)

Alice watched the witch theater continue. Things had calmed down a little, and they had now opened the box. Three of them were standing around it while the small, chubby witch lay on the ground pretending to cry. Alice's view began to get obscured by the growing crowd of costumed people who were gathering to watch the show—but not before she saw the three witch figures embark on what looked like a very good imitation of a typical witchy spell, involving a lot of arm waving and jerky dancing around the box.

A party of very tall Grula-Grulas now moved in front of Alice's line of sight and the show was lost to view. But the crowd of ghouls, black fairies, Chimeras, mummies and a large amount of Gragull (it was easy to look good in a blood-sucking Gragull costume) continued cheering and shouting encouragement, and the noise filled the little office. Alice was about to get down from the stool and find some earplugs when she saw the crowd part to allow the DomDaniel figure through—no one wanted to touch him. Alice shivered. Whoever had been stupid enough to dress up like that had done a

good job; it was just how she remembered him. The figure was now out of the crowd and heading toward the Customs House. Alice realized that her lighted window must be shining out like a beacon; she suddenly felt very exposed and fought a desire to duck down and hide.

“Don’t be silly, Alice,” she muttered to herself. “It’s not *really* him.”

Alice had met DomDaniel in his time as ExtraOrdinary Wizard, and his parting words still invaded her nightmares: “*I will see you again, Miss Nettles. Unfortunately for you. Ha ha.*” But Alice was determined to tough it out—she was *not* going to be scared by a Hallowseeth reveler. She watched the figure walk carefully across the cobbles, bright with rain from the recent downpour; she saw a gust of wind take his cloak and wrap it around him; she saw the light flashing from his rings—in particular, the creepy ring with two evil green faces that he always wore on his left thumb; she saw his ringed hand reach up to keep hold of his tall stovepipe hat and she saw his sweaty, excited face shining in the glow of the harborside torches. And when he stopped right beneath the window and his dark green eyes stared straight into hers, Alice went cold.

“It’s *him*,” she whispered in horror. “Sheesh. It’s the real thing!” Alice leaped off the stool, hurried over to her desk and blew out the candle. Then she collapsed into her chair, shocked.

Alice sat in the dark, trembling. “But how could it be DomDaniel?” she muttered to herself. “He’s *dead*.” Fighting down her panic, she began to think things through.

Alther Mella had told her that DomDaniel had drowned in the Marram Marshes when his ship, the *Vengeance*, had sunk some six months ago. Even Alice, who was not much interested in ghosts (apart from Alther) knew enough about things ghostly to understand that this could not be DomDaniel’s ghost, for a ghost must stay in the place where it entered ghosthood for a year and a day. And so any ghost of DomDaniel would still be languishing deep in Marsh mud—and serves it right too, she thought. Besides, wind did not snatch at ghostly cloaks; it blew right through them. The only answer was that somehow DomDaniel had survived the loss of his ship. And now, here he was, *back in the Port*.

Shaking, Alice got to her feet. She hurried out of her office, across the empty hallway and up the stairs, glancing over her shoulder just in case, somehow, DomDaniel had gotten inside. When Alice reached the upstairs galleried landing, she broke into a run and did not stop until she came to the double doors that led to the guest suite.

Alice paused, suddenly unwilling to disturb Marcia. Suppose she had made a mistake. Suppose it really was just some Hallowseeth reveler. “Come

on, Alice,” she told herself firmly. “You *know* it was him. And Marcia has to know too. Now. Before something awful happens.”

And so Alice, never one to do things by halves, took her Customs House gavel out of her pocket and thumped Marcia’s door. Hard.

8

INVISIBLE



Marcia was on the Port Barge. A shark was slamming against the side, and only she knew why—it was trying to get to Septimus *and eat him*.

Bang! Bang! *Bang!*

Septimus, who was sleeping in the box room near the door, leaped out of bed and stood at attention with the familiar feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach at the thought of the Do-or-Die night exercise that surely lay ahead. It took him a full minute to remember that he was no longer in the Young Army and that he was actually *safe*.

Bang! Bang! *Bang!*

Septimus opened his bedroom door and peered out into the entrance lobby, which was dimly lit by a small night candle.

Bang! Bang! *Bang!*

The sturdy oak panels of the door shook with the blows—*someone was trying to break the door down*. Septimus padded across to Marcia’s door but as he reached it, it was thrown open.

“Septimus?” said Marcia, bleary in her purple night robe. “What *is* going on?”

Bang! Bang! *Bang!*

“There’s someone at the door,” Septimus said, rather unnecessarily.

“Marcia!” a voice called. “Marcia, it’s me, Alice!”

Marcia tugged open the doors. “Alice? Goodness, you look awful. Come in.”

“Marcia. I’m really sorry to wake you but ...” Alice glanced over her

shoulder, half-afraid that DomDaniel might be lurking in the dark corridor behind her, listening. Alice dropped her voice to a whisper. “*DomDaniel’s outside.*”

“*What?*” Marcia gasped.

“Come and see.” Alice took Marcia—with Septimus following—over to the round window on the landing that looked down onto the Quayside. She looked out and her heart sank. The Quayside was packed with even more Hallowseeth revelers, who were gathered excitedly at the water’s edge around the Port Witch Coven show. There was no sign of DomDaniel anywhere.

Alice shook her head. “Oh, I can’t see him. There are so many people.”

Marcia looked down at the bizarre crowd below. She respected Alice Nettles very much indeed, but she could not help but think that Alice had mistaken someone dressed up as DomDaniel. How could she possibly tell the difference in such a muddle of people, and at night, too? Marcia sighed. What unfortunate timing for Septimus’s visit to the Port. Why hadn’t she remembered it was their Hallowseeth?

Alice felt horribly embarrassed. “I am so sorry to wake you up, Marcia. But it really was DomDaniel; I am sure of it. He came right up to my window and stared at me. And he had that ring with those two evil green faces ...” Alice shuddered. “It was horrible.”

Marcia saw how shaken Alice was, and she knew that Alice was not given to fanciful imaginings. “Don’t worry, Alice,” she said. “I’ll go down and take a look.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Alice.

“So will I,” said Septimus.

“No, Septimus,” said Marcia. “You will stay here.”

“But I’m your Apprentice now. It’s my job to come with you,” Septimus said.

“Not this time, Septimus. I don’t want you anywhere near that evil old Necromancer. You may watch if you must.”

Marcia hurried back to her room. She put her ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt around her purple night robe, threw her cloak over her shoulders and pulled on her pointy purple python shoes. She was ready.

Marcia and Alice emerged from the Customs House unnoticed. The Quayside was thronged with so many bizarre costumes that no one paid any attention to an ExtraOrdinary Wizard in a night robe. “Over there.” Marcia pointed to the center of activity surrounding the Port Witch Coven. “Something’s going on.”

“It’s some kind of performance, I think,” said Alice. “About the Port Witch Coven.”

The sound of chanting began and the crowd started clapping along in time, vigorously stamping their feet.

“Let’s take a closer look,” said Marcia. “Alther always said that if you found trouble, you would find DomDaniel in the middle of it.”

Alice smiled at the mention of Alther. “Well, that *is* where DomDaniel was before he came over to my window.”

“There you are, then,” said Marcia. “Let’s go and see.”

The throng was so thick that Marcia and Alice had to skirt around the outside. They passed by the archway that led into Fishguts Twist—a dark and slimy place that smelled of old cabbage. Marcia stopped.

“What is it?” whispered Alice.

Marcia shook her head. Something **Darke** was nearby, but not as **Darke** as she would have expected if it were DomDaniel. “I don’t know,” she said.

“Not *him*?” asked Alice.

“Hmm. Let’s have a look.” Marcia took a small glass ball from her ExtraOrdinary Wizard belt, warmed it in her hand, then, holding it between finger and thumb, she gingerly put her hand into the gloom of the archway. The little ball glowed brightly, and to Marcia’s surprise it showed no shadows of **Darke** at all—just an old stone bench to their left and ahead the winding, torch-lit alley with its **Magykal** bookshops, which Marcia was looking forward to visiting with Septimus. Marcia shrugged. “That’s odd,” she said to Alice. “I was sure there was *something* in here.”

From its hiding place underneath the stone bench, the **Darke** Toad was keeping out of the way of the heavily booted Port feet. All human feet looked much the same to the **Darke** Toad—big, ugly and, when they were wearing their foot armor, dangerous. But when a pair of purple pointy python shoes stopped in front of it, the **Darke** Toad shrank back in fear. These were the most terrifying shoes he had ever seen. The **Magyk** surrounding them was as strong as the dreadful smell of snake that emanated from them. The **Darke** Toad quickly backed into the end of a drainpipe and hoped the snakes did not come after it. It waited anxiously until the snakes turned and went away, then it rubbed itself in a convenient pool of slime to get rid of the prickling sensation of **Magyk**. Five minutes later, its Master found it.

DomDaniel sat down on the stone bench very carefully and heaved a sigh of relief. Despite an unpleasant slipping sensation inside him whenever he moved, his **Clothed Bones** had worked well enough to allow him to throw up a **Darke Screen** and do a bit of **Selective Invisibility** on old Marcia

Overstrand—or Nastier Overstrand, as he liked to call her—and that annoying woman she was with. What was her name? Malice Dock Leaf, that was it. Of course, he could have had a showdown if he had wanted to, but he preferred to bide his time. He was planning something rather special for old Nastier and he didn't want to spoil it.

DomDaniel looked out from the archway, watching the Hallowseeth revelers milling around the harborside. He thought how amusing it would be to make them become what they were dressed as for real—that would show them. He smiled. Maybe next year, when Nastier had been disposed of and he was ExtraOrdinary Wizard once more. But right now he fancied a little nap.

Simon Heap returned with a bag of hot Hallowseeth herrings (a Port delicacy) for his Master—as he'd been instructed—and found him snoring. Simon put the herrings down on the bench and tiptoed away to join the throng. The lure of normal life—or as normal as it got at Hallowseeth in the Port—was irresistible.

WORKING THE CROWD



Marcia and Alice pushed their way through the stamping, clapping and highly excited crowd. Marcia was unused to people not making way for her at once. “Excuse me, *excuse me*,” she repeated irritably, over and over again.

“Oi! Just because you’re dressed like old Bossy Boots doesn’t mean you have to behave like her too,” a giant Bogle Bug remonstrated as Marcia tried to elbow it out of the way. Marcia then found her path to the witches deliberately blocked by the Bogle Bug’s friends—a giant Water Nixie, a luminous Specter and two pink Magogs.

“Stop *pushing*, will you?” one of the pink Magogs told Marcia. “We can’t

all be at the front!”

Marcia resisted the urge to send a self-propelled **Sting Bug** into the Magog’s costume and doggedly carried on through the throng. She and Alice were heading for a space at the front of the crowd, where an open metal box lay on the edge of the Quay. Around the box—in which a sea of worms wriggled and writhed—were Linda, the Witch Mother, Veronica and Daphne, who had her fists tightly clamped over her eyes.

It was Linda who was running the show—she had the crowd in the palm of her hand and was chanting an **Incantation** in time to the stamping feet. At the end of each phrase she turned to the crowd and yelled, “Yeah!” which the crowd repeated with gusto. Linda’s eyes shone with exhilaration; with every “Yeah!” the crowd added their energy to the spell. This is going to be *massive*, Linda thought.

“Let them *fly* way up *high*! Yeah!” Linda screamed.

“Yeah!” the crowd yelled in return.

“Let them *grow* when they *go*! Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

“Let what we *see* no longer *be*! Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

“Let them *be* part of the *sea*! Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

“Let them be ... *gribble*!”

There was a sudden, shocked silence.

“Gribble?” a mummy in front of Marcia muttered to its fellow mummy. “But isn’t that one of those worms?”

“Yeah. Er, I mean yes. Ship-eating worms.”

The first mummy laughed. “Hey, Bill, we’re acting like it’s real.”

Bill-the-Mummy laughed uneasily. “Felt like it,” he said.

Linda had forgotten she was in the middle of a crowd of people who were closely connected with all things maritime. Almost every person on that Quay knew what gribble worms were—little marine worms that ate their way through ships’ timbers in no time at all. A ship could set off from Port with a few gribbles buried in its timbers and a couple of weeks later disappear into the ocean, leaving nothing more than a froth of wood dust on the surface of the water.

But Linda was no fool; she sensed that the crowd was turning against her. The **Incantation** needed time to brew—there were thousands of worms to turn—and Linda knew she had to get the crowd back on her side for at least another two minutes.

“But hey, guys, we don’t want to do that—do we?” she yelled.

“No!” a few uncertain shouts came in reply.

“We want to have fun!” Linda shouted, frantically jumping up and down and grinning so hard that she thought her face might crack. “Hey! And that’s what we are going to do. Fun! Yeah?”

It worked.

“Yeah!” yelled the crowd.

This was too much for Daphne. She turned to the crowd and screamed out, “But it’s not fun. It’s *not*. I hate you, Linda. I hate you *all!*”

Linda—once a supremely accomplished playground bully—recognized an opportunity. “Ooh,” she said. “She *hates* us. *Ooh.*”

“Ooh,” those in the crowd who had not been bullied echoed obligingly.

“Perhaps I should turn her into a gribble?”

“Yeah!” someone yelled from the back. “Gribble!”

Linda reckoned she was getting the crowd back on her side. “She’d like that,” she said. “She’d like it in there, wriggling around with her slimy little friends.” Linda pointed to the box at her feet, which was now, to her relief, glowing a bright orange and hissing. She grabbed Daphne by the collar and asked the audience, “So, what do you say—shall I turn this moaning little worm into a gribble?”

The audience sensed some fun was on the way. “Yeah!” more people shouted. “Yeah! Turn her into a gribble!” A chant began to build. “Grib-*ull*, grib-*ull*, grib-*ull!*”

Daphne looked horrified. She wrenched herself away from Linda and ran. The crowd parted to make way for her exit and Daphne cannoned straight into Marcia. There was a roar of laughter.

“Brilliant timing!” said someone. “Absolutely *brilliant.*”

Marcia winced as Daphne’s sticky witch cloak brushed against the **Magyk** in her own cloak.

“These witches are very realistic,” Alice shouted to Marcia over the noise.

“They’re more than realistic, Alice,” Marcia shouted back. “They’re *real.*”

“Real?” Alice yelled. “*Really* real?”

“There’s a witchy **Darkeness** in the air you could cut with a knife,” said Marcia.

“But Marcia, if they’re real, then what they are doing is real too,” Alice said.

“I would imagine so,” Marcia said drily. With Alice at her heels, Marcia moved rapidly through the cleared space and headed toward Linda, who was now working her audience into a frenzy.

“What do we want?” Linda was shouting.

“Grib-ull, grib-ull!” everyone yelled.

“When do we want it?”

“Now!”

To the delight of the crowd Marcia, backed up by Alice, was now face-to-face with Linda. “Hey, Wizard and witch fight!” someone yelled.

The call was quickly taken up: “Wizard and witch! Fight! Fight! Fight! Wizard and witch! Fight! Fight! Fight!”

“Quiet!” Linda yelled—and such was her crowd control that she got it at once. “Gribble first—then fight! Yeah?”

“Yeah!” yelled the crowd. “Gribble *first!* Then *fight!*”

Eyeing the suspiciously glowing box of woodworms, Marcia waited until the noise had died away enough for her to be heard. Then she took a deep breath and yelled, “Port Witch Coven! I command you to *stop*. Now!”

“Spoilsport!” came a shout from the crowd, and it was quickly taken up into a chant. “Spo-il-sport! Spo-il-sport! Spo-il-sport!”

Linda laughed and Marcia felt horribly uncomfortable. She had forgotten how much she had come to rely on the respect people automatically gave her as ExtraOrdinary Wizard. Suddenly she was just another Hallowseeth reveler in a dodgy costume—and it was a shock.

Eager to see what was happening, people began to push past Marcia and Alice, who were quickly edged out of the space around the witches. Marcia lost patience. With the help of a few well-judged **Pushes**, she emerged into the clearing. In front of her sat the box—from which emanated a powerful, crowd-fueled **Magyk**—now alive with writhing woodworms glowing brilliant red. Linda and the Witch Mother were staring into the contents, willing them to *do something fast*.

Veronica saw Marcia coming. “Pigs!” she said. “It’s the pigging ExtraOrdinary Wizard!”

“It’s only some idiot in a purple nightie, stupid,” snapped Linda.

But the Witch Mother knew Marcia from way back. “No, it’s not,” she snapped. “Quick, Linda. *Do it!*”

Linda became flustered. “It’s *done*, you stupid old trout,” she hissed. “We just have to wait for it to—”

Marcia was upon them.

“Pig off!” yelled Linda.

Marcia hurled a **Freeze Flash** at them.

It was too late. Its energy was diverted into the witches’ **Magyk** and it triggered the spell. There was a deafening *boom* that resonated all around the harborside. The crowd screamed in excitement, Daphne’s box erupted in a blaze of light and a stream of brilliant red stars whooshed into the sky. All

eyes followed them as they rose up and up, and then with a faint *pfut* broke into myriad pinpoints of light that rained gently down and settled daintily onto the ships. A roar of appreciation came from the crowd, followed by riotous applause.

“Jolly good,” Linda said to the Witch Mother. “The rats will be jumping ship soon. Now, girls, lose yourselves in the crowd before anyone realizes what’s going on. Remember, I want a kid small enough to fit up the sewer pipe. It so needs unblocking. Ha ha.”

“Stop right there!” said Marcia.

“Oh *stuff off*,” Linda snarled, and pushed past Marcia. Marcia swung around and threw a long, low **Trip-Up** that went curling around Linda’s feet, sending the witch sprawling onto the wet cobblestones. Linda burst out laughing. “Too late!” she yelled. “*Too pigging late!*”

A shriek from Alice Nettles took Marcia’s attention away from the witches.

“Oh my goodness,” gasped Marcia. *The ships were melting.*

GRIBBLES



A *horrified silence fell across* the harborside as the crowd watched the masts of the three ships that had been directly beneath the cascade of stars rapidly crumble into nothing. It took many long, shocked seconds for the assorted Specters, Bogle Bugs, mummies, Grula-Grulas, Chimeras and Gragull to understand that this was actually happening *for real*. But as the Quayside reverberated to the hollow *thud* of sails and ropes falling onto decks, then the long, slow crunching sound of decks folding in under their weight like wet paper bags, people at last began to react. They rushed toward the ships and began urging the sailors to jump. Many hurried off to the Chandlery to fetch ropes and life buoys. A party of young Specters bravely leaped into the water

and began hauling out anyone they could find.

Screams of “*Abandon ship!*” filled the harbor as the collapse began to spread along the line of ships. Masts fell like ninepins and hulls caved in like eggshells. The Harbor Master, festooned with life buoys, hurried along the Quayside, hurling them into the water, which was now dark with debris and full of struggling sailors, many of whom could not swim.

In the chaos, Daphne sneaked back to retrieve her empty woodworm box. She carefully put it in the wheelbarrow and headed toward Fishguts Twist. Daphne could take no more; she was going home. However, when she reached the stone bench where DomDaniel was slumped with his mouth open, snoring, the sight of the bag of Hallowseeth herrings was too much of a temptation. Daphne sat down and began to crunch her way through the now-cold, but still deliciously salty, little fish—heads and all. Daphne was not a delicate eater, and the noisy sucking of fish bones invaded DomDaniel’s dreams and woke him up.

Daphne tipped the remaining herring scales into her mouth, screwed up the bag and threw it angrily at a passing crocodile with an ax in its head. “I *hate* her,” she said.

“The crocodile?” DomDaniel asked blearily.

“No, Linda. She killed all my lovely woodworms. She’s a cow.”

For some reason DomDaniel liked Daphne. It was an odd feeling to like someone, and DomDaniel did not intend to encourage it. But he put his hand into his old cloak pocket and took out a miniature silver box inlaid with onyx. “Have you still got Dukey?” he asked.

Daphne looked stunned. “How do you know about Dukey?”

DomDaniel smiled, his lips slipping over his teeth like skin on cold custard. “I make it my business to hear what’s going on,” he said.

“Yes, I’ve still got Dukey,” whispered Daphne.

“Well, then, let’s see him.”

Bewildered, Daphne took Dukey out of her pocket. DomDaniel inspected the fat worm covered in fluff. “He’ll fit,” he said. Then he flicked the lid off the silver box, revealing a brilliant blue interior that shone like a jewel. “Drop him in there,” he told Daphne.

Dazed at such attention from the great DomDaniel, Daphne dropped her last, precious and very dead woodworm into the box. DomDaniel snapped the lid shut. “Keep it closed for twenty-four hours,” he told Daphne. “Then when you open it you will have an endless supply. You’ll soon get your colony back.”

Daphne stared at the little silver box in amazement. “Th-thank you,” she stammered.

“Don’t mention it,” said DomDaniel.

Daphne understood. “No,” she said. “I won’t.”

Daphne and DomDaniel sat in companionable silence, Daphne smiling with sheer happiness, DomDaniel worrying about why he felt as though his skin was about to fall off.

While peace descended into the shadows at the entrance to Fishguts Twist, pandemonium still reigned in the harbor. The Quayside swarmed with all kinds of creatures carrying ropes and floats and hurling them into the harbor. Some were braving the gribble worms and jumping into their own rowboats in desperate attempts to reach sailors struggling in the water. Not all rowboats made it back safely. Marcia directed her energies to **Reviving** those sailors who were brought out of the water half—or sometimes fully—drowned. If she got to them within three minutes of drowning, she knew she had a chance of saving them.

Simon worked hard too. Unnoticed in the melee he pulled sailors from the water and he even delivered one to Marcia without her recognizing him. Simon was near exhaustion when he caught sight of a young boy clinging on to a spar that was rapidly disappearing under gribble attack. He dived into the sludge floating on the surface of the water and pulled the boy to safety. As he helped the shivering, red-haired boy up the steps, a woman’s voice said, “Ah, poor dearie. Let me take him, Simon Heap.” Shattered, he handed the boy over. It was only some minutes later when he had recovered his breath that it occurred to Simon to wonder how the woman had known his name.

From the window in the Customs House, Septimus had watched the unfolding drama—at first with excitement at the beautiful display of lights and then, when he realized that a disaster was taking place, with frustration that he could not be down there, *doing something*. But he remembered what Marcia had told him and he dutifully stayed where he was.

It was when Septimus saw three vicious-looking women in witches’ cloaks dragging away a struggling, half-drowned boy, that he could stand it no more. And when the boy saw him in the window and yelled, “*Help me!*” Septimus was off. He threw on his Apprentice cloak, buckled up his Apprentice belt and hurtled down the stairs. But by the time he got outside, the boy and the witches were gone.

Marcia’s final **Revive** had worked. The sailor sat up and groaned. “You’ll be

okay,” she told him, helping him to his feet.

“I’ll get him along to the Harbor Master’s,” said Alice. “They’re opening the emergency bunkhouse out the back.”

Marcia watched Alice help the bedraggled sailor slowly across the Quayside. She turned and looked at the harbor. The water reminded her of one of Aunt Zelda’s stews—thick, brown and full of white stringy things. It was, in fact, now more of a rubbish dump than a harbor. The remains of thirteen ships—mainly a tangle of ropes, sails and fishing nets—floated in a thick scum of gribble-digested wood dust. A somber crowd of Port people had gathered and were hugging one another in dismay. Not only were all thirteen ships gone, but the harbor itself was now unusable. Below the watery sludge lay the ironwork from thirteen ships piled onto the harbor bottom, along with, they feared, the remains of more than a few drowned sailors. Marcia joined the onlookers. She felt powerless to do anything to help. No **Magyk** could help the drowned now, or restore the ships. Marcia shook her head in dismay—the Port Witch Coven had done a terrible thing.

Suddenly she heard a voice calling, “Marcia!” She spun around to see Septimus racing toward her. “Septimus, I told you to stay inside,” she said, trying—unsuccessfully—to be stern and not show how pleased she was to see him.

“I’m sorry,” said Septimus, “but the witches ... they ...” He stopped to catch his breath.

“I know,” said Marcia. “It’s awful.”

“They ... *kidnapped a boy.*”

Now at last there was something Marcia could actually stop them doing. “Right, let’s get them,” she said. “Which way did they go?”

Septimus pointed toward Fishguts Twist. “Up there. I think.”

They stopped by an empty bench at the mouth of Fishguts Twist. The alleyway had numerous branches off it—or dives, as they were called in the Port.

Septimus eyed the dives despondently. “But they could have gone down any of those,” he said.

Marcia was unwilling to give up. “So we’ll just have to take our chances.”

It was at that moment that the **Darke Toad’s Listening Time** was up. It hopped out from the drainpipe and the movement caught Septimus’s eye. “Oh!” he said. “It’s a toad.” To Marcia’s disgust Septimus squatted down and picked it up. The toad sat in his hand and stared balefully at him. Septimus stared back, remembering a rude rhyme about DomDaniel they used to whisper in the Young Army:

*If you want to know where DomDaniel sat,
Go where it smells of rotting cat.
If you want to know where DomDaniel's gone,
Find a fat toad and you won't go wrong.
Because wherever he goes
There is always a toad.
Just follow the toad in the road.*

The **Darke** Toad shifted uncomfortably on Septimus's hand. It didn't like the feel of human warmth one bit.

"Put that horrible thing down, Septimus," said Marcia. "You don't know where it's been."

"But I *do* know where it's been," said Septimus.

"Up some disgusting drainpipe, no doubt. *Put it down.*"

"It's been with DomDaniel," said Septimus.

There was something about Septimus's certainty that made Marcia take notice. "Really?" she said.

"I reckon," said Septimus, raising his hand to his face so that he and the toad were eyeballing each other, "that this is a **Darke** Toad."

"Most Port toads have some **Darke** in them," said Marcia. "We have the Port Witch Coven to thank for that."

"But this is a *DomDaniel* toad," said Septimus. "I'm sure it is."

Marcia looked puzzled. "How do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, they used to say that DomDaniel always took a toad with him when he went anywhere. When he left, he'd leave it there as a sort of spy. The toad would hang around for, er—" Septimus trawled his photographic memory and scrolled down page three of his old Young Army Memory Book. "It was 5.71666666666667 minutes, I think, to listen to what people said about DomDaniel after he left, then the toad would catch up with him and tell him. It got a lot of people into big trouble. When I was in the Young Army we were taught to recognize a DomDaniel toad. And not stamp on it. *Ever*. We had signs stuck up in the barracks saying *Respect the Toad.*"

"So you mean that this one will hop off now and tell DomDaniel what we've been saying?" asked Marcia.

"I reckon so," said Septimus.

"Well, it can tell him from me that I know he's at the bottom of this and he is not getting away with it. It can tell him from me that I'm coming to get him."

But it was not DomDaniel who concerned Septimus; it was the Port Witch Coven. "Marcia, Alice Nettles said that DomDaniel was with the Port Witch

Coven, didn't she?"

"Well, yes, she did. I must admit, Septimus, I did think she was mistaken, but maybe she was right after all. Well, there's only one way to find out. Let the toad go and we'll follow it."

Septimus put the toad onto the ground and it quickly hopped away. "Just follow the toad in the road," he murmured.

Marcia looked at her Apprentice quizzically. "Another Young Army rhyme?" she asked.

"Well ..." Septimus always felt reluctant to admit to remembering anything from the Young Army. It felt somehow disloyal to Marcia.

But Marcia was not concerned at all. She smiled. "There was a surprising amount of sense in some of their rhymes," she said, "Come on, Septimus, let's go."

FOLLOW THE TOAD



Jakey Fry—only ten or possibly eleven years old, he was not sure which—was terrified. Jakey knew enough about witches to know he was in *big* trouble. A witch had him in her **Grasp**, her long black fingernails felt as though they were drilling into his shoulder, and no matter how loud he tried to yell, he could make no sound. In front of him was a witch with a cracked white face, who walked on spikes and was leaning on another weird witch with a cone of hair stuck on her head. Behind him was a witch pushing a wheelbarrow that kept jabbing into the back of his legs. And behind *her* was something really horrible that Jakey couldn't see, even though he knew it was there. The only person who looked kind of normal was a young man in an old black cloak who was hurrying along behind the wheelbarrow witch; but every time Jakey looked back and tried to catch his eye, the young man looked away. Jakey knew that look well enough. He'd seen it on people's faces when his father—the notorious Skipper Fry—shouted at him in the street. It was the I-don't-want-to-get-involved face. He'd find no help there. Jakey knew he was on his own.

Jakey was so scared that his legs kept giving way beneath him, but the witch who had her fingers dug into his shoulder didn't care. She had dragged him halfway along Fishguts Twist, down Spider Slide, through the Dripping Duck and out into a run-down road called The Shambles, which Jakey knew very well indeed. As they went past the lodging house where he lived with his father, Jakey stared desperately up at the dark window, hoping that maybe Skipper Fry was looking out for him. But he knew his father would never do

that—he didn't want his son at home. Jakey had to earn his keep as a ship's rat and as soon as he arrived back in the Port his father always signed him up for another voyage.

As Jakey was dragged past the battered front door of the lodging house he gave a silent sob. No one would ever know what had really happened to him—everyone would assume he had drowned in the harbor that night. For Jakey understood that whatever the witches had planned for him, he was not going to survive it.

A few streets away from Jakey, pursued by two purple snakes bristling with sharp, bright **Magyk**, the **Darke** Toad was moving fast. It hurried past the bookshops on Fishguts Twist longing to catch up with its Master, who would surely make short work of the snakes. Hoping to put them off its trail, the **Darke** Toad delayed its turn into Spider Slide until the very last minute and then shot into its shadows. The ploy very nearly worked. Marcia hurried by, but Septimus was not fooled. He dived into the Slide, and Marcia, realizing what had happened, followed him.

Spider Slide was so narrow that they had to go in single file. "You stay in front, Septimus," said Marcia. "That way I can make sure you're okay. There are some strange people around here at night."

Septimus felt glad of Marcia's protection and tried not to think about how scared the kidnapped boy must be, out there on his own.

The **Darke** Toad now headed toward one of its favorite places, a dank, covered way known as the Dripping Duck. The Dripping Duck was well named—its dripping roof was so low that Marcia had to duck, and the ground was covered in thick slime. As they emerged into the fresh air, Marcia inspected her shoes with a sigh. They were never going to be the same.

Septimus and Marcia now found themselves on The Shambles. At the far end Septimus's keen eyesight picked out a small, round figure with a wheelbarrow rapidly disappearing around the corner. "There they are!" he said excitedly.

"Are you sure?" asked Marcia, peering along the empty street.

"Yes. I saw the little one with the wheelbarrow."

"Aha, the *wheelbarrow*."

The **Darke** Toad sped up. Marcia and Septimus hurried along behind it and saw it hop around the corner at the end of the street. At the corner Marcia signaled to Septimus to wait. She peered around, and to her surprise, the witches and the boy were no more than a few yards away, with the witches engaged in a furious—yet oddly silent—argument.

Marcia backtracked and bumped into Septimus. “You’re right,” she whispered. “It’s them.”

“Is the boy there?” asked Septimus.

“Yes.”

“So why are we waiting? We have to help him!”

“Shh!” shushed Marcia. “Septimus, I want you to stay here. I didn’t see DomDaniel but it wouldn’t surprise me if he’s done some kind of **Invisibility**. I don’t want him to know you are here. You know that the reason you ended up in the Young Army was because he wanted you for his Apprentice. If Alice is right and he is actually alive, then he is a danger to you. He may still want you as his Apprentice. Understand?”

“But the *boy*,” Septimus protested. “I *have* to rescue him!” He thought of all the times in the Young Army when he had dreamed that someone would come and rescue *him*, but no one ever had. And now he had a chance to help another boy who Septimus just *knew* was feeling just like he had—and *Marcia wasn’t going to let him do it*.

Marcia was afraid that Septimus would take off at any moment and run straight into the clutches of DomDaniel. She looked him in the eye and held his gaze. “Septimus, you are my Apprentice and you have to trust me. We must act together as a team. You have done your part of the rescue and now I have to do mine. That is how it works. Okay?”

Septimus could only nod in reply. He felt really upset.

“Good. Now you stay right here. I do not want DomDaniel to have the *slightest suspicion* that you are here. I will be back as soon as I can and I promise you that I will be bringing the boy with me.”

“Okay,” Septimus said reluctantly.

“Well done.” Marcia set off purposefully around the corner. She had made a promise to her Apprentice and she was determined to keep it.

GOLDFISH



DomDaniel saw Marcia coming and scuttled into the shadows of a nearby doorway. **Invisible** or not, he was taking no chances. **Invisibility** is not a reliable state, particularly between Wizards—and even more so between ExtraOrdinary Wizards. And **Selective Invisibility** is even more unreliable.

Marcia was not fooled. She saw the dim shape in the doorway with its familiar stovepipe hat, she saw the glint of the Two-Faced Ring—which she knew was almost impossible to make **Invisible**—and the **Darke** Toad sitting fat and gulping on the doorstep and she knew for sure that Alice was right. DomDaniel was here. But Marcia paid him no attention; the only thing that mattered to her right then was her promise to Septimus. She had to rescue the

kidnapped boy—and fast. She had a feeling that Septimus was not going to wait around the corner for long.

Marcia's mission was made easier by the fact that the four witches did not notice her approach—they were still immersed in their silent argument. This had begun when they had emerged from the Dripping Duck, and Linda had laid claim to Jakey as her personal servant to do with what she wanted. The Witch Mother had disagreed, saying he was for the use of the Coven, but Linda was having none of it—she had gotten the boy first, and the boy was hers. *So there*. The argument had escalated along The Shambles, and as they had rounded the corner into Fore Street it had become a full-blown fight. Veronica had taken Linda's side because she was too scared to do otherwise. Daphne, who now regarded Linda as a mass murderer of woodworms, took the Witch Mother's side. Linda had **Thrown** the first **Silent Spell** at the Witch Mother, who retaliated fast. This was followed by Daphne and Veronica throwing a **Silent** at each other at *exactly* the same time. Now all four witches were **Silent**.

It did not take Marcia long to realize what had happened. A nickname for the **Silent** spell is the “Goldfish,” due to the way those under the spell try to shout ever louder and, goldfish like, open and close their mouths with no sound emerging. And right then the four witches—plus the unfortunate Jakey Fry, who had had a **Silent** put on him the moment Simon had handed him over—looked like an unhappy fish family recently thrown out of their bowl.

At Marcia's appearance a brief glimmer of hope flashed across Jakey's face. Linda leaped into action. Yelling foul **Silent** words, she lunged at Marcia, dragging with her Jakey, who was still in her **Grasp**.

Marcia easily sidestepped the attack. “Now, now, Linda, there is no need to swear,” she said. (Like all Wizards, Marcia could lip-read). “If you behave nicely and take your **Grasp** off this boy I might, possibly, **Reverse** the **Silent** for you.”

We don't need your help, you stupid cow! Linda's mouth opened and closed **Silently**. *We've got a much more powerful Wizard than you.*

So there with knobs on! Veronica yelled **Silently**.

“That would be the powerful Wizard who is hiding in the doorway, too scared to show himself, would it?” Marcia asked coolly.

DomDaniel decided to leave before things got worse. He slunk out of the doorway and headed along Fore Street to look for Simon, who he had sent on ahead to find “a decent horse, Heap, to get us home.”

Marcia watched the departing **Darke** shape with a feeling of relief—Septimus was safe. She turned to Linda and told her, “I'll give you three seconds to take your **Grasp** off the boy. If you do not, I shall **Remove** it. The

Wizard code requires me to warn you that a forced **Remove** may lead to some personal damage.”

You pigging purple cow! Linda yelled **Silently**.

“One second, two seconds, three se—”

Linda dropped her **Grasp**.

Jakey Fry gaped at Marcia in astonishment—*the Wizard woman had rescued him*. Tears of gratitude pricked the inside of his eyelids. *Thank you*, he mouthed, forgetting he was **Silent**.

“You are very welcome,” said Marcia.

Linda gave Marcia a sharp nudge in the ribs. *What about your promise, then?* she asked, pointing to her mouth.

“I promised nothing,” said Marcia.

Yes, you did, you lying old bat! yelled Linda.

Marcia turned her back on the witch and said to Jakey Fry, “Let’s get you talking again, shall we?”

Linda positioned herself very close to Marcia, waiting for her to work her way through the **Silent Reverse**.

Marcia finished with, “What’s done is done, by all or one, I now set you free.” She threw a small ball of light in the air, it whizzed around Jakey’s head, touched him on the mouth and Jakey laughed out loud—it tickled. Quick as a flash, Linda’s hand snatched the ball out of the air and touched her own mouth with it. “Got it!” she crowed. “Not as clever as you thought, are you?”

Marcia said nothing. The Witch Mother grabbed the ball from Linda; a fight to be next erupted between Daphne and Veronica, and Marcia hurried Jakey away. As they disappeared around the corner, a barrage of swearing erupted behind them.

Septimus was waiting anxiously. At the sight of Marcia with Jakey he broke into a broad grin. “Hey, are you okay?” he asked Jakey.

“Yeah,” Jakey muttered. And then, in case the Wizard woman decided to take him prisoner for herself, he took off along The Shambles at top speed.

Marcia and Septimus watched the spindly figure of Jakey Fry hurtle away from them. They saw him skid to a halt outside one of the more decrepit lodging houses, throw himself against the front door and disappear inside.

Jakey raced up to the room he called home to find—to his relief—that his father was not there. From the window he watched his purple rescuer and the boy who had asked if he was okay coming along the street. As they passed under his window the Wizard woman looked up and smiled at him—and suddenly Jakey realized who she was. A smile spread over his face. He couldn’t be as rubbish as his father kept telling him he was. He must be worth

something if the *ExtraOrdinary Wizard* from the Castle had bothered to set him—Jakey Fry, lowly ship’s rat—free.

TRUTH



Heading for home, the witches hurried along Fore Street and caught up with DomDaniel and the **Darke** Toad.

“Give me the **Darke** Toad and then push off, you old bag of bones,” the Witch Mother said to DomDaniel.

DomDaniel and the other witches looked shocked. The Witch Mother looked horrified. “Did I just say that?” she asked.

“Yes, you smelly old haddock, you did,” said the normally timid Daphne.

“Daphne!” said Linda. “You took the words right out of my mouth.”

“And mine,” said Veronica. She laughed. “Witch Mother, you look like a cracked old teacup with that stupid white stuff on your face.”

“Or the fungus under the sink.” Daphne giggled.

The witches stared at one another in horror—they were all saying exactly what they were thinking.

The sound of hooves clip-clopping toward them heralded Simon’s return. He was leading a big, beautiful black horse, which he had found in a tiny, filthy and unlocked stable. Simon, who still had some scruples, had left a crown (the standard price for a horse) plus a silver sixpence for the saddle and bridle.

DomDaniel looked at the horse approvingly. “Very nice,” he said. “Time

to go. I'll take the horse, Heap. You'll be walking."

"Not for long, you slimy old basket." The Witch Mother laughed.

"What did you say?" demanded DomDaniel.

"You heard," snapped the Witch Mother. "Hand over the **Darke** Toad, you weasel-eyed stoat face."

DomDaniel was used to the Witch Mother being rude to him. It had once been something he had liked about her, but now he thought she was going a bit far. "I have not forgotten that the **Darke** Toad was part of our bargain, Pamela," he said stiffly. He bent down very slowly—he hated the way he could feel skin and fat slipping over his bones—and picked up the toad.

The Witch Mother looked longingly at the **Darke** Toad as it sat gulping and blinking on DomDaniel's very squishy palm.

"Give it to me," she said. "*Hurry up!*"

DomDaniel frowned—he would have liked to refuse but a **Darke** bargain must be kept. Grumpily, he dropped the toad into the Witch Mother's outstretched hand.

"Say the words," snapped the Witch Mother.

"Say the words, *please*," DomDaniel said peevishly.

"Oh, get on with it, fatso," snapped the Witch Mother.

DomDaniel looked very annoyed. If he hadn't suddenly felt unpleasantly itchy he would have said something equally rude in return. But all he wanted to do was get away from the witches and have a good scratch. "Madam, I assign to you all rights to this **Darke** Toad. May its **Darkeness** follow you for all your days. So be it. *Ooof*." DomDaniel could stand it no longer. He found a particularly itchy spot on his stomach and gave it a surreptitious scratch.

The Witch Mother cradled the **Darke** Toad in her hands. "Toady-woady," she cooed.

"I'll be off now," said DomDaniel. He felt as though his skin were crawling with ants.

"Good riddance, you smelly old slime bucket," returned the Witch Mother. "Come on, girls. Home. Oh, and Daphne, give Heap the wheelbarrow."

"Why?" asked Daphne.

"Because those **Clothed Bones** won't last much longer. Ha ha!"

DomDaniel could bear the itching no more. "What"—*scratch*—"do you"—*scratch-scratch-scratch*—"mean?"

The Witch Mother laughed. "You vain old lump of gristle, don't you realize? We're rubbish at stuff like that. There's no way we could make a spell that powerful *permanent*, not even with Cowan blood. In fact, I am amazed it

has lasted as long as it has. Ha!” She poked DomDaniel in the chest and her finger sank deep into his robe. “Eurgh, that is *not* nice.”

DomDaniel stared down at the hole in his chest. He looked up at the Witch Mother in shock as, like a crumpling balloon, his cloak caved in and the remains of the witches’ **Clothing Bones** spell evaporated. DomDaniel emitted a long, low groan, his legs folded out from under him and he collapsed into a heap on the road.

“You tricked me!” his—still **Clothed**—head screamed.

“Yes, we did. Serves you right, you smarmy little snake,” said the Witch Mother.

Linda was astonished. “You tell him, Witch Mother. I must say, I’m impressed. You’re not as utterly pathetic as you look.”

The Witch Mother pointedly ignored Linda. She turned to Veronica and Daphne and said, “Unlike Linda. Who *is* as completely vile as she looks.”

Daphne and Veronica laughed with delight. “Yeah. Vile!” they chorused.

Linda was speechless with fury.

The Witch Mother chuckled—she was back in control of her Coven. She held up the **Darke** Toad and smiled. A lump of white makeup fell onto DomDaniel’s head, once more atop a pile of bones. The Witch Mother stared down at the head. “No one will mess with us now,” she said. “Not even *you*.”

DomDaniel hurled the worst **Darke** swear words possible at the departing Coven, but they took no notice as they followed the Witch Mother up the street, a line of mismatched chicks trailing after their mother hen.

With gritted teeth Simon picked up the bones and put them into the wheelbarrow, carefully balancing the head on top while DomDaniel swore at him. Simon patted the horse’s nose and wondered whether he should let him go. He decided to leave the decision to the horse.

“Thunder,” he whispered—for that had been the name scrawled over the stable door—“you can follow me if you want to. It’s a long way, but I’ll look after you, I promise.” The horse pawed at the ground and sniffed the early morning air. The sun would soon rise, and he wanted to be off and away from the dark and cramped stable.

As the night sky began to lighten, Fore Street echoed to the *clip-clop, clip-clop* of Thunder’s hooves and the plaintive *EEK-EEK, eek-eek* of a squeaky wheel as Simon pushed the wheelbarrow and its contents along the pavement. At the end of Fore Street the wheel fell off the barrow and DomDaniel’s head rolled onto the street. “Put me on the horse, you dithering idiot,” it snarled.

Simon had had enough insults for the night. “All right,” he said. “I *will*.” In one seamless, angry movement, he threw off his cloak, caught the head and the **UnClothed** bones up into it, bundled them up into a ball and slung it onto

the horse. Then he swung himself into the saddle and rode off toward the dawn, heading along the track that wound through the dunes and would take him across the Sheeplands, up into the Badlands and back to the dark, dank Observatory.

From its new home on the doorknocker of the Port Witch Coven, the **Darke** Toad blinked and watched them go.

Septimus and Marcia emerged from Fishguts Twist onto the deserted harbor front. A somber atmosphere hung over the harbor, and a few people were sitting mournfully on the harbor wall, staring at the dark water, thick with wreckage. The Harbor Master's house was a blaze of lights as the surviving sailors bunked down for what remained of the night.

Marcia closed the thick oak door of the Customs House with a quiet *thunk*. She and Septimus headed across the entrance hall and up the wide stone stairs to the guest quarters.

"It was very nice of you to reverse the witches' **Silent**," said Septimus as Marcia lit a nightlight and gave it to Septimus to take into his room.

"Not as nice as you might think," Marcia said, smiling.

"Oh?"

"It had a twenty-four-hour **Think Speak** on it."

Septimus laughed. "You mean they will have to say exactly what they are thinking for the next twenty-four hours?"

"They will indeed," said Marcia. "That will make life rather interesting, I should imagine. Now, Septimus, off to bed. That's enough excitement for one night."

Septimus yawned. He reckoned Marcia was right. "Good night," he said. And then, "That boy ... why did he run away from us? We were only trying to help him."

"I seem to remember another boy who wanted to run away, not so long ago," said Marcia. "It took *him* a while to realize that I wanted to help too."

"What boy?" asked Septimus. And then he realized that Marcia meant *him*. "Oh," he said. "I see."

"Good night, Septimus," said Marcia, smiling. "Sleep well."

"I will," said Septimus.

EXCERPT FROM FYRE

The **Magyk** series by Angie Sage concludes with *Fyre*—more funny and fantastical adventures reuniting the entire Septimus Heap cast, and with one last powerful incantation:

*May **Magyk** be with you,
May you soar high in **Flyte**.
May **Physik** guide you and
Queste be your goal.
May **Syren** not find you,
May **Darke** be behind you,
May you always have **Fyre** in your soul.*

Read on for a sneak peek at *Fyre*, the stunning finale to the Septimus Heap series!



1

WHAT LIES BENEATH



In the Vaults of the Manuscriptorium, *The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath* was unrolled on a large table. Lit by a bright lantern that hung above the table, the large and fragile sheet of opalescent **Magykal** paper lay weighted down by standard Manuscriptorium paperweights—squares of lead backed with blue felt. *The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath* was a map of all the Ice Tunnels that ran below the Castle—apart from the section that traveled out to the Isles of Syren. As its name suggested, the *Live Plan* was a little more than just a plan. **Magykally**, it showed what was happening in the Ice Tunnels at that very moment.

Gathered around it were the new Chief Hermetic Scribe, O. Beetle Beetle; Romilly Badger, the Inspection Clerk; and Partridge, the new Scribe of Maps. If you had walked into the Vaults at that moment it would not have been clear who actually was the Chief Hermetic Scribe. Beetle's long blue-and-gold coat

of office had been banished to a nearby hook because its gold-banded sleeves scratched the delicate *Live Plan* and he was wearing his comfortable old Admiral's jacket, which kept out the chill of the Vaults. With his dark hair flopping forward over his eyes, Beetle looked very much at home as he leaned over the *Live Plan*, concentrating hard.

Suddenly Romilly—a slight girl with light brown hair and what Partridge thought was a cute, goofy smile—squeaked with excitement. A faint luminous splodge was moving along a wide tunnel below the Palace.

“Well spotted,” said Beetle. “Ice Wraiths are not easy to see. I reckon that's Moaning Hilda.”

“There's another one!” Romilly was on a roll. “Ooh ... and look, what's that?” Her finger stabbed at a tiny shadow near the old Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik.

Partridge was impressed. There was a minuscule blip at the end of Romilly's finger. “Is that an Ice Wraith too?” he asked.

Beetle peered closer. “No, it's too shadowy. And slow. Look—it is hardly moving at all compared to Moaning Hilda, who is way over there now. And it is too well defined; you can see it actually has a shape.”

Romilly was puzzled. “Like a person, you mean?”

“Yes,” said Beetle. “Just like a—*bother!*”

“It's gone,” said Romilly sadly. “That's a shame. It can't have been a person then, can it? Someone can't suddenly disappear. It must have been a ghost.”

Beetle shook his head; it was too solid for a ghost. But the *Live Plan* was telling him that all the Ice Tunnel hatches remained **Sealed**, so there was nowhere the person could have gone. Only a ghost could disappear from the middle of an Ice Tunnel like that.

“Weird,” he said. “I could have sworn that was human.”

It was human—a human named Marcellus Pye.

Marcellus Pye, recently reinstated Castle Alchemist, had just dropped down through a hatch at the bottom of an unmapped shaft, which went close enough to an Ice Tunnel to show on the *Live Plan*. As soon as he was through the hatch Marcellus knew he was safe—the *Live Plan* did not show anything lower than this level.

A pole with foot-bars led down from the hatch and Marcellus climbed down it with his eyes closed. He reached a flimsy metal platform and stood, not daring to open his eyes, not believing that after nearly five hundred years he was *back in the Chamber of Fyre*.

However, Marcellus did not need to open his eyes to know where he was.

A familiar metallic sweetness that found its way to the back of his tongue told him he was back home, and brought with it a flood of memories—the tear that had run up from the base of the Cauldron, the sharp *crack* of the splitting **Fyre** rods and the heat of the **Fyre** as it spun out of control. Swarms of Drummins working ceaselessly, trying to contain the damage. The smell of burning rock as the flames spread beneath the Castle, setting the old timber houses alight. The panic, the fear as the Castle threatened to become a raging inferno. Marcellus remembered it all. He prepared himself for a scene of terrible devastation, took a deep breath and decided to open his eyes on the count of three.

One ... two ... three!

A jolt of surprise ran through him—*it was as if nothing had happened*. Marcellus had expected black soot to cover everything, but there was none—quite the reverse. Illuminated by the neatly placed **Fyre** Globes, which still burned with their everlasting flames, the metal platform shone. Marcellus picked up a **Fyre** Globe, cupping it in his hands. Marcellus smiled. The flame inside the ball licked against the glass where his hands touched it, like a faithful dog welcoming its owner home. He replaced the ball beside his foot and his smile faded. He was indeed home, but he was home alone. No Drummin could have survived.

Marcellus knew that he must now look over the edge of the dizzyingly high platform on which he was standing. This was when he would know the worst. As he gingerly walked forward, he felt the whole structure perform a slight shimmy. A feeling of panic shot up through his feet—Marcellus knew exactly how far he had to fall.

Nervously he peered over the edge.

Far below lay the great **Fyre** Cauldron, its mouth a perfect circle of blackness ringed by a necklace of **Fyre** Globes. Marcellus was immensely relieved—the *Fyre Cauldron was intact*. He stared down into the depths, allowing his eyes to become accustomed to the dark.

Soon he began to make out more details. He saw the metal tracery that was embedded in the rock and covered the cavern like a huge spider's web gleaming with a dull silver shine. He saw the peppering of dark circles in the rock that marked the entrance to the hundreds, maybe thousands, of Drummin burrows. He saw the familiar patterns of **Fyre** Globes that marked out paths of the walkways strung across the cavern hundreds of feet below and, best of all, he could now see inside the Cauldron the graphite glitter of one hundred and thirty nine stars—the ends of the **Fyre** rods that stood upright like fat little pens in an inkpot.

Marcellus shook his head in utter amazement. He had found his **Fyre**

Chamber cleaned, repaired, neatly put in mothballs and, by the look of it, ready to go. The Drummins must have survived much longer than he had realized. They had worked so hard and *he had never even known*. Something caught in his throat; he swallowed hard and wiped his eyes. Suddenly Marcellus experienced what he called a Time Slip—a flashback to all those years ago, when he had been standing on the very spot where he was now.

His loyal Drummins are swarming around him. Julius Pike, ExtraOrdinary Wizard and one-time friend, is on the upper platform, yelling above the roar of the flames, “Marcellus. I am closing this down!”

“Julius, please. Just a few hours more,” he is begging. “We can control the Fyre. I know we can.” Beside him on the platform old Duglius Drummin is saying, “ExtraOrdinary, we Drummins do guarantee it, we do.”

*But Julius Pike doesn’t even recognize a Drummin as a living thing. He completely ignores Duglius. “You have had your chance,” Julius yells. “I am **Sealing** the water tunnels and **Freezing** them. It is over, Marcellus.”*

He is dragged toward the hatch by a bunch of thickset Wizards. He grabs hold of Duglius, determined to save at least one Drummin. But Duglius looks him in the eye and says sternly, “Alchemist, put me down. My work is not done.”

The last thing he sees as the hatch slams shut is the old Drummin sadly returning his gaze—Duglius knows this is the end.

After that, Marcellus had cared no more. He had handed Julius his Alchemie **Key**; he had even helped to **Seal** the Great Chamber of Alchemie and done nothing more than shrug halfheartedly when Julius, smiling the kind of smile a pike would if it could, had told him that all memories of the Chamber of **Fyre** would be expunged. *“Forever, Marcellus. It shall never be spoken of again. And in the future, no one will know what is here. No one. All records will be destroyed.”*

Marcellus shook himself out of the memory and the distant echoes of the past faded. He told himself that all were long gone. Even the redoubtable Julius Pike was now no more than a ghost, said to have gone back to where he grew up—a farm near the Port. But he, Marcellus Pye, was still here, and he had work to do. He had the **Fyre** to start and the Two-Faced Ring to destroy.

Marcellus swung himself onto the metal ladder that led down from the upper platform and cautiously began the descent into the **Fyre** Chamber—or the Deeps, as the Drummins had called it. The ladder shook with each step as Marcellus headed doggedly downward toward a wide platform far below from which yet more **Fyre** Globes winked up at him. Some ten long minutes

later, he set foot on what was known as the Viewing Station, and stopped to take stock.

Marcellus was now level with the top of the **Fyre** Cauldron. He peered down at the star-shaped tops of the **Fyre** rods glistening with the dull shine that undamaged **Fyre** rods possessed. The last time he had seen them they were on fire, disintegrating before his eyes and now ... Marcellus shook his head in admiration. How had the Drummins done it?

A narrow walkway known as the Inspection Circle ran around the rim of the Cauldron. It was made of metal lattice, which Marcellus could see had been repaired where it had buckled in the heat. Very carefully, he stepped down onto it, holding tight to the guardrails on either side. From his tool belt he took a small hammer, known as a drummer, and claspng it tightly he set off. Every few paces he stopped and tapped the metal rim of the **Fyre** Cauldron, listening intently. To his ears it appeared to be sound, although he knew his hearing was nowhere near as acute as it needed to be for the job.

This was what the Drummins had done all day, all night, all the time. They had swarmed over the Cauldron, drum, drum, drumming with their tiny hammers, listening to the sounds of the metal, understanding everything it told them. Marcellus knew he was a poor substitute for a Drummin but he did the best he could. After walking the Inspection Circle, he returned to the Viewing Station, knowing that he could put off no longer the thing he had been dreading the most. He must go down to the floor of the Chamber of **Fyre**.

A flight of curved metal steps wound their way around the belly of the Cauldron down into the dimness below, which was lit by a few scattered **Fyre** Globes. Slowly, Marcellus descended into the depths and the smell of damp earth came up to meet him. On the bottom step, he stopped, gathering the courage to step onto the ground. Marcellus was convinced that the cavern floor must be strewn with the remains of the Drummins and he could not bear the thought of crunching their delicate little bones like eggshells underfoot.

It was some minutes before Marcellus stepped off. To his relief there was no sickening crunch. He took another step—on tiptoe—then another, and felt nothing below his feet but bare earth. Carefully, Marcellus tiptoed around the base of the Cauldron, tapping it with his hammer, listening, then moving on. Not once did he tread on anything remotely crunchy. He supposed that the delicate bones had already turned to dust. After a circuit of the underside of the Cauldron, Marcellus knew that all was well.

It was now time to begin the **Fyre**.

Back on the Viewing Station, Marcellus headed off along another frighteningly flimsy walkway that was strung out across the cavern, thirty feet

up. He walked cautiously, glad of the light from a corresponding line of **Fyre** Globes placed on the ground. At last he arrived at a chamber burrowed into the rock face at the back of the cavern and stepped inside. He was back in his old control room.

Below the coating of hundreds of years' worth of dust, Marcellus could see that the walls had been repainted white and everything shone—there was no sign of the greasy soot that had covered everything. Marcellus walked across to the far wall where, beside a line of iron levers, there was a large brass wheel set into the rock. Taking a deep breath, Marcellus grasped the wheel. It moved easily. As he slowly turned it, Marcellus could feel the slip and slide, the *clunk* and the *thunk* of the chain of command, which reached up through the rock into the depths of the UnderFlow. Somewhere far above him a sluice gate opened. A great gurgle echoed around the sooty darkness of Alchemie Quay and the sluggish waters began to move. Marcellus felt the rumble inside the rock face of the tumbling water as it poured through ancient channels and began to fill the reservoir deep within the cavern walls.

Now Marcellus turned his attention to a bank of twenty-one small wheels farther along. Once the **Fyre** was begun, he must have a way of getting rid of excess heat. In the old days the heat had been dispersed through what were now the Ice Tunnels and used to warm the older buildings of the Castle. Marcellus had given the current ExtraOrdinary Wizard, Marcia Overstrand, his word that he would preserve the Ice Tunnels. This meant he needed to open up the secondary venting system—a network of pores that snaked up to the surface of the Castle.

Marcellus dared not risk discovery yet. He needed precious time to set the **Fyre** going, time to prove that it was not a danger to the Castle. Although Marcia had agreed that he could start up the **Fyre**, Marcellus knew that she assumed that the **Fyre** was the small furnace in the Great Chamber of Alchemie and Physik. Indeed, that was what he had led Marcia to think. Julius Pike had told Marcellus that he would make sure that no ExtraOrdinary Wizard would *ever* give permission to open up the Chamber of **Fyre** again—and Marcellus had believed him.

And so now Marcellus turned his attention to the little brass wheels that would open heat vents scattered throughout the Castle and wick excess heat safely away from the awakening **Fyre**. Marcellus had given this some thought—the trick was to open vents in places where the unusual heat could be explained away as something else. He took a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and consulted a list. Counting carefully along, he spun nine selected wheels until they stopped. Marcellus checked his paper again, checked the wheels and stood back satisfied.

By now a red pointer on a dial was telling him that the reservoir was nearly full; Marcellus turned the wheel to close the sluice gate, rechecked his list and left the control room. Job done.

Two hours later, the water was flowing through the Cauldron and the **Fyre** was beginning the slow, gentle process of coming alive once again. Wearily, Marcellus pushed his Alchemie **Keye** into the dip on the lower **Fyre** hatch. He remembered the time, when they were both growing old, that Julius had come to see him. He had given Marcellus back the Alchemie **Keye** because, “*I trust you, Marcellus. I know you will not use it.*” And he hadn’t.

Well, not until now.

Romilly and Partridge had long gone back to work, but in the Vaults, Beetle still watched the *Live Plan*—he knew that what goes down must come up. Beetle’s stomach rumbled and as if on cue, Foxy, Chief Charm Scribe, poked his head around the half-open door. Beetle looked up.

*Marcellus climbed through the lower **Fyre** hatch. Once again, he was a blip on The Live Plan of What Lies Beneath.*

“Ta-da!” said Foxy. “Sausage sandwich!” He put a neatly wrapped package beside Beetle’s candle. It smelled wonderful.

*Marcellus closed the lower **Fyre** hatch and began to climb—fast.*

“Thanks, Foxy,” said Beetle. He looked back at the plan but his eyes, tired after so much staring, did not focus well enough to see the Marcellus blip. He glanced at the sausage sandwich longingly. He had no idea he was so hungry.

“I’ll unwrap it for you,” said Foxy. “You don’t want sticky stuff on the *Live Plan*.”

Beetle peered at the plan once more.

“Seen something?” asked Foxy.

“Yeah—I think ...” Beetle pointed to the Marcellus blip.

Foxy leaned forward and his beaky nose cast a shadow over the blip.

*Marcellus reached the upper **Fyre** hatch.*

“Shove over, Foxy,” said Beetle, irritated. “You’re blocking the light.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Beetle looked up. “Sorry, Foxo. Didn’t mean to snap. Thanks for the sandwich.”

*Marcellus was through the upper **Fyre** hatch and off the Live Plan.*

Beetle bit into his sausage sandwich.

And down in the Deeps, the **Fyre** began to wake.

A WHITE WEDDING



The *Big Freeze* had come in, covering the Castle in a deep blanket of snow.

On a sunny late afternoon in the breathtakingly still air, pencil-thin columns of smoke rose from a thousand chimneys up into the sky. Along Wizard Way a crowd had gathered to watch a wedding procession walk from the Great Arch to the Palace. As the procession passed by, people from the crowd dropped in behind and followed, chattering about the young couple who had just gotten married in the Great Hall of the Wizard Tower: Simon and Lucy Heap.

Simon Heap, with his curly straw-colored hair neatly tied back in a ponytail, wore new blue robes—which, as the son of an Ordinary Wizard, he was entitled to do on his wedding day. The freshly dyed blue was bright and

trimmed with traditional white wedding ribbons, which trailed behind him. Lucy Heap (née Gringe) was wearing a long, white, floaty woolen dress, which she had knitted herself and edged with pink fur. She had lovingly embroidered entwined blue and pink letters “S” and “L” across the skirt. Her mother had objected to this, saying it was bad taste, and for once in matters of taste Mrs. Gringe was probably right. But it was Lucy’s Big Day and what Lucy wanted to do, Lucy was going to do. *No change there, then*, her brother, Rupert, had remarked.

The wedding party progressed down Wizard Way toward the Palace, crunching through newly fallen snow. The sky was a brilliant winter blue, but a small snow cloud directly above obligingly provided a few fat snowflakes, which floated down and landed on Lucy’s beribboned long brown hair, where they settled like confetti. Lucy and Simon were laughing and talking happily to each other, Lucy twirling in the snow to show off her dress and sharing a joke with her new brothers.

Next to Lucy walked her own brother, Rupert, and his girlfriend, Maggie. Simon had considerably more companions: his adoptive sister, Princess Jenna, and his six brothers, including the four Forest Heaps: Sam, twins Edd and Erik, and Jo-Jo.

Mrs. Theodora Gringe, mother of the bride, walked right behind her daughter, occasionally treading on Lucy’s train in her eagerness to be at the front. When they had emerged from the Great Arch, Mrs. Gringe had had to be restrained from actually leading the wedding party down Wizard Way. Lucy’s mother was the proudest mother of the bride that the Castle had seen for a long time. Who would have imagined, thought Theodora Gringe, that the guests at her daughter’s wedding would have included the great dignitaries of the Castle? The ExtraOrdinary Wizard, the Princess and the Chief Hermetic Scribe, and even that weird Alchemist fellow: they were all here. There was no doubt about it—the Gringes were on the way up.

But it was a shame, she thought, about the Heaps. They were a disreputable-looking bunch, and there were so *many* of them. Everywhere she looked she saw the distinctive curly straw-colored Heap hair topping a scruffy-looking individual. The Gringes were massively outnumbered.

A shout of laughter drew Theodora Gringe’s attention to a group of four noisy men who reminded her of Silas Heap and who, she supposed (correctly), were his brothers. Mrs. Gringe grimaced and cast her critical eye over the Heaps she recognized. She grudgingly admitted to herself that Silas and Sarah looked smart enough in their blue and white wedding clothes—if a little eccentric with Sarah carrying that ridiculous duck-in-a-bag. Mrs. Gringe eyed up the duck: ready-plucked, perfect for a stew. Deciding to suggest that

to Sarah later, she scrutinized the Heap boys with mixed feelings. The two youngest, Nicko and Septimus, weren't too bad.

Septimus in particular looked rather fine in his impressive formal Apprentice robes with the long purple ribbons dangling from his the sleeves. He was taller than Mrs. Gringe remembered and she noticed that his typical Heap hair had actually been combed. She didn't approve of Nicko's sailor's braids wound through his hair, although she supposed that his sober navy-blue boatyard tunic with its rather fetching sailor's collar was acceptable.

But at the sight of the remaining Heaps, Theodora Gringe's mouth puckered in distaste. The four Forest boys were a *disgrace*. She tutted as she watched Sam, Edd, Erik and Jo-Jo straggle along beside the bridegroom like—she searched for the right words—yes, that was it, like a pack of wolverines. At least they could have had the decency to keep to the back.

(While the wedding party had been in the Wizard Tower Courtyard, Mrs. Gringe had tried to push the Forest boys to the back. A struggle had ensued and her husband, Gringe, had had to drag her off. "Let it be, Theodora," he'd hissed. "They are Lucy's brothers now." Mrs. Gringe had felt quite faint at the thought. She had had to take a long look at their trophy guest, Madam Marcia Overstrand, ExtraOrdinary Wizard, to get over it—which had been a little embarrassing as Marcia had asked her, rather sharply, if there was something wrong.)

Mortified by the memory, Mrs. Gringe sighed and then realized that she had been overtaken by the crowd. Happily unaware that the tall, pointy felt triangle perched on top of her hat gave onlookers the impression that a shark was cruising through the wedding party, stalking the bride, Mrs. Gringe began to elbow her way back up to the front.

At last they reached the Palace Gate. The onlookers clustered around, offering congratulations, gifts and good wishes. Lucy and Simon accepted them all, laughing, exclaiming, handing the gifts to various friends and relations to carry for them.

Sarah Heap linked her arm through Silas's and smiled at him. She felt unbelievably happy. For the first time since the day Septimus had been born, she had all her boys with her. It seemed as though a heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders—in fact right then Sarah felt so light that she would not have been surprised if she had looked down and seen her feet floating a few inches above the pavement. She watched her gaggle of Forest boys, all young men now, laughing and joking with Simon as though he had never been away. ("Away" was the word Sarah used to describe Simon's **Darke** years.) She saw Septimus, confident in his Apprentice robes, talking with her little Jenna, who looked so tall and Queenly now. But best of all, Sarah saw

her oldest son's eyes—bright green once more—shining with happiness as he looked around, no longer an outcast, back where he belonged. In the Castle. With his family.

Simon could hardly believe it himself. He was stunned at all the good wishes and the feeling that people actually seemed to *like* him. Not so long ago, when he had lived below the ground in a **Darke** place, he'd had dreams just like this. But he would wake from them in the middle of the night, distraught when he realized they were only dreams. Now, to his amazement, they had come true.

The crowd continued to grow and it looked as if Simon and Lucy were going to be at the Palace Gate for a while yet. On the edge of the crowd, Marcia Overstrand cut an imposing figure. She was wearing ceremonial ExtraOrdinary Wizard robes of embroidered purple silk lined with the softest, highly expensive Marshmouse fur. From below the robes two pointy shoes made of purple python skin peeked out into the white snow. Marcia's dark wavy hair was held back in a formal gold ExtraOrdinary Wizard headband, which glinted impressively in the winter sunlight. Marcia looked impressive—but prickly. Her green eyes found Septimus and she beckoned irritably to her Apprentice. Septimus excused himself from Jenna and hurried over to Marcia. He had promised Sarah that he would “make sure Marcia didn't take over,” and he could see the warning signs.

“Septimus, have you seen that mess?” Marcia demanded.

Septimus followed the direction of Marcia's pointing finger, although he knew exactly what she was talking about. At the end of Ceremonial Way—which led straight up from the Palace Gate—a tall column of scaffolding covered with a brilliant blue tarpaulin reared up, garish against the snow. Around it were scattered untidy piles of bricks and a clutter of builders' equipment.

“Yes,” Septimus replied—not very helpfully, in Marcia's opinion.

“It's Marcellus, isn't it? What is he doing starting already?”

Septimus shrugged. He didn't see why Marcia was asking him, especially as Marcia still hadn't set a date for him to begin his month with Marcellus. “Why don't you ask *him*?” he said.

Marcia looked a little guilty. “Well, I promised your mother when she came to see me that there would be no ... er, arguments.”

“Mum came to see you?” asked Septimus, surprised.

Marcia sighed. “Yes. She brought me the guest list and said that if there was anyone on it I didn't like, she would quite understand if I didn't come. Naturally I said that *of course* I was coming to Simon's wedding and it didn't matter at all who was there. She didn't look convinced, I must say. I ended up

promising her that I would be, well”—Marcia pulled a face—“*nice* to everyone.”

“Wow.” Septimus glanced across at Sarah Heap with new respect.

“Apprentice! Marcia!” Marcellus Pye’s voice caught their attention. Marcellus had escaped the clutches of Mrs. Gringe and was desperate to talk to someone—even Marcia. “Well, well,” he said jovially. “You both look very splendid.”

“Not quite as splendid as you do, Marcellus,” said Marcia, eyeing the Alchemist’s new set of black robes, the sleeves of which were slashed to show the red velvet shirt he was wearing underneath. Both cloak and tunic were liberally sprinkled with gold fastenings that glittered in the sunlight. Septimus could tell that Marcellus had made a big effort. His dark hair was freshly cut in a short bob and brushed forward over his forehead in the old-fashioned style that the Alchemist still favored on special occasions, and he was wearing his favorite pair of red shoes—the ones that Septimus had given him for his birthday two years previously. Marcia noticed the shoes and tutted. They still gave her an uncomfortable twinge of jealousy of which she was not proud.

Marcia waved her arm in the direction of the tarpaulin. “I see you have already begun,” she said, a little disapprovingly. She forced herself to refrain from adding that Marcellus had agreed not to begin building the chimney until the Great Chamber of Alchemie had been reopened.

Septimus saw Marcellus give a guilty start. “Goodness! What, um, makes you say that?”

“Well, I should have thought it was obvious—that rubbish at the end of Ceremonial Way.”

Septimus saw a look of relief fly across Marcellus’s face. “Ah. The *chimney*,” he said. “I’m merely making preparations. I know you do not wish to keep the Two-Faced Ring for longer than necessary. Keeping that ring safe must be a nightmare.”

As she had promised Sarah, Marcia made an effort. “Yes, it is. But at least we have it, Marcellus. Thanks to you.”

Septimus looked impressed. His mother had done a remarkable job, he thought.

Marcellus felt encouraged. He decided to ask a favor. “I wonder, Marcia, if you would object to a change of name?”

Marcia was flummoxed. “I am perfectly happy with Marcia,” she said.

“No, no—I mean the Ceremonial Way. In the old days when the Great Chamber was operating and we had the chimney at the end of it—as we soon will again—it used to be called Alchemie Way. I wonder if you would allow it

to resume its old name?”

“Oh,” said Marcia. “Well, I suppose so. It was called Alchemie Way before so it is only right that it is Alchemie Way once more.”

“Thank you!” Marcellus beamed. “And soon Alchemie Way will lead to the newly built Alchemie Chimney.” He sighed. “Well, it will when the builders bother to turn up.” A sudden outbreak of cheering and clapping signaled that the wedding party was beginning to head off to the Palace. Marcellus slipped away before Marcia had a chance to ask any more awkward questions.

Marcia felt dismal. An evening spent with a mixture of Heaps and Gringes did not figure anywhere on her good-nights-out list—not even at the very bottom. She glanced back longingly toward the Wizard Tower, wondering if she could make a run for it.

Septimus intercepted her glance. “You can’t leave *now*. That would be very rude,” he told her sternly.

“Of course I’m not leaving now,” Marcia said tartly. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

The wedding supper carried on late into the night. Heaps and Gringes did not always mix well and there were a few tricky moments, particularly when Mrs. Gringe put the duck stew suggestion to Sarah Heap. But nothing, not even Mrs. Gringe’s insistence that *it would be no trouble at all to take the duck home, and seeing as it was nice and plump it would do enough for everyone and she could bring the stew over the next day to save Sarah the bother of cooking* could dent Sarah’s happiness for long. She had all her children with her for the first time *ever*, and that was enough for her.

Marcia was surprised to find that her evening was not as bad as she had feared. After some very tedious speeches by various increasingly merry Heap uncles, a welcome distraction appeared. Through the long windows of the Ballroom, which reached to the floor and looked out across the Palace lawns down to the river, a barge ablaze with lights was seen drawing up at the Palace landing stage.

“Goodness, who can that be?” Marcia commented to Jenna, who was sitting next to her.

Jenna knew who it was. “It’s my father. Late as usual.”

“Oh, how nice,” said Marcia. And then, hurriedly, “Not nice that he is late, of course. Nice that he has made it to the wedding.”

“Just about,” said Jenna.

Silas and the four Heap uncles, glad of an excuse to escape, went to inspect the barge and escort Milo back to the wedding supper. He arrived

resplendent in what some people thought was the dress uniform of an Admiral of the Fleet and others were sure they had seen in the window of a fancy dress shop in the Port—but whatever it was he was wearing, Milo caused a stir. He strode up to the bride, bowed, kissed her hand and presented her with a tiny ship of gold in a crystal bottle, much to Lucy's delight. Then he congratulated Simon and took his seat next to Jenna.

It was not long before Jenna made an excuse to go and talk to the Forest Heaps at the far end of the table. Milo then took Jenna's place next to Marcia and from that moment Marcia found the evening was much improved. So much so that she stayed rather longer than she had planned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR



Grosefield Photography

Angie Sage was born in London and grew up in the Thames Valley, London, and Kent. She now lives in Somerset in a very old house that has a secret tunnel below it. The first six books in the Septimus Heap series are international bestsellers. She is also the author of the Araminta Spookie series. You can visit her online at www.septimusheap.com or follow her on Twitter @AngieSageAuthor.

Mark Zug has loved fantasy novels since he was a teenager. He has illustrated many collectible card games, including *Magic: The Gathering* and *Dune*, as well as books and magazines. He lives in Pennsylvania. You can visit him online at www.markzug.com.

Follow @StanleyMsgRat on Twitter for updates from the Long-Distance Confidential Message Rat!

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins authors.

OTHER WORKS

ALSO BY ANGIE SAGE

*Septimus Heap, Book One: **Magyk***

*Septimus Heap, Book Two: **Flyte***

*Septimus Heap, Book Three: **Physik***

*Septimus Heap, Book Four: **Queste***

*Septimus Heap, Book Five: **Syren***

*Septimus Heap, Book Six: **Darke***

*Septimus Heap, Book Seven: **Fyre***

*Septimus Heap: **The Magykal Papers***

*Araminta Spookie: **My Haunted House***

*Araminta Spookie: **The Sword in the Grotto***

*Araminta Spookie: **Frognapped***

*Araminta Spookie: **Vampire Brat***

*Araminta Spookie: **Ghostsitters***

COPYRIGHT

Katherine Tegen Books is an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

Septimus Heap: The Darke Toad
Text copyright © 2013 by Angie Sage
Illustrations copyright © 2013 by Mark Zug

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse-engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

EPUB Edition © JANUARY 2013 ISBN 9780062236258

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FIRST EDITION

BACK ADS



UNLOCK
THE
TREASURE!

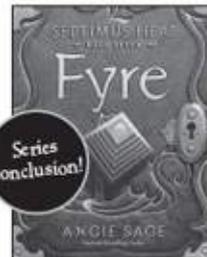
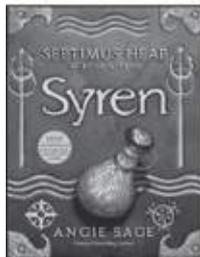
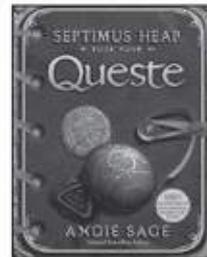
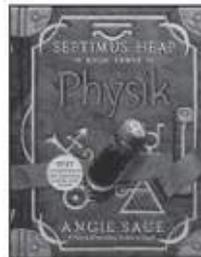
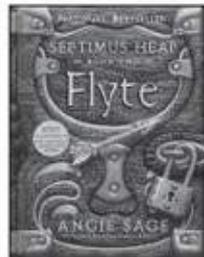


VISIT
www.septimusheap.com
and discover the world of Septimus!

* Play games to earn the most points and win prizes *

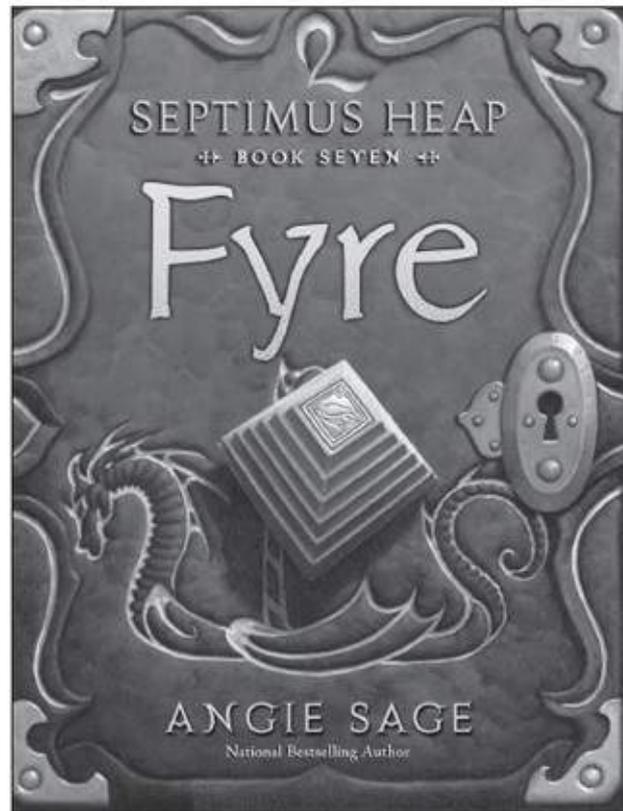


Read the other books in the Septimus Heap series



 KATHERINE TEGEN BOOKS
An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

THE GREATEST MAGYK OF ALL . . .



Don't miss the grand finale of the
New York Times bestselling Septimus Heap series!



Discover the world of Septimus at www.septimusheap.com

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
<http://www.harpercollins.com.au>

Canada

HarperCollins Canada
2 Bloor Street East - 20th Floor
Toronto, ON, M4W, 1A8, Canada
<http://www.harpercollins.ca>

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
<http://www.harpercollins.co.nz>

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
<http://www.harpercollins.co.uk>

United States

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
<http://www.harpercollins.com>